What the boys are saying

An examination of the views of boys about declining rates of achievement and retention

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This paper summarises the views of 1800 Year 9 to 11 boys about declining rates of achievement and retention. The boys have been clear and largely uniform in their perspective of the issues and problems, and in their general view that the adult world is 'not listening' and 'not really interested'. They have been equally clear about what needs to be done to effectively deal with their concerns and to provide better, more relevant educational outcomes. In brief, they see themselves to be stuck with an unsuitable, out-of-date and culturally inconsistent learning environment that they cannot change. By the middle of Year 9, their school experience has firmly established a negative and necessary association between formal learning and what they understand as an institutionalised, unpleasant waste of time, dealing with matters having no obvious relevance to their lives and their perceived needs and interests, and demanding the kind of personal sacrifice and general disempowerment that makes the hazy promise of long term rewards simply 'not enough' for most of them.

Key words: adolescent males, achievement and retention, boys' education, boys' views, gender

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper has been to provide an overview of what secondary school aged boys are saying about the phenomena of declining retention and achievement, and how their educational outcomes might be improved. The paper presents the findings of a study funded through the Australian Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs', Higher Education Division, Evaluation and Investigations Program. Our primary intention has been to present the views of the boys in a way that highlights the issues and problems that they've raised and that they believe should form the focus of discussion about declining rates of retention and achievement.

The Adolescent Years are the Most Significant

In brief, the boys believe that the adolescent years, from the middle of Year 8 to Year 11, are the most significant. The primary years, from reception to Year 7, are talked about as *'good times'*[1], when adolescent males say that they *'liked school'* and *'learnt heaps of stuff'*. Year 8 is said to

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[1] Statements made by students are recorded in quotes and in italics.

start out *'okay, because it's all new, the work's easy and the teachers don't know you'*. The problems begin late in Year 8, continue to develop until they either *'get out'* or *'survive'* to finish Year 11 and perhaps Year 12. Our research reveals a broad range of interconnected factors that adolescent males believe make this an outcome they don't like, they don't value and that they cannot change *'because nobody's listening'*.

The adult world, for example, is not listening enough to recognize that referring to male students of secondary school age as 'adolescent males'[2] is too detached, too alienating and too clinical. Of all the options, from 'adolescent males' to 'guys', the participants in this study have shown a preference to be called *'boys'*. In general, this practice has been adopted in this paper.

Listening to the 'Boys'

It was evident from the outset that most of the boys were clear and uniform in their perspective of the issues and problems in these years, and in their general view that declining rates of achievement and retention are inevitable because the adult world is *'not listening'* and *'not genuinely interested'* in their views, their well-being, and for many, their educational needs and outcomes:

> *They don't want to listen. They make the rules. There is always an excuse.* (Year 9-11)

> *They always make things sound the way they want … what they want sound best. Ya don't stand a chance.* (Year 11)

Furthermore, the boys have obviously thought about their educational experience often and at length, and have well-formed views about a range of factors that continue to shape and direct their achievement and their ability or preparedness to remain at school.

Although the boys are not familiar with the literature, most of them have seen or heard achievement and retention issues discussed in the media. From what they have said, it is clear that they regard the views of the adult world, on these matters, to be simplistic to the point of being wrong. They believe that adults don't ask young people what they think and that they certainly don't ask in a way that establishes trust and mutual respect; they don't listen, and they don't really want to know, particularly if it requires or necessitates substantial changes on their part.

Although much of what the boys have said differs significantly from the literature, the media and what passes as 'common sense', these differences will not be critically examined at length in this paper. Here, it is our intention to present an overview of what the boys are saying. We have not tried to make judgements about the truth or falsity of their views, not because these are not matters of importance, but because they are of little pragmatic value until we are able to understand their views in the context of their reality. This was the essential focus and aim of the study.

To investigate matters concerning young Australians usefully, it is increasingly important to recognize that the ongoing democratisation and liberalisation of Australian society, at least in part, has been a process of understanding and accepting difference. This is not just the rhetoric of understanding and accepting difference, and not just differences of mere perspective, but the genuine recognition that there may be a different reality for others, upon which their views are based, and within which their views are equally efficacious.

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[2] Statements made by people other than the students are recorded in quotes and not italicised.

There is, however, one issue that is raised in the literature and one that needs to be addressed in order to make sense of much of what the boys are saying. They are clearly very contextual, albeit not always consistently, in their understanding of the issues and problems that they believe explain the phenomena of declining retention and achievement. They include a broad range of issues and identify an equally broad range of factors, the significance of which lies as much in their dynamic interdependence as it does in their diversity, or in the particular issues or factors that they choose to talk about at length and at a particular time.

Going Beyond the Constraints of Our Cultural Logic

Although poor academic achievement, or the choice to leave school early, are more easily understood as separate, isolated outcomes, they remain inseparable aspects of a plurality of interacting and compounding conditions. For example, the experiences of boys in education are varied and variable, involving a diverse range of phenomena: family environments, cultural/philosophical commitments (including some as fundamental as varied perceptions of time and space), socio-economic conditions, physiology, different school environments, teachers, activities and achievements out of school, attitudes, chance events, perceptions of success and 'the good life', the idea of what it means to be male, an adult, young, 'up to date' and many others. This diversity raises some fundamental issues about methodology, the expectation of research, and perhaps more importantly, it draws attention to the impact of the paradoxical state of the dominant cultural logic on both the problem itself and on the way it is understood (Slade & Morgan 2000).

Although it seems difficult, and perhaps impossible, to think or talk about everything in order to think or talk about something, it must be acknowledged from the outset that the dominant culture pre-disposes us to think and talk in terms of fragmentation and certainty, rather than interconnection and relativity. This is a fundamental predisposition with no less than a fundamental influence on how we understand time, space, identity, knowledge, truth and values (Spradlin & Porterfield 1984). It not only shapes our understanding of what is 'real', 'correct' and 'valuable' in education and learning, it also limits our vision of what might be done and it directs what it is that we try to do. Paradoxically, it is our success at applying fragmentation and certainty that has created both the logical and the pragmatic imperatives to think in terms of interconnection and relativity (Slade & Morgan 2000:71). Furthermore, it has created the necessity that this be done both in and through education into the twenty-first century (Delors 1998:19; Slade 1998a,1998b).

The idea that our reluctance to meet this philosophical challenge in education might itself be a large part of the problem that forms the focus of this research seems not to have been pursued to any great extent in the literature. Nonetheless, the compelling reality of interdependence is often recognized, hence the strong tendency in the literature to bring research pathways and outcomes together. However, from what the boys are saying, they have failed to come together enough.

Browne and Fletcher (1995), Kenway (1997), Epstein et al. (1998) and Collins et al. (2000), for example, see the need to bring many different approaches together in an attempt to be comprehensive. Nonetheless, these stay largely within the fields of masculinity studies and gender reform and, rightly or wrongly, inform the kinds of strategic initiatives, like the use of 'boys only' classes or 'boys' groups', that the boys in this study believe either miss the point or simply make matters worse.

Similarly, Pallotta-Chiarolli (1998) expressly emphasises the need to 'move beyond' the restrictive influence of false dichotomies like the 'either/or positioning' that sustains the 'nature

versus nurture' debate. Epstein et al. also acknowledge the need to break through this kind of restraint:

> ....the discourses in which debates about the schooling of boys have been framed are both narrow through the ways in which the terms 'achievement' and 'education' have been understood, and masculinist in style; that they lack historical perspective; that it is unhelpful to set up a binary opposition between the schooling of girls and that of boys, according to which if one group wins, the other loses; and that questions around equity and differences among boys and among girls as well as between boys and girls are key to understanding what is happening in schools (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1998:4).

Moving beyond the dominant cultural commitment to fragmentation and certainty is a necessary condition of dealing effectively with the issues and problems that shape and direct current changes in retention and achievement for boys.

IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES AND THE APPROPRIATE METHODOLOGY

In addition to a review of the literature, a questionnaire was sent to all secondary schools in South Australia, in a bid to gauge interest in the project and to establish the issues and problems shaping changes in rates of retention and achievement for boys. This was followed by a one day conference with participating schools.

The Initial Issues

The questionnaire to schools was primarily introductory, asking only four questions:

1. What are the central issues and problems concerning and affecting the achievement and retention of adolescent males at your school?

2. What programs are in place to deal with the problems you have encountered?

3. Which initiatives are proving to be useful?

4. Would you be prepared to be part of our project, allowing us to contact you early in the new school year?

From both the literature review and the introductory questionnaire to schools it was evident that the issues and problems were being understood and treated more in terms of 'problem boys' who are not coping, than problems that boys more generally face while trying to fulfil their learning needs. The focus appeared to be largely on 'boys at risk' and the strategic emphasis on 'fixing up the boys'. This is clearly indicated in Figures 1 and 2, which graph the responses of 61 secondary schools to the first three questions in the introductory questionnaire. Figure 1 presents responses to the first question. Although poor motivation and behaviour are the two factors emphasised more than any other by the schools, most factors are identified in terms of deficiencies in the boys.

