



E I P

D Declining Rates of Achievement and Retention

The perceptions of
adolescent males

01/6

Professor Faith Trent

Malcolm Slade

The Flinders University of South Australia

ISBN 0 642 77206 1

DETYA No. 6705.HERC 01A

01/6



Evaluations and Investigations Programme
Higher Education Division

Department of Education,
Training and Youth Affairs





Department of Education,
Training and Youth Affairs

Declining Rates of Achievement and Retention

The perceptions of
adolescent males

Professor Faith Trent
Malcolm Slade

The Flinders University of South Australia

01/6
June 2001

Evaluations and Investigations Programme
Higher Education Division

© Commonwealth of Australia 2001

ISBN 0 642 77205 3

ISBN 0 642 77206 1 (Online version)

DETYA No. 6705 HERC01A

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without permission from Ausinfo. Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to the Manager, Legislative Services, Ausinfo, GPO Box 84, Canberra ACT 2601.

The report is funded under the Evaluations and Investigations Programme of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Project team	vii
Executive summary	ix
1 Introduction	1
1.1 The adolescent years are the most significant	1
1.2 Listening to the ‘Boys’	1
2 Identifying the issues and the appropriate methodology	5
2.1 The initial issues	5
2.2 The emerging issues	9
2.3 Appropriate methodology	9
2.4 Limitations of the study	12
3 What the boys are saying: an overview	13
3.1 A uniformity of viewpoint	13
3.1.1 Simple solutions?	15
3.1.2 Masculinity crisis?	16
3.1.3 Literacy and numeracy?	17
3.1.4 It’s not cool to be clever?	17
3.1.5 It’s not just about gender	20
3.1.6 Issues identified by the boys—a selection	20
4 Gender equity?	23
4.1 It’s not simply about gender	23
4.2 Single sex classes	25
5 Teachers and schooling	27
6 The downward spiral of disaffection	31

7 The curriculum turns out to be what happens in the classroom33

8 Retention39

9 Three versions of a ‘better place’41

10 The paradox of achievement: the unrecognised CV45

11 Conclusion47

Appendix A: The views of other student groups49

Appendix B: Quantitative methodology and data analysis51

References63

Figures

Figure 1: Distribution of schools responding to the introductory questionnaire6

Figure 2: Issues and problems identified by schools in the introductory questionnaire7

Figure 3: Extant programs identified by schools in the introductory questionnaire8

Figure A1: Percentages responses of agree or strongly agree by item and gender60

Tables

Table A 1: Students’ statements survey item numbers organised by categories55

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge and thank the many people and schools involved in this project for their cooperation and commitment. First and foremost we thank the boys who took part, for their trust, their openness, and their enthusiasm.

We thank the teaching staff at participating schools for their strong support for the research, for their time and effort in coordinating the focus groups, and for the support and encouragement given to the boys who took part.

We are grateful to Professor John Keeves, Associate Professor Bob Teasdale and Dr Robin Ryan from the Flinders University Institute of International Education for their interest and advice on various aspects of the work. We also thank Professor Keeves and Dr Trevor Johnson for their assistance with the trial Survey of Student Views.

We acknowledge and thank staff from the Evaluations and Investigations Program, Higher Education Division of the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, as well as the members of our Project Advisory Committee, and the staff of the Faculty Office of Education, Theology, Humanities and Law, Flinders University, for their support and assistance throughout the project.

We especially thank the other two members of the project team, Katherine Dix and Ann-Maree O'Connor for their valuable assistance in most aspects of the project and for their ongoing support and interest. We thank Katherine for her work with the girls' focus groups and with the development, trialling and reporting of the Survey of Student Views.

While acknowledging the assistance of the Steering Committee, the material contained in this report is the responsibility of the researchers.

Faith Trent

Malcolm Slade

Project team

Project Leader

Professor Faith Trent

Principal Researcher

Malcolm Slade

Other Research and Administrative Staff

Katherine Dix

Ann-Maree O'Connor

Project Advisory Committee

Professor Lyn Yates

Mr Bruce Milligan

Dr Elizabeth McDonald

Dr Jan Baker

Mr Peter Nicholson

Executive summary

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

It is evident from the literature review undertaken as part of this study, and from media reports, that the issues and problems are being reported as single factors and more in terms of 'problem boys' who are not coping, than problems that boys more generally face while trying to fulfil their learning needs. Some of the strategies employed currently reflect these approaches.

Several popularly held views are that the problems start in the primary years, and that the issues are reducible to matters of gender difference, gender equity or literacy and numeracy. These were discussed in the literature but were not perceived by the boys as being significant factors in the choice to remain at school. Issues about masculinity did not feature at all, with occasionally some irritation being expressed by the boys about others defining 'what they [the boys] ought to be'.