Despite the prevailing influence of a deficit model, staff in schools, through both their questionnaire responses and in subsequent discussions, expressed a general view that the incidence of problems involving boys is widespread and increasing. Furthermore, they believe that this is happening in ways that indicate a growing disaffection on the part of a broad range of boys, not all of whom fit the stereotypical boy 'at risk'. The schools, for example, draw attention both to an increasing number of 'very bright' boys who have become 'problem boys', and to an increasing number of boys in general who simply 'don't care about the consequences', either of their behaviour or their lack of interest in school work or achievement.
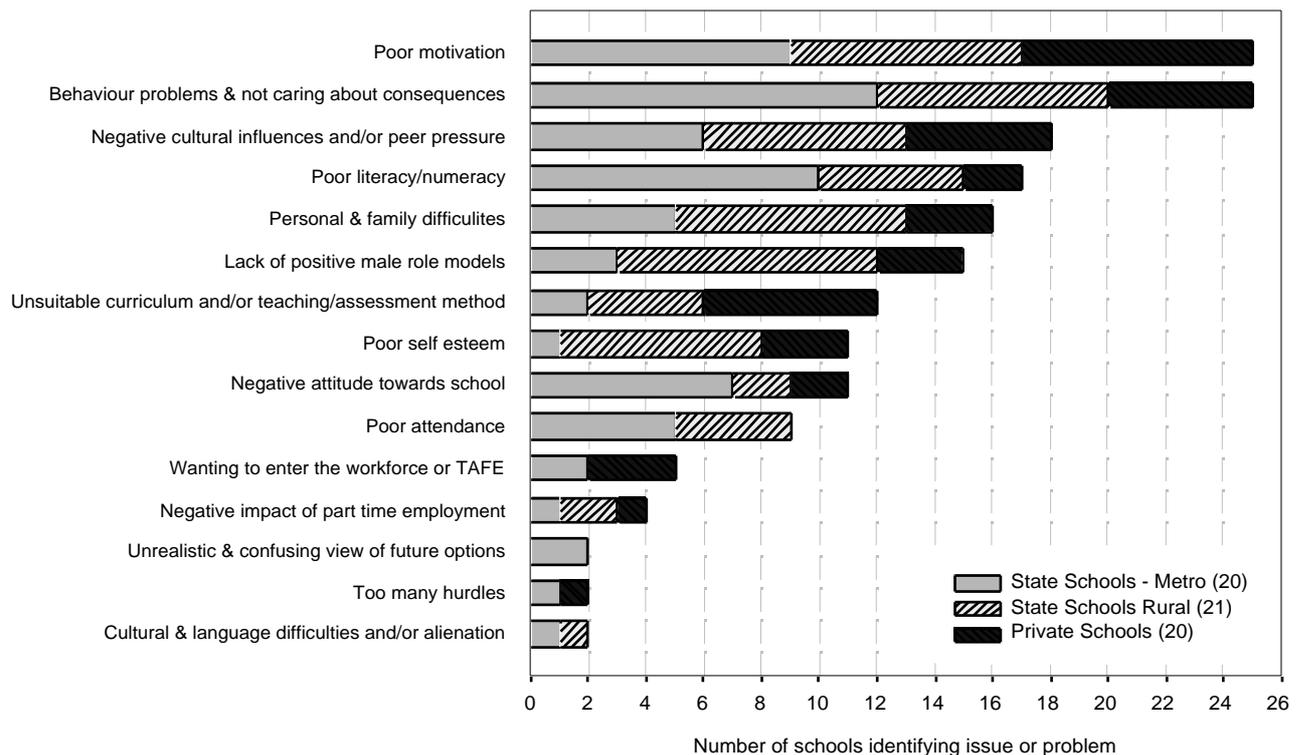
Figure 1: Issues and problems identified by schools in the introductory questionnaire

Figure 2 illustrates responses to Questions 2 and 3 of the introductory questionnaire to schools and indicates the programs that participating schools are currently using, the number of schools using these programs, and the extent to which the programs are considered useful.

Although the emphasis remains firmly on 'fixing up the boys', two points are worth noting:

1. The strategic emphasis is also upon bringing the educational experience up to date through research, staff development and parent seminars, and through the introduction or extension of vocational training, work experience and coursework done in the TAFE environment. This suggests that schools are actually responding to the issues and problems more in terms of the problems that boys face, trying to deal with an inappropriate and perhaps out of date educational offering, than might appear from their answers to Question 1 and indicated by the factors identified in Figure 1.

2. Extant programs, where these are in place, are considered useful by most schools, but not as useful as they had hoped. Most responses were cautiously optimistic, but some were more openly pessimistic, declaring that they had little confidence in the narrowness and inappropriateness of contemporary or traditional views, strategies and approaches. Several responses indicated a strong sense of debilitating hopelessness; of their sheer inability to cope with the scale and complexity of the issues and problems they felt compelled to list, when they were asked to identify the significant causal features of declining achievement and retention in boys. This was evident, for example, in schools that indicated a clear, first hand experiential awareness of declining achievement and retention in their boys, but saw themselves as having no relevant programs in place that they might genuinely call appropriate, let alone useful. Subsequent discussions with these schools revealed the presence of programs similar to those that had been identified by other schools as being used and being found to be 'useful' as strategies.
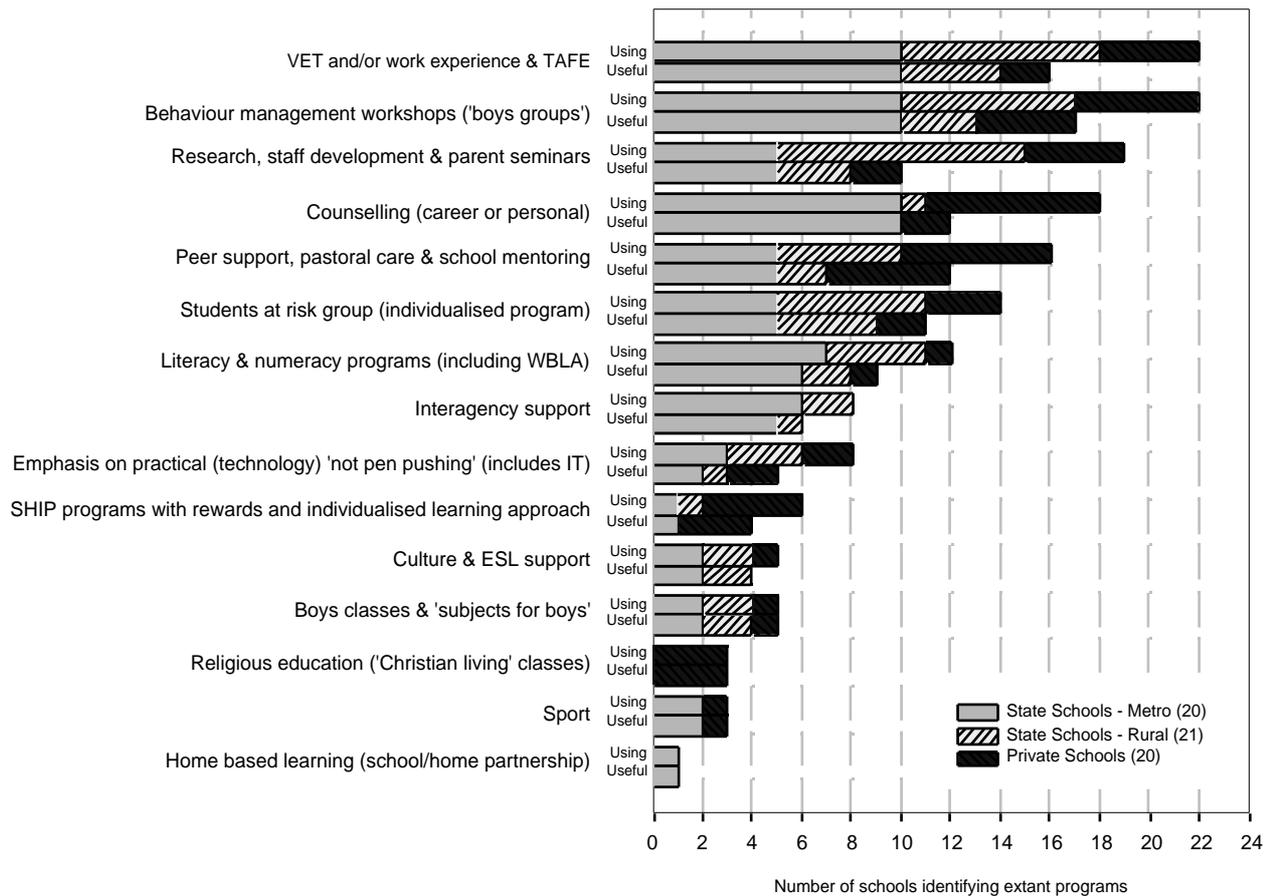
Figure 2: Extant programs identified by schools in the introductory questionnaire

More generally, the schools show a lack of confidence in the relevance and effectiveness of the kind of programs that are encouraged by current policy and research emphases. This, together with a perceived lack of resources to deal with 'one more problem', is apparent from the poor 'usefulness' given to programs involving research, staff training and community awareness, and from the relatively small number of schools electing to respond in this way.

Clearly, there is both a prevailing lack of confidence, and a diversity of viewpoints about the nature of the issues and the utility of current strategies, where these exist. Both of these demand further investigation.

Two observations are worth making which follow from this second point:

1. From what the boys are saying, they would regard the apparent lack of confidence on the part of teachers more as a lack of interest. They believe that many initiatives fail because there are too many *'bad teachers'*, who *'don't ask'*, *'don't listen'*, *'don't care'* and who are not culturally 'up to date'. They also believe that there are too many *'old'* teachers. Although *'old'* teachers are not necessarily *'bad'* teachers because they are old, there is a strong view that the prevalence of older teachers accounts for their lack of interest in new ideas and their cynicism about the value of established ideas and strategies.

2. Reporting back to schools, at staff meetings, training sessions, small group discussions, conferences, and parent meetings, has been a central methodological feature of this research. This has usually been done by addressing staff meetings or training sessions. Discussions at these gatherings indicate a strong interest in what the boys are saying. They also indicate a

general frustration at feeling compelled to work with policies and practices that are known to be inappropriate. They either don't know what else to do, or they feel left to pursue new and more successful directions without support, often individually, 'in secret', and against accepted practice.

Staff and parents frequently raised the point that research, similar to that being done with the boys, should be done 'back to back', involving all other groups in education, namely the girls, teachers, parents, the bureaucracy and those involved in the training of teachers. Their expressed view has been that this kind of research would not only enable a more complete picture of views and experiences, it would help to create understanding between these groups, thereby addressing one of the major problems.

The Emerging Issues

Following the introductory questionnaire to schools, a one day conference was held with staff from the participating schools, at which the issues and problems were discussed and extant strategies were reviewed in more detail.

Several new issues emerged at this point:

1. The issues and problems that explain changes in the achievement and retention of boys cannot be dealt with solely in terms of gender equity, and we must avoid comparing males and females.

2. We must avoid the narrow, misleading focus on 'fixing up the boys'.

3. It is particularly important to listen genuinely to 'what the boys are saying'.

4. Given the rapid pace of social change in recent decades, together with the reality of globalisation, information technology and an aging population, there is a need to understand the influence of conflicting paradigms and the perception of inconsistency and irrelevance within the prevailing paradigm in education. There is, for example, inconsistency and irrelevance, in and between:

   • policy and practice, or the rhetoric and experience of education;

   • notions of success, achievement and appropriate behaviour;

   • prevailing expectations of education and what is actually achievable, relevant and valued;

   • the recognition, acceptance and application of changing cultural realities - including the impact of democratisation, globalisation and information technology; and

   • fundamental perceptions of space, time, identity, knowledge, truth and values, and the ways in which these are dealt with in education.

Appropriate Methodology

In response to these emerging issues, a methodology was chosen that enabled us to gather the views of all boys, both those who are considered 'problem boys' or 'boys at risk', and those who appear neither to have, nor to be, problems in education. This was done in two stages. The first stage used a qualitative research method, namely, talking with 600 boys in 60 focus groups at 20 schools, selected from over sixty participating schools and balanced across all sectors.

At each school, three groups of ten boys were involved, including one group each of Year 9 and Year 11 boys, chosen at random, and one group of mixed Year 9 to 11, chosen by the school as 'boys at risk', either academically or in terms of behaviour. The focus groups met for two, ninety

minute discussion sessions. These were understood as informal discussions in which the boys were asked to discuss the reported phenomena of declining rates of achievement and retention, drawing upon their own experiences in education.

To encourage the boys to express their views freely and openly in discussion, it was agreed that no teaching staff would be present and that the views expressed would be strictly confidential. Adult participation in the focus groups was limited to the Project Research Officer, whose role was primarily to listen, and subsequently to record and summarise the views expressed.

The boys were asked to speak from their own, individual educational experience, including their perceived needs and aspirations. They were also invited to speak in the language of their choosing, and to broaden or redirect the discussion where they thought this to be necessary in order to incorporate the relevant issues and problems adequately. Their views were recorded and summarised.

At a second 90 minute session the summary of views was reported back to the boys for critical assessment, further comment, refinement, and verification.

Focus group participants willingly offered their views, showing noticeable surprise about having been asked to make meaningful comment, as well as initial caution, fearing that their comments would be held against them in some way. Soon after the start of the session, the boys demonstrated relief that they were able to offer their views in their own way, using their chosen language, and in a context that engendered mutual trust and respect. Indeed, the focus group sessions, both in terms of form and content, have been identified by the boys as examples of what might easily and productively be achieved in the classroom. Apart from comments to this effect from the participants themselves, teaching staff frequently offered feedback about the success of the groups and about the marked, positive influence that these sessions had had on the boys involved.

At the start of the sessions the boys were given an assurance of full confidentiality. In most groups, this needed to be a commitment to ensure that the discussion was only heard by the researcher. Ironically, towards the end of the sessions, the boys often asked if the tape could be played to their teachers. Although it remained agreed that it would not be, this is clearly an indication that getting the teachers to listen, in a context that involves somebody from the 'outside', and in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, is high on their list of priorities. It is also apparent that when boys are allowed to talk freely and to choose their own language and mode of expression, they are more enthusiastic, articulate, expressively confident and comprehensive.

Initial concerns, both about the influence of the peer group on the openness of discussion, and about the willingness of adolescent males to participate in group discussions of this kind, proved unnecessary. Although all participants were free to choose their own level of involvement, very few chose to remain silent, and even these boys appeared to express their views in ways that satisfied them. The influence of 'peer pressure' within the discussion was not apparent. Indeed, the critical climate of the discussions made it apparent that differences of viewpoint were being aired, debated and usually resolved.

In the second stage, the task of understanding 'what the boys are saying', was partly an extension of the first stage and involved talking with a further 1200 boys in 120 focus groups at the remaining 40 schools. These groups met for one 90 minute discussion only, toward the end of which they were asked to review critically the ongoing summary of what other groups had been saying.

The focus groups in the first stage had repeatedly begun with a claim by the boys that the issues and problems are not just about boys, and that '*you should be talking to girls as well*'. Some groups suggested that they '*go and get some for you now, cos they'll tell you themselves*'.

A decision was made to conduct similar focus groups, during the second stage of the project, with girls from two schools; one having a mix of rural and metropolitan students with experience in both state and private schools, and the other a senior college. The groups were selected and the discussions conducted in a way that was similar to the boys, with the only adult present being a female researcher. Although the sample was small, the aim was to do no more than trial the focus group method and test the views expressed by the boys, that the girls would identify similar issues and problems; that they would be similarly uniform in their views and largely in agreement with boys. Their responses are reported in brief.

A small selection of groups in the second stage also completed a trial Survey of Student Views, consisting of 100 statements that had been made by the boys at the first 20 schools. Although this research tool is not yet refined, the aim was to develop a list of commonly made statements about the issues and problems, in a language that 'made sense' to the boys, and to provide a mechanism that might be used to give quantitative definition to our understanding of what they had been saying.

The second stage of the project also involved further data collection from adolescent males in their first year of tertiary study at Flinders University. Results indicate that although the pattern of attrition is becoming more severe for both sexes, the trend is greater for males.

WHAT THE BOYS ARE SAYING: AN OVERVIEW

I want to leave school cos it's a hole. The teachers suck, the workload sucks, homework sucks, the uniform sucks. Mum won't let me leave cos she left at Year 11 to work in a factory, sewing. (Year 11)

There are good things about school, but the bad things outweigh the good. (Year 9-11)

A Uniformity of Viewpoint

Despite the broad diversity of the sample, the boys uniformly identified a range of important factors. Although differences appeared, these remained differences of degree; largely the degree to which the issues were important in their individual experience, and the degree to which they were prepared to act individually upon their views or preferences, particularly in the light of the consequences. The boys remain clear and uniform in the identification of the issues and problems, and about the kind of changes that would improve their educational outcomes. This uniformity of viewpoint is particularly significant in four senses:

1. There was uniformity across the schools.

    The boys we talked with were selected from 60 schools balanced across all sectors. Despite the apparent differences in responses from the schools the boys' views remained uniform, making it necessary to analyse and report the data on the basis of 'what the boys are saying'.

    The most noticeable differences from school to school amounted to local issues but these were largely symptomatic of views expressed in general. The views themselves were similar across all schools.

2. There was uniformity between the groups, both between the year levels and between the randomly chosen boys and those who were identified by the schools to be 'at risk'.

Although there were understandable differences in their levels of experience, the viewpoints remained similar. Year 11 boys, for example, reflected on their Year 9 experience in ways that confirmed the views of the Year 9 participants. Similarly, the boys at risk expressed an immediate awareness of having been 'selected'. This was not resented, as much as it was used both to support their claim that teachers conspire to create, extend and maintain 'bad reputations' for boys they simply don't like, and as an indication of narrowness and inflexibility of viewpoint on the part of teaching staff. Some of these 'at risk' participants were particularly cautious at first, expressing distrust for people claiming to be interested in their views, and showing a distinct awareness of having been 'interviewed-out'.

3.   There was uniformity across levels of achievement.

After visiting the first few schools, the distinct uniformity of views raised concerns about the randomness of the selection. It seemed that the schools were selecting boys who were all medium to low achievers. Given that most of the boys had spoken with some degree of disaffection, we wrongly assumed that none of them were high achievers.

In subsequent schools, after more than one hour of discussion, the boys were asked to give comment on how they were going in terms of achievement. The results were surprisingly representative of the broad range of boys in schools. Some were very high achievers and some very low. Some described themselves as 'nerdy' types who were doing well, others who were doing well but preferred to do other things and didn't really care much about school work. Some had behaviour problems but were high achievers, and there were others who kept out of trouble but just couldn't do the work, and so on. In brief, the sample was diverse and broadly representative.

Nonetheless, the simple, but significant feature of the discussions was that the boys were largely in agreement, often to the extent where one group would follow another, without having spoken to each other, and talk of the same issues, the same problems, the same people; identifying the same teachers as examples of good teachers, describing the same forms of humiliation, the same frustrations, teaching and coursework inadequacies, and so on.