The views of the boys to emerge included:

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

- School expects adult behaviour but doesn't deliver an adult environment.
 - School pushes the rhetoric of education (e.g. fairness, respect, flexibility, a celebration of difference, etc.) but produces the opposite in practice.
 - School is about getting most boys out of education.
 - School is about preparing youth for adult life, but adult life gets in the way of school; culturally celebrated achievements and rites of passage into adult life (e.g. sport, driver's licence, owning a car, part time work, providing for their own needs, helping to run a household, establishing an adult identity, social life and sexual relationships) are negative influences on school achievement and on the preparedness of boys to stay at school.
10. The primary factor, and the most troublesome paradox for boys, is that there are too many unsuitable teachers who either create or exacerbate their problems. Good teachers change everything but there are not enough good teachers.
11. For most boys, school is focused on preserving the status-quo, which makes it culturally out of date and unable to respond to change. It remains detached from the real world, distant from the rest of their lives, and neither convincingly forward looking, nor plausibly concerned with the need to prepare them for a place within the emerging society.

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

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

In order to see whether trends continued post school, the retention and achievement rates of 1st year students at Flinders University were examined. These results show that adolescent males leave university in higher numbers

than females, and that the rate of retention is declining for both over the last four years.

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

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

The challenges and issues

In summary, some of the issues which emerged which need further consideration are:

- A need for understanding 'good teaching', and how it relates to the perceptions of the boys.
- A need for systemic change in schooling which brings schooling closer to the 'outside world' as perceived by adolescent males.
- Research into the nature of learning environments, which would address the issues raised by the boys, and provide opportunities for them to succeed.
- A focus in pre-service teacher education on understanding the perceptions, lifestyles, views and aspirations of adolescent males and how these impact on schooling, retention and achievement.
- The design and delivery of in-service education for teachers which focuses on understanding the impact of lifestyles, views, aspirations and perceptions of the current generation of adolescent males and the impact on schooling, retention and achievement.
- Examination of and action on the relationship between years 8, 9, 10 and years 11 and 12, noting the perceptions of the boys.

Most crucially, there is a need to develop and foster environments in which adolescent males are not seen as a problem and are recognised as young adults who have views which need to inform the educative process.

1 Introduction

1.1 The adolescent years are the most significant

The primary purpose of this research has been to provide an overview of what adolescent males are saying about the phenomena of declining retention and achievement, and how their educational outcomes might be improved.

In brief, they 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 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. In some cases they appear to manifest themselves in the first year of University. 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 study. The participants have also shown a preference to remain involved as much as possible, up to and beyond the reporting stage.

1.2 Listening to the 'Boys'

It has been evident from the outset that most boys are 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:

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

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

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 simplify matters 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 a deal of what the boys have said differs from the views expressed in much of the literature, the media, and what passes as 'common sense', these differences will not be critically examined at length in this Report. This research presents another view of those things which have been canvassed by academics, teachers, parents and the media. In no sense are the responses 'right' or 'wrong' but they do represent their reality which informs the decisions about achievement and retention the boys make. Thus, this report presents an overview of what the boys are saying.

It appears likely that at present the gap between school culture and the wider Australian culture, in which adolescents are participating, is wider than at any other time in history.

From what the boys have said, they believe that their views and their reality are not recognized, and that there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of education; one that explains how the broadening gap between school culture and the wider Australian culture constitutes a day to day problem and a paradoxical dilemma; one that drives them to believe '*nobody's listening*'.

From the interviews the boys 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.

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.

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 atomising factors and assigning blame is a necessary condition of dealing effectively with the issues and problems that shape and direct current changes in retention and achievement for boys.

2 Identifying the issues and the appropriate methodology

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

2.1 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, 2 and 3, which graph the responses of 61 secondary schools to the first three questions in the introductory questionnaire.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of schools responding to the questionnaire, all but one of which continued their participation throughout the study. The responses were balanced across the three sectors, State, Catholic and Independent. For the State sector in particular, rural and country responses were also balanced.

Figure 1: Distribution of Schools Responding to the Introductory Questionnaire

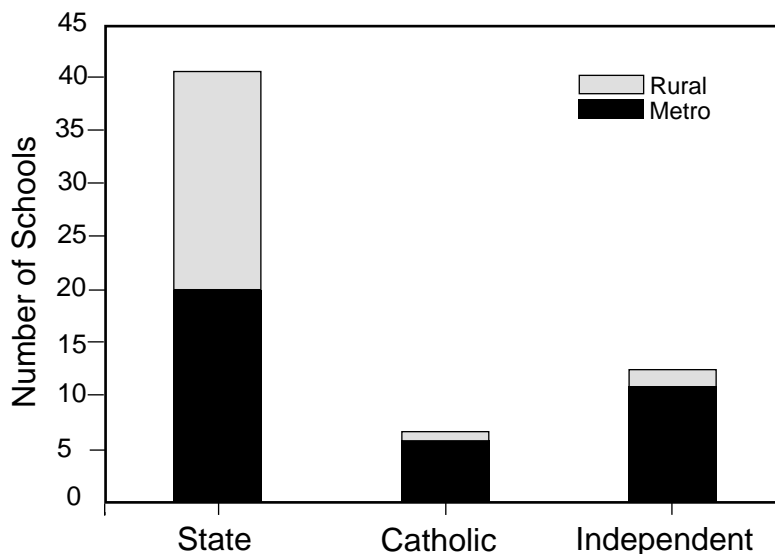