4.   There was methodological uniformity in the analysis and presentation of their points of view.

The boys uniformly emphasised the interconnectedness of a diversity of factors and of their constituting phenomena, drawing upon subtleties and nuances in explanation that are not apparent in the literature, nor in discussions with teaching and research staff. These appear, from the perspective of the boys, to be inaccessible to much of the adult world.

Although the understanding of both interconnectedness and the difficulty that the adult world is having in making the cultural transition from fragmentation and certainty to interconnectedness and relativity, is more intuitive and experiential for the boys, it is no less influential in their thinking and their expectations.

The last of these senses of uniformity strongly supports a conviction, repeatedly displayed by the boys, that the adult world is not listening. This needs to be understood to mean both that they don't seek, don't hear and don't respect the views of the boys. It also needs to be understood to mean that adults prefer explanations that confirm what they already think, remain uncomplicated, and make their task both straightforward and one that in the doing can be seen to be done. For the boys, this amounts to the adult world persistently getting things wrong because *'they like it simple'* and *'they just look at one thing'*. There are many examples of how this tendency has a

broad and significant influence, both on the achievement and retention of boys, and on the way that boys more generally respond to adult views and strategies.

Among the most relevant examples, are several prevailing adult views about achievement and retention for boys that turn out to be decidedly what the boys are 'not' saying.

What the Boys are 'Not' Saying

It's Not that Simple

Although the boys generally reject views and strategies that focus solely on 'fixing up the boys', they do not hesitate to see their contextually relative meaning and value. They unhesitatingly acknowledge that they are often lazy, disorganised, uncompromising, obstructive, destructive, and so on. Nonetheless, they persist in seeing these contextually, both spatially and over time. For example, they identify *'mucking up'* in class as a necessary or deliberate response to a set of circumstances that they believe cannot be dealt with in any other way. That is, these are 'necessary', retaliatory choices. We *'muck up'*, they say, with *'bad teachers'* but not with *'good teachers'*. They also talk about *'being'* lazy and *'being'* disorganised because the work is boring, repetitive and irrelevant, because they dislike the teacher, and so on.

In the view of most boys, adults exclude contextual complexity in order to *'make things simple'*. This, they say, is why adults never really understand. Importantly, this is not the claim that adult views are false, it is more the claim that they are dangerously incomplete, too often to the point of becoming false in their application.

Most boys claim that they have *'got a life'* and would do a lot better at their school work if teachers took other aspects of their lives into account when setting homework, assessing a piece of work or setting deadlines:

> *I've got a social life, volunteer work and sport; not just school.* (Year 9-11)

> *If you don't finish your work, the school doesn't give a shit. You just get zero.* (Year 9-11)

Similarly, they say, teachers get behavioural 'problems' wrong because they don't ask how and why something happened, and with an open mind. Instead, *'they just pick on the boy with a reputation'*:

> *I got accused of selling drugs at school cos my friend did. Cos I knew him I got interviewed first. They accused me before anyone else, just cos of my past. I've never been involved with drugs.* (Year 9-11)

> *You'll go to say your side of the story to the teacher and they'll go, 'don't answer back', or 'don't lie'. You never get to say your side.* (Year 9-11)

Teachers would understand more if they would *'just listen to you'* and recognize all of the things that are going on.

Masculinity Crisis?

Conspicuous by its absence from their expressed views, has been the concern, evident in the literature and the media, that boys are troubled by some kind of masculinity crisis and that this influences their achievement and retention. Surprisingly, in a 90 minute discussion session, in which the boys were very open and thought themselves to have been comprehensive, there was very little discussion about any aspect of being male and its significance in education. This was even more surprising at schools where programs aimed at developing their self-awareness, self-

esteem, self-confidence and their perception of 'being male', were known to be in place and known to have involved a large number of the focus group participants.

At this stage, it appears that if there are issues and problems concerning 'being male' in education, or in society generally, most boys don't see them, or don't see them looming large in the context of issues and problems that influence their lives at school. When asked, they talk about them as issues and problems that are of interest to adults because they are mainly for and about adults.

Once again, they show puzzlement and irritation when the broad range of interconnected factors, involving bad teachers, an out of date school culture and a boring, repetitive and irrelevant curriculum, remain largely ignored while strategies, that amount to 'fixing the boys', are implemented.

It is unlikely that the boys will uniformly support any strategic initiative that is raised by teachers who they do not consider *'good teachers'*, and that is raised within a schooling context that shapes and directs most of the issues and problems that influence their achievement and their preparedness to finish Year 12.

Literacy and Numeracy?

Despite the emphasis placed on improving literacy and numeracy for boys, as both an explanation and a strategy to deal with declining retention and achievement, the boys in this study showed surprisingly little interest in the issue, or confidence in the strategy, remaining consistently puzzled and irritated by explanations and strategic initiatives that are directed solely at 'fixing up the boys'. It seems that for most boys, many of whom are high achievers, literacy and numeracy are valued and treated as any other aspect of the educational offering:

> *If I need it, I'll learn it. If I don't, I won't.* (Year 9-11)

Once again, it would seem, that what offends boys about strategies that are intent upon 'fixing up the boys' is that, in the context of their school experience, these are seen to be the product of people who don't listen to them, don't respect their views, don't really care about their educational outcomes, and who are more intent upon finding 'quick fix' solutions, for self-interested reasons, which demand minimal change on their part.

It's Not that 'It's Not Cool to be Clever'

Another example is the boys' response to a notion (popular in the literature and the media) that boys in general think it's 'not cool to be clever'; more negatively, that they think 'it's cool to be a fool'. As a generalisation, they believe the notion to be simplistic to the point of being false.

Although most boys acknowledge that in Years 8, 9 and 10, they occasionally *'give shit to the smart people',* it is thought that most of the *'paying out'* that is done about cleverness, like any other kind, is done between friends, *'in fun'*. It is not considered to be a significant negative influence on either their attitude to achieving or their performance at school. Furthermore, it is thought to be far less likely to occur from Year 10 onward:

> *Mostly happens in Year 9.* (Year 11-12)

> *If you're still here after Year 10 then you don't have to be, so you're here to do something, and if you don't then you should leave and do something else.* (Year 11-12)

Furthermore, some people *'are paid out for being dumb'*. In other words, they're paid out because *'they are not smart'*:

> *I actually see a lot of people that are not smart being paid out ...* (Year 9)

Nonetheless, some *'paying out'*, and some that is identified as intentionally harmful, is directed at the *'real nerds'* but it is claimed that this is retaliatory and about *'social stuff'*; is done in different ways, and for reasons that have little to do with cleverness or achievement. The *'real nerds'*, it is claimed, bring it upon themselves by being deliberately and often aggressively anti-social, sometimes to the point of being offensively elitist.

The boys see the adult interest in 'it's not cool to be clever' more as an example of how the adult world seems determined to be wrong either by taking things out of context, or by trying to understand these things without appealing to their contextual significance. Indeed, most boys believe that adults do this with agreement between themselves and with such conviction that they invent stereotypes which they all use, and which they accept without question, but which are obviously false. For the boys, this is what explains the adult interest in dealing with stereotypical boys, even when there aren't any. More particularly, it explains why adults invent the stereotypical boy who is supposed to believe that 'it's not cool to be clever':

> *It's just a stupid stereotype that people have made up.* (Year 11)

> *I don't think it* [being clever] *is uncool ...* (Year 9)

> *It's cool to be clever. If you're clever then you can make more money.* (Year 11)

Rather than any tendency on the part of the boys to believe that it is not cool to be clever, it is more the impact of being misunderstood that is said to have a negative influence on achievement and retention, largely by way of creating disaffection and the belief that there are *'too many bad teachers'*.

Along with bad teachers, the boys are also, but not uniformly, of the view that parents similarly misunderstand, reinforcing and extending the disaffection as well as tightening the grip of despair:

> *Parents go 'you just don't want to try cos it's not cool' ...*[I say] *'Mum, I'm trying but I'm getting shit marks cos I don't understand and I've asked the teacher but they just don't want to answer the question.* (Year 11)

These parents are not only involved in generating misunderstandings about matters outside of school, they compound the impact of misunderstandings inside of school by believing what teachers tell them.

This issue of trust and respect repeatedly appears in the focus group discussions. Most boys talk of the difficulty and often the impossibility of establishing a relationship of trust with adults. Interestingly, they talk of trust and respect being established between themselves, in a range of ways, some of which involve *'paying out'*, others are more physical, like pushing, shoving, messing up hair or clothing, and so on. They also talk of how the teachers and school rules *'get in the way'* in these communicative social matters.

Indeed, one of their observations about what constitutes a good teacher, is that it is someone who understands their ways of communicating, using these to establish trust and respect. A good teacher is one who participates in these practices and enjoys the humour that distinguishes the odd incident of *'serious paying out'* from general *'stuffing around'*.

A good teacher, it seems, is one who is involved enough to be contextually flexible or pluralistic; someone who accepts the rhetoric of education, in practical, if not theoretical ways, particularly the importance it places on the relativity of identity, knowledge, truth and value. Notwithstanding, boys occasionally talk of the best teachers as those who are *'given shit'* by

other teachers because they are flexible enough to join in with their students. Ironically, of course, this amounts to the suggestion that teachers are also involved in *'paying each other out'*, but not always in fun.

In general, the boys admire cleverness. This is one of the reasons why boys value and admire girls and the minority of boys who are high achievers, believing that their own complaints about unfair treatment take nothing away from the successes that these students are having.

It's Not Just About Gender

A final example, which is dealt with in more detail below, is the popular view that girls are getting a better deal in schools. The boys agree, but in a way that, once again, shows the popular view to be incomplete to the point of being false, largely because it separates one issue from the range of interconnected issues and phenomena that they know to be significant and know to be interconnected.

Factors Identified by the Boys - A Selection

The boys identified a range of interconnected factors, emphasising the following:

- The adult world is not listening, or not genuinely listening.

- Most boys don't value school; it's more about getting credentials than learning, and these don't operate usefully as short term motives. Apart from the social life, school for most boys is considered to be an unwanted means to an end that starts out being too distant and becomes increasingly unachievable.

- Most girls get a better deal, but so do boys who find it easy or necessary to comply and conform, and who quietly get the work done.

- School work is boring, repetitive and irrelevant.

- School doesn't offer the courses that most boys want to do; largely courses and coursework that *'get you ready for a job'*.

- Homework is neglected or rejected because it is too intrusive, destructive and ultimately unachievable without sacrificing more valued aspects of their lives.

- Years 8, 9 and 10 waste too much time and the Year 11 workload is deliberately made excessive, and comes at a time when the demands of life beyond school are increasing and becoming more important, rewarding and fulfilling, e.g. part time work, sport, social life, etc.

- School pushes boys into a downward spiral of disaffection, resistance, resentment, anger and retaliation that, for many, is just too hard to stop.

- School presents too many contradictions and too many debilitating paradoxes. Some example are provided by the following:

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

  - School pushes the rhetoric of education (e.g. fairness, justice, respect, flexibility, the celebration of difference, etc.) but produces the opposite in practice.

  - School is about getting most boys out of education.

- School is about preparing you for adult life, but adult life gets in the way of school; culturally celebrated achievements and rites of passage into adult life (e.g. participation in competitive sport, getting a driver's license, owning a car, getting part time work, providing for their own needs, helping to run a household, as well as 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.

- The primary factor, and the most troublesome paradox for most boys, is that there are *'too many bad teachers'* who either create or exacerbate their problems, and *'too many old teachers'* who *'don't like kids'* and who *'don't stay up with things'*. Good teachers make school tolerable but there are not enough good teachers (usually said to be around ten per cent).

- 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 students for a place within the emerging society.

- School is like a prison, but even prisoners get toilets they can use.

It is important to recognize that although these are the key factors raised in the focus group discussions, the boys did not offer them as a list of separate factors, each of which might usefully be understood or dealt with in isolation. Consequently, the following discussion of these factors reflects the boys' emphasis on their interconnection and their contextually conditional relevance and significance. Similarly, the boys did not give these factors a place in a static order of priority and we have tried to avoid imposing one. Notwithstanding, their relationship with *'bad teachers'* and the failure of the adult world to genuinely listen to their views, are clearly regarded as primary factors, both causally in the sense that they have an immediate influence on the significance of all other factors, and strategically in that changing one of these, at least initially, changes everything.

GIRLS GET A BETTER DEAL

The boys uniformly and emphatically claim that girls get a better deal at school. In the classroom, the girls get more help and attention from teachers, better marks for similar work, more leniency in terms of work deadlines and behaviour, and more freedom to talk and move about:

Girls get favoured more than boys ... (Year 9-11)

Yeah, I agree with that totally ... (Year 9-11)

The boys also uniformly believe that girls are trusted more to go out of the classroom, to use the library, to work elsewhere or to use resources located in other rooms; that girls' requests to use the toilets during class time are never denied, while boys are usually told to wait, and that girls are allowed to leave the room in groups while *'they'd never let us do that'*:

If we want to go to the library ... like, if the girls ask they can go ... but we're not allowed ... they [the teachers] *don't trust us ...* (Year 9)

If the teachers see you for one minute out of class and you get suspended for it, and you haven't even done nothing wrong ... (Year 11)

Most boys claim that they are not trusted at all; that *'girls get more excursions'* and that they occupy most of the positions of responsibility in the school because *'they are preferred by the teachers'*:

> *Yeah ... just little things ... like they have girls' days out and stuff like that ...* (Year 9-11)

> *We don't get any of the benefits that girls get ... like excursions and things like that ...* (Year 9)

In general, the boys believe that girls are given more encouragement to stay at school, while many boys are actively discouraged; told that they are not clever, not well suited to the work, made to feel that they don't belong and that it would be in their interests to leave.

It's Not Simply About Gender

Although the issue of girls getting a better deal is raised in terms of gender, it is treated more as a matter of fact; one that is considered to be well known by both boys and girls, but one, the significance of which is explicitly qualified as their discussion develops. It soon becomes evident that this is not considered to be an issue or problem that can usefully be dealt with simply in terms of gender, either as gender difference or gender equity. Indeed, it is dealt with more as an example of what they see to be the narrowness, inflexibility and general inappropriateness of most aspects of school work and school life. For example:

1. They make the point that not all girls are the same, and some girls get a better deal than others.

2. Although girls always get a better deal relative to boys, they also make the point that not all boys are the same, and some boys get a better deal than others.

3. Girls are seen to be getting a better deal as a consequence of other, more broadly significant factors; primarily that there are *'too many bad teachers'* who have *'too much power'*, and that *'school is out of date', 'too inflexible', 'has nothing much to offer'*, and too narrowly defines achievement and success. For example:

   • Bad teachers favour students who conform and comply, and allow students to benefit from *'sucking up'*. Its not so much about gender as being stuck with bad teachers and not being able to choose or move.

   • The curriculum favours students who like a particular kind of work, done in a particular kind of way. Although most boys find this to be boring, repetitive and irrelevant, the issue is not about gender as much as the lack of appropriate options and the flexibility to enable students to pursue their own learning needs and their preferred learning style and direction.

   • School neither recognizes nor values the needs and achievements of students in other aspects of their lives. It is not so much about gender as students being penalised for having a life beyond school (in many ways the kind of life that is promised as an outcome of school). The boys believe that girls *'don't have a life'* or are prevented from having a life by school work and parents. The boys feel punished for not being prepared to give up that life to meet the demands of a school system that is unnecessarily oppressive, out of date and inflexible.

Despite their uniform conviction that girls get a better deal, the emphasis of the boys' discussions is either not upon gender from the outset, or it moves away from gender, and their experience with good teachers is sufficient in itself to make this necessary. For them, this is not only compelling, it

is obvious and must be well known to all who have experienced life in the classroom, including *'the teachers'*.

From the small sample of girls' responses, it would seem that the claim made by the boys, that the girls see the issues and problems in much the same way that they do, is generally correct. Although there are gender differences in the views, there is clear, uniform agreement that the issues and problems are largely about an oppressive, inflexible, out of date offering from teachers, the curriculum, and school culture and organisation generally.

Not surprisingly, the boys are at difference with attempts, either by educational institutions, through research and the choice of corrective strategies, or by the media and the community generally, to focus solely or largely on gender equity or gender differences to explain the declining rate of achievement and retention of boys, or of boys relative to girls. Mostly, this is expressed as puzzlement; a genuine failure to understand how the adult world could make such large mistakes about the obvious. Often, it is expressed more contemptuously, as an example of the adult preference for simplistic analysis, or for the self-interested kind that draws attention away from the real issues; to avoid having to challenge the status-quo or to respond effectively to a complexity of issues at the one time, most of which require self-criticism and big changes on their part.

'Boys Only' Classes Just Don't Work

From the introductory questionnaire, as well as remarks made by the boys, and by staff in several schools, it is apparent that 'boys only' classes are being used or planned as a strategy to deal with the declining achievement and retention of boys. The boys uniformly condemn the move and challenge the reasoning. In all classes other than PE, and in some cases Technical Studies, the boys believe that such a move can only make matters worse.

Although most boys are strongly of the view that girls get a better deal in the classroom, they do not believe that separating them from the girls would be an improvement. For example, if this is done on the basis of gender differences, it ignores the reality that some boys, and at some time most boys, prefer learning environments that are similar to those that would suit most girls and vice versa. In other words, by focusing narrowly on one difference, other differences are denied. It is similarly self-defeating when done in a bid to achieve gender equity. In view of their dynamic and diverse nature, the division of girls and boys into separate classrooms results in the inequitable imposition of 'equity'. Besides, girls, in girls only classes, might get an '*even better deal*', and so on.

Interestingly, most boys believe that they work better when girls are in the classroom. This, they say, is partly because they like their company and *'they're good to look at'*, but it is also because the presence of most girls is thought to create a better, more productive and rewarding environment by providing:

- the richness of diversity;

- the asset of cleverness;

- the example of good work practice;

- a moderating influence on retaliatory behaviour;

- an interest in long term outcomes; and

- the influence of a pragmatically driven focus on compliance and conformity that results in them finding ways to make the best of a bad lot, with benefits for all.

Notwithstanding, the boys believe that the primary and most significant influence on the classroom environment is not whether or not the class consists of all boys or all girls, but whether or not it has a good teacher. The best classroom environment is one in which there is the conjunction of diversity and the kind of good teacher who is comfortable with difference and is not troubled by the riddle of relativity and its application in teaching practice.

Like compulsory sport, uniforms, and so on, it seems that gender-based favouritism or prejudice, where these are present, provide local factors that serve as instances or indicators of the more significant and somewhat general causes of declining achievement and retention.

'BASICALLY, THERE ARE TOO MANY BAD TEACHERS' - A PARADOXICAL DILEMMA FOR BOYS

There are definitely good teachers and bad teachers. If we could get rid of the bad teachers, we'd know who to get rid of. (Year 9)

Despite the broad and complex association of factors, the boys consistently and emphatically see their retention and achievement problems primarily in terms of their relationship with teachers and what they see to be a proliferation of 'bad' teachers who are given too much power. A uniformly repeated view is that a 'good' teacher changes everything. One good teacher, alone, is enough to make a bad lot tolerable and achievement, in an otherwise repressive, oppressive environment, seem possible.

The participants in this study have been clear, constructive and detailed in defining the constituting features of good teaching, from their perspective; providing more than 60 defining features of a 'good teacher'. Interestingly, their emphasis is always placed on the personality of teachers; their ability and willingness to establish relationships of mutual respect and friendship with their students. In most schools, however, less than ten per cent of their teachers were thought to meet these criteria.

A good teacher is one who:
- listens to what you have to say;
- respects you as a person; treats you like a friend; treats you as an adult;
- is relaxed, enjoys their day, and is able to laugh, especially at mistakes;
- is flexible, adjusting rules and expectations to meet the needs of individuals and particular circumstances;
- explains the work; makes the work interesting; finds interesting things to do;
- doesn't humiliate you in front of the class; doesn't try to destroy you so that you'll leave school, or tell you you're no good and that you should leave school;
- doesn't write slabs of work on the board to be copied;
- lets you talk and move about in the classroom;
- doesn't favour girls, or the boys who do what they're told;
- doesn't keep picking on people who have a reputation, pushing them to retaliate;
- doesn't mark you down because of your behaviour; and
- gives you a chance to muck up and learn from it.

The focus of discussion in all groups either starts out as, or quickly turns to, teachers. All of the boys, to varying degrees, resent what they see as largely ineffective, out of date teaching by people who they think cannot teach, shouldn't be allowed to teach, have lost interest in teaching, and who are unnecessarily, inequitably, inconsistently, and usually unsuccessfully, authoritarian.

From their remarks about good teachers, the boys are identifying teachers who go beyond the 'policies and pretence' of education and its contemporary rhetoric about thinking in terms of interdependence and relativity. Essentially, they are describing teachers who, professionally and personally, are taking risks by listening, responding, respecting, trusting and valuing their students more than the rules, the policies, the legal precedents, their training, careers, the reputation of the school, and in some cases, small but vocal groups of parents:

> *Good teachers are flexible with your behaviour. You can joke in class. We drop a couple of words ... we shouldn't, but he doesn't give detentions. He breaks the rules of the school but he doesn't break his own. He's nice to you so you abide by him, we've got respect for him.* (Year 11)

Ironically, the kind of non-compliance that characterises these teachers seems to make them more successful at teaching and more valued as positive role models and often mentors:

> *Whatever they do, is what we do. If they're a good teacher and they do better stuff, we do better stuff. If they are a crappy teacher, we do bad stuff.* (Year 9)

> *They be good to you, you be good to them ... that's it.* (Year 9-11)

> *... they are not completely strict ... no one really talks a lot and there is not a lot of telling off in the class ... Everybody seems to have respect for everyone else and there is not a lot of mucking around.* (Year 11)

> *We'll get further with teachers like that ... we're motivated to work if the teacher's relaxed. It makes it fun. We want to work.* (Year 9)

> *If the teacher's relaxed we're going to achieve more because we want to achieve more.* (Year 9)

Furthermore, from the boys' criteria of 'good teaching' it is evident that these teachers display a genuine, practical commitment to the democratisation and liberalisation of the young. In doing so, they are effectively offering a resolution to many of the paradoxes faced by the boys, and to the debilitating despair that ultimately shapes and directs their educational outcomes. In other words, they give them sufficient reason to believe in themselves, in others, in the value of learning and of working toward long term goals; that what needs to be done in their lives can be done, and that their confidence in the logic that led to despair was well founded:

> *For a while, I thought it was just me, that I had problems or somethin'. But since I've had xxxx* [a 'good' teacher] *in maths, it's all changed ... everythin's better ... even other stuff ... and that was last year. I'd like to get him for everthin'. If we had him this year, I reckon I'd do real good.* (Year 11)

Although the boys often talked about the fact that they *'feel better'* with good teachers, they also feel vindicated.

Interestingly, 'good teachers' might be male or female. They are not necessarily young, but it helps. Although being young does not necessarily make a teacher a 'good teacher', the boys uniformly believe that being old predisposes a teacher to be less in tune with changing attitudes, beliefs and practices, and less directed by contemporary challenges, and less focused on preparing for the future. The boys are also uniformly of the view that most of their teachers are old.

Young teachers are more likely to meet the boys' criteria for good teaching because *'they are closer to where we are'*. Young teachers are thought to like what they are doing more than most older teachers, and they *'try harder'* to *'have fun'*, and to make *'the work more interesting'*. Importantly, when the boys talk about young teachers being *'closer'*, this is not explained simply in terms of age. Young teachers are more likely to *'treat you like a friend'*, to know about *'the things we're interested in'*, and to understand the kinds of problems that school creates for young people.

More generally, young teachers are thought to be culturally more up to date; paradigmatically more in tune with the contemporary world. Not surprisingly, teachers who meet the boys' criteria for good teaching, are often thought of as 'young' teachers, regardless of their age. Age, in itself, is not the issue. The distinguishing features of good teaching remain largely focused on the ideas, attitudes and practices of individual teachers.

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL OF DISAFFECTION

Once they have experienced one or two good teachers, the boys want to know why the rest can't be *'trained properly'* and why the material they teach can't be made more interesting and more relevant. To them, the logic is straightforward, that is, good teachers and good teaching are demonstrably better for all, *'so why don't they just do it'*:

> *Because our teacher treated us well and everything, then everyone treated him well back. He didn't have to say be quiet all the time. Because he was so good to us we were just good back to him and we just shut up and did our work. He respected us.* (Year 9)

Given that the boys are unable to fault their logic, they seem left with the unwanted conclusion that the teachers (and perhaps most of the adult world) can't see the need for change and remain insensitive to their plight, can't change when they need to, despite the seriousness and urgency of the task, or simply don't want to change. The response from the boys to each of these is similar, namely disaffection, making resistance seem necessary, which compounds the problem, leading to resentment, anger and retaliation. The display of their response seems to be all that differs from boy to boy. For a few it is a minor irritation that is easily dealt with through compliance, but for most, the compulsion to respond, directly or indirectly, becomes an obstacle to achievement:

> *We get them back and muck up with teachers that don't respect us.* (Year 9)

Despite the immediate satisfaction of being heard by way of causing disruption, the spiral of disaffection, resentment and anger is not considered by the boys to be a response that is likely to achieve a great deal. It appears to be a last resort, and perhaps a cry for help or a response driven by despair; not only the more familiar subjective 'feelings' of despair, but a rational, objective despair. Put simply, this is the reasoned, rational conviction that what must be changed cannot be changed; that due rational process leads to this conclusion and without 'fiddling the books' it can lead to nothing else (Medlin 1989, Slade 1989). The cheery optimism of teachers, counsellors, or perhaps parents, who say that they understand, but who offer no real solutions, merely confirms the paradox.

Objective despair logically follows from the boys' experience in education and they show very little interest in denying the logic that makes it necessary. Indeed, they seem to be determined to follow this logic at any cost. Hence, too often the spiral of disaffection is a process that they consider necessary:

> *You can't just sit there. You got to fight back, muck up, or somethin'. What else can you do?* (Year 9)

Strategically, either denying their use of this logic or asking the boys to deny the logic itself, is pointless. It would be far better to give them reasons to change the outcome of the logic, for example, provide more 'good teachers'. From what the boys are saying, the prevalence of 'bad teachers' and the boys' inability to avoid or control the impact that these teachers have on their lives, remains the primary and most troublesome of the many paradoxes confronting these boys daily.

From epidemiological research findings during the last ten years we have learnt that irresolvable paradoxes of this kind can have a broad, as well as both immediate and long term, impact on human health, particularly in the formative years. Interestingly, not being able to resolve paradoxes of this kind is also thought to influence human behaviour and the ability to learn (McEwen 1998).

THE CURRICULUM TURNS OUT TO BE WHAT HAPPENS IN THE CLASSROOM

For most boys, school work is boring, repetitive and irrelevant. However, from their perspective you cannot change the curriculum unless you change the teachers:

School is, like, boring, and teachers, they are boring. (Year 9)

Are you saying that the teachers are boring, or is it the work itself?

No, the teachers make it boring. They rave on about stuff that is not exactly necessary. (Year 9)

How do you think these 'boring' teachers affect your work and your achievement?

They make us sleepy, and then you can't concentrate properly. (Year 9)

What about the work itself?

It depends on the teacher. Our French teacher doesn't explain anything. She, like, gives us work sheets, 'here, do that'. She just goes and sits down. We don't end up doin' it and we get duty slips. (Year 9)

When the boys talk about both the work and teachers being boring, irrelevant and repetitive, they do this as though these were inseparable aspects of the one process that they simply call *'school'*. This includes school organisation and its culture; the length of the lessons, the day, the school week, the term, and so on, as well as homework, uniforms, attendance and behaviour expectations. They include aspects of the built environment, like enclosed classrooms, toilets that can't be used, as well as gates and fences *'that make you feel like you're in prison'*. They also include libraries and librarians, who they say, try to keep boys out. For the boys, these are all interdependent and causally interrelated aspects of their attitude to the work.

Nonetheless, the boys' emphasis consistently and uniformly returns to the teachers as the primary factor; the one that must be changed before any of the others can be changed; the one which by changing will change all of the others. For most boys, the fault primarily lies with the teachers, because the power lies with the teachers to make the necessary adjustments, but they don't. For them, the outcome is that boys learn less because teachers teach badly:

You don't really learn that well if you can't concentrate because you're bored. (Year 9)

Teachers should do more things to make it interesting. They could do creative things instead of just sitting down filling in things on a work sheet kind of stuff. (Year 9)

It's the same for all lessons pretty much. (Year 9)

It is important to note that the boys refer to the work as being boring in several ways:

1. It is inherently boring because *'it's all theory'*.

2. The work has been done before, ie, it *'is too repetitive'*.

3. The work is done in the same way, lesson after lesson, day after day, year after year, ie, we read a novel and *'do a review about it'*, then we read another novel and *'do a review about it'*, or we watch a movie and *'do a review about it'*. Sometimes *'they just get you to do assignments'* one after the other, or you just sit in classrooms and *'copy out of books or from other people'*. That's *'all we ever do'*.

4. It presents no challenge, since it's *'real easy stuff'*, and because it is easy it gets boring.

5. The work is not relevant, namely it's *'stuff you can't use'*, o*r 'you won't even use in the work you want to do'*, by which they mean *'real work'* outside and beyond school:

    We do real easy stuff ... we've done it all before ... it's heaps boring; it's all theory ... stuff you can't use. (Year 9)

    I think school is too repetitive. Like in English you do the same things over and over again. We watch a movie and then go and do a review about it, then we read a book and do a review about it. That's what I get sick of doing ... (Year 9)

    We've been doing that since Year 8 and 9 and 10 ... (Year 11)

    I find that Year 11, (and 12 I've been told) ... that it's pointless, because you don't learn anything. They just get you to do assignments. You don't learn anything at all ... When you do assignments, you don't really care what you do, you just write it down so you can finish it ... (Year 9-11)

    You only copy out of books or from other people, so you're not learning anything ... (Year 9-11)

    And in maths it's just sheets [work sheets] *...* (Year 9)

    And in maths they give you things you won't even use in the work you want to do. It's pointless. (Year 11)

    In lessons like science, languages and maths it's the same stuff rolled off again and again. (Year 9)

    My marks in maths have dropped considerably because of the way the teachers teach. (Year 9)

Although several subjects are talked about as inherently boring, irrelevant and repetitive, the boys consistently believe that a good teacher can make any subject interesting:

My teacher has made a big difference in my work in maths. My mum spoke to the teacher cos she thought I was cheating. (Year 11)

All of the boys either expressed or supported the view that they *'do better'*, in terms of self-esteem and achievement, with better teachers; they muck around less, they concentrate more, they work harder in class and they usually get the homework done.

Basically, the boys believe that by changing the teachers you have already changed the curriculum. In other words, the curriculum turns out to be what actually happens in the classroom, and learning turns out to be what the participants actually take away with them and use.

In understanding their views about the curriculum, stereotypes and other dichotomous distinctions become prohibitive and destructive. All boys say that they learn better when they are *'doing things'*; *'interesting'*, *'hands-on'* things. Nonetheless, what constitutes 'doing things', or things that are 'interesting' does not fit into the more traditional dichotomous divisions between 'academic' and 'technical', 'theoretical' and 'practical' or 'abstract' and 'concrete'; in which things academic, theoretical or abstract are necessarily passive and uninteresting, and things technical, practical or concrete are necessarily active, interesting and more 'real'.

Science and maths are regarded by some boys as subjects that involve interesting, active tasks that they enjoy. Some of these are practical, but most are theoretical or abstract. The same boys speak of their interest in sport and in a range of classes involving mechanics, cooking and drama, because they amount to 'doing things'.

Significantly, stereotypes, false dichotomies and similar culturally archival concepts, are at their most destructive in information technology, where most traditional distinctions become fuzzy. The boys, for example, fail to understand why computer games and the use of email are excluded from their academic program, why teachers spend so much time *'trying to block internet sites'* that are easily accessed from home, why teachers don't understand computers much, why they *'force students to 'learn' 'what they already know'*, and why teachers and librarians stand guard over computers that have already passed their use by date.

From the views expressed by most boys, it would seem that the idea that boys and computers were 'born for each other' needs revision. In our schools, it seems that the two might be experiencing a 'forced separation'.

Once again, the boys bring the issue back to teachers. At schools where the Information Technology teachers are regarded as 'good teachers' the state of the facilities, the speed of the modem, and so on, are not problems that cannot be dealt with 'somehow'. In one school, the boys described the 'Info Tech' teacher as *'a legend'* largely because *'he listens'*, *'he treats you like a friend'*, *'he takes you seriously'*, and he *'lets you do stuff'*. From much of what was said, it is evident that this particular teacher has understood that computing is not just a new technology, it is also a new way of life, involving new dimensions of space and time, new expectations and a virtual world in which distinctions between reality and fantasy collapse, and notions like 'distance', 'tomorrow', 'limits', 'restrictions, 'blocked sites' and even 'copyright' make very little sense.

Boys who talked about their ability to *'build computers'* and who have been *'programming for five years'*, or who have found ways of *'getting into blocked sites'* and so on, also talked about their frustration at being forced to do boring, menial tasks in the classroom like *'opening and closing files'* and how their resistance had led to 'withdrawal' from computing classes and, in one case, a three day suspension. They also talked of being excluded from computing facilities because they refused to take their hats off, or because they 'used' email or loaded 'games' onto school computers. This general frustration is directed largely at teachers.

STAYING ON TO YEAR 12

The spiral of disaffection is more often destructive for boys who are declared low achievers or who, more accurately, are non-achievers at school. These boys are both more prepared to accept the consequences of non-compliance and retaliation and less able to absorb these consequences in terms of the impact on their level of achievement. For them, it seems to be more important to get the immediate satisfaction of resistance and retaliation; to respond to what is perceived to be

injustice, immediately. Nonetheless, these boys generally see themselves as able to do well under the right conditions; perhaps even to Year 12 and beyond. Whatever their choice(s) of direction, they remain aware, albeit vaguely, of the advantages of completing Year 12:

> *If I could leave tomorrow, get a good job, just out of the blue, there's no way I'd be here, but because of unemployment you need school - to get Year 12 and tertiary education helps a lot.* (Year 11)

However, most have decided that the conditions are not only not right, they are intolerable. They find themselves with no alternative other than to adjust their expectations and for many boys it seems that they view their options, in education and their career, negatively; more in terms of what they can't do. Their view of themselves; of their abilities and their potential for success, is conditioned more by the immediate circumstances of their schooling than by what they might learn or what careers they might pursue were these conditions more flexible or more suited to their needs. They seem to know that this is happening, but they feel powerless to control these events. They know that they're being assessed, and that their lives are being shaped and directed, more by the limitations of their schooling than by an objectively fair assessment of their ability and potential.

This further compounds the paradoxical dilemma of education, namely, that they have to stay in a place that they believe they can't stay in, doing work that they believe is of no value, in order to get qualifications that they believe do not accurately measure their ability, but which they will need if they are to get the chance to demonstrate their real ability to learn 'on the job'.

A surprisingly large number (perhaps more than half) of the boys say that the price of finishing Year 11 is too high. Although most of the Year 9 boys think that they could make it to Year 12, the retention figures suggest that they won't (Collins et al. 2000). Many boys have already left school before Year 11, and around half of the Year 11 boys we spoke with indicated that they would not be going on to Year 12. Many of these considered themselves unlikely to pass Year 11. The remainder thought that they would do Year 12, some because their parents wanted them to, and others because they could, and that they might need it in the future. Most of these boys felt that there was little point in going on to do tertiary study without a clear career pathway in mind. Only a small number said that they had been focused on getting good grades in Years 8, 9 and 10, as progressive steps toward finishing Year 12 with the kind of results that would lead to university study and on to their chosen career. These were usually the boys with ambitions that led to careers like 'doctor', 'lawyer' or 'engineer'.

Unfortunately, the prospect of coming back to do Year 11 or 12 at another time, for all boys, is simply rejected. Learning is synonymous with school: 'life long learning - no way!' It seems that their school experience has firmly established a negative and necessary association between formal learning and what they understand as an institutionalised, unpleasant waste of time. For them, school deals with matters having no obvious relevance to their lives and their perceived needs and interests, and demands the kind of personal sacrifice and general disempowerment that makes the hazy promise of long term rewards simply and ultimately not enough.

THREE VERSIONS OF A *'BETTER PLACE'*

The boys, whether they are the ones who are not achieving, who are not achieving their best, or who simply don't like the conditions under which they are being 'successful' at 'achieving', often present an idealised version of TAFE, the world of work, or senior college, as the solution to their problems. These are considered to be alternatives to school, and are usually talked about while

referring to someone who has taken one of these options. Generally, peer counselling of this kind, like peer support, peer tutoring, and peer recognition, is considered the most meaningful and reliable, albeit, not when it is ordered and organized.

Even at their worst, the possibility of pursuing TAFE, the world of work, or senior college, offers many boys genuine hope from as early as Year 9; often enough to preserve their self-esteem along with confidence in an early judgement that the world beyond school can only be better:

> *Compare this school to xxxx* [a private senior college for Years 11 and 12] *… I reckon all schools should be like that … you choose what time you have your lessons and all that … it makes school easier and it makes you want to work.* (Year 9)

> *TAFE would be better cos it's more focused on one thing. Here* [at school]*, you have to do all these subjects and it doesn't sink in properly.* (Year 11)

> *With work, you have more motivation ... it will be better ... you get paid.* (Year 9-11)

Whether or not the boys are getting accurate reports about TAFE, the world of work or senior college, is not the most important issue. These alternatives, and the way the boys describe them in their discussions, provide us with models of what they see to be better learning environments; options that they would like to pursue and that they believe would effectively deal with all of their current problems. As alternative models of a better place, these options provide templates for change in schools, and basically, they are templates for adult learning environments.

Of course for some boys at least one of these options has already been realised, and with great satisfaction. For example:

1. The majority of the boys involved in this study have experienced the world of work through part time jobs by the time they reach Year 11. Many understand these part time jobs to involve very poor pay and working conditions. Nonetheless, work remains a better place; one that offers the status and experience of adult life, and *'you get paid'*. Although part time work becomes a major obstacle to their achievement and retention at school, it is paradoxically an effective antidote for the kind of dissatisfaction that they believe explains poor achievement and retention outcomes.

2. From what the boys are saying, vocational education works far better when they are allowed to leave the school to attend courses at a TAFE centre. Although they talk broadly and favourably about the benefits of having a more adult learning environment at TAFE, with better teachers and more interesting, useful work, for many boys it is a transforming influence on their lives and their attitude to learning because it solves their problems with schooling and leaves them feeling vindicated; life beyond school is better, and learning can be interesting and useful. Paradoxically, although these boys were encouraged to take up TAFE courses because of their poor performance in more academic areas, one of the outcomes they identify is a higher level of achievement and retention in those areas:

> *TAFE is better cos they treat you different to school. More like an adult.* (Year 11)

> *Yeah, the TAFE teachers treat you more like mates.* (Year 11)

> *At TAFE there is better material and equipment, we do prac and theory, but at school it's all theory.* (Year 11)

> *School expects you to do it* [school work] *at the weekend, but TAFE realises that you need time to relax.* (Year 11)

TAFE is much better cos everyone wants to learn, so you do heaps more. It's heaps more interesting. (Year 11)

Cos of TAFE we get a free lesson [at school]*, which helps with the work* [homework]*.* (Year 11)

Of all the groups of boys in this study, only two were uniformly content with their current educational offering. One was a group of boys at risk, all of whom were in Year 11, and most of whom were attending a TAFE college one full day each week. The other was at a private senior college, catering solely for Year 11 and 12 students.

3.   The senior college experience gave the boys a more adult learning environment, with a culturally more up to date *'atmosphere'*, but the focus of their satisfaction repeatedly returned to the improved relationship they have with their teachers:

The atmosphere here makes the difference. Everyone wants to learn, and wants to go to uni'. Everyone generally gets along with everyone else ... the relationship between teachers and kids. (Year 11)

There's more trust. At my old school you had to have a note from your parents for everything. Here, you can leave the campus if you want. They treat you more like adults. (Year 11)

At the old school you were forced to do your homework. Here, they're not forcing you but if you don't do it you're only letting yourself down. Everyone is still doing it [the homework]*!* (Year 11)

If you respect the teachers ... they are not completely strict ... no one really talks a lot and there is not a lot of telling off in the class. Compared to last year, like, I went to the same school for eight years, they're just constant with 'keep quiet', 'shut-up'. It's a constant thing. Like, here, it might come up once or twice in a lesson, and it's just, 'could you please be quiet', Everybody seems to have respect for everyone else and there is not a lot of mucking around. (Year 11)

It is important to note that the boys see a distinction between adult learning environments, either idealised or experienced, and their current 'senior school' offering. From the experience of the boys in this study, most senior schools, despite their diverse and changing nature, remain schools. For most boys, they offer improved environments but these remain little more than minor concessions, and even these are thought to be largely to the benefit of those who make it to Year 12 by learning to fit into an environment that has not sufficiently recognized their age, their cultural expectations and their current life style preferences. By contrast, adult learning environments offer the full recognition of 'adulthood'.

It is also important to understand their use of the term 'adult'. Being 'adult' is partly a measure of maturity in years, but it is far more a justification for being treated fairly and equally as individuals in their own right; applying the same conditions of respect, justice, equity, fairness, freedom, responsibility and so on, that are usually denied to children 'because they are children':

... like, one of my mates had, like, a beard, and he's been told off by the teacher, and it's an expectation of the school to shave it off ... It was a clean shaved beard ... It didn't have this morning's corn flakes in it or anything ... It looked good and they told him to go away. (Year 11)

We get caned [not physically] *for having facial hair at school, these days.*

Teachers are allowed to have facial hair. See, what's that?

... but the thing is the feeling there ...Teachers should have to live by the same expectations as us.

Yeah, instead of treating us like kids. (Year 11)

Interestingly, a large part of what is generally meant by the term 'maturity' is a preparedness to conform and to comply to the expectations of 'adults'. The boys don't use this term a great deal, but when they do, it is usually used to explain the success of girls and the 'approval' afforded to them by the adult world.

Although the three preferred options of TAFE, the world of work, or senior college, are expressed as idealisations, they are common in that at least one of them will be seen to offer each of the boys, despite their diversity of backgrounds, abilities and interests, a way of getting out of oppressive, restrictive school environments that are seen to be out of date and dominated by bad teachers who prefer to establish control rather than mutual trust, respect and a place 'with' their students in the process of learning.

The boys talk about TAFE and senior college as educational alternatives offering better teachers, more flexibility, more freedom, and where the students are treated with more respect and more generally, as adults. The world of work is seen in a similar way. It offers more interesting tasks, less pressure, more real learning opportunities, more respect, freedom, an adult identity and immediate rewards; recognisable rewards, namely money and the adult lifestyle that it can buy.

THE PARADOX OF ACHIEVEMENT: THE UNRECOGNISED CV

From what the boys are saying, it seems that at Year 11 most of them have achieved a great deal. They are very perceptive, intelligent young men who are struggling to believe in themselves and surviving conditions that would destroy most adults. At Year 11, and at about 16 to 17 years of age, these boys have an impressive curriculum vitae; one that must make any researcher wonder why you're asking them to focus on their declining rate of achievement.

The boys seem to be aware of their achievements, and aware that the adult world, particularly the world of education, affords them little or no recognition. In its place, they find themselves systematically excluded from being seen to be achievers.

Although the boys show an awareness that success means different things for different people, they are puzzled, disappointed, and in many cases angry, that the adult world persistently fails to recognize their successes, particularly those that, in contemporary Australian society, are clearly 'rites of passage' into adulthood. For example:

- They have found and sustained part time work, and at a time of high unemployment. In excess of 60 per cent of the Year 11 boys say they are working, with the average being around 15 hours - in some groups all the boys were working and some are working 25 to 35 hours a week in low paid jobs with difficult conditions and often have supervisory responsibilities.

- Many Year 11 boys are licensed car drivers.

- They have managed to maintain, for over three years, their involvement in an education process that they believe to be unsuitable and often hostile to their needs and interests.

- They participate in some sort of competitive sport, whether it be in organised team sports or in more individual pursuits like skate-boarding. More than 60 per cent indicated a weekly commitment to organised team sports, in the range of 6 to 12 hours, spread over 2 to 5 days each week.

- They maintain a social life with both male and female friends.

- They make difficult decisions, for example, about drug use.

- They deal with family differences and problems, some of which produce pressure to achieve in particular ways or conditions that shape and direct education options, performance and outcomes.

- They continue to adjust to rapid physiological and psychological changes.

- They cope with the increased responsibilities of adulthood, while being actively denied the accompanying adult freedom and empowerment.

- They sustain a fundamental belief in their culture, expressing this through their individual integrity, their passion for freedom, and their strength to resist perceived injustice against all odds.

- They are surviving an advertising industry that makes promises that it cannot deliver, and popularises goals and 'norms' that cannot be realised.

- They remain forward looking and largely optimistic, despite being taught about the horrors of converging social and environmental crises which threaten human survival on a global scale.

Despite these and other positive achievements, the boys find that they get very little recognition for their successes; recognition coming mostly from their peers. Few rewards are given and their gains have little or no impact on their school grades. Furthermore, the boys find themselves judged by their teachers, the school, and often parents, as being 'failures', 'poor achievers' or just not being capable of applying themselves to difficult tasks.

It would come as no surprise to the boys to learn that the focus of the literature and the media, when dealing with the declining rates of retention and achievement, is essentially directed toward 'fixing up the boys'. It would come as even less of a surprise to learn that the character of responses, from our introductory questionnaire of participating schools, was similarly directed at 'fixing up the boys'. It would seem that the boys themselves see their problems very differently.

They see themselves stuck with an unsuitable learning environment that they cannot change, largely because it is constituted by teachers who don't care. Although they identify the curriculum as irrelevant and unchallenging, their experience with 'good' teachers has shown this to be an unnecessary outcome. Furthermore, it is one that is made worse because it is dominated by authoritarian school policies and practices that achieve nothing other than wasting classroom time, making education an unpleasant experience, and creating a pre-occupying focus on getting out of school as soon as possible. Once again, their experience with 'good' teachers has shown them that this is also an unnecessary outcome.

The choice, whether or not to correct declining rates of retention and achievement, they believe, lies largely with the teachers and the preparedness of an aging adult world to *'genuinely listen'*, and to *'catch up'*; to bring the culture and focus of schooling up to date so that it might be better placed to keep pace with the economic, social and cultural changes that are already making demands that it cannot meet, and that in the coming decades will be as much dramatic as they are inevitable.

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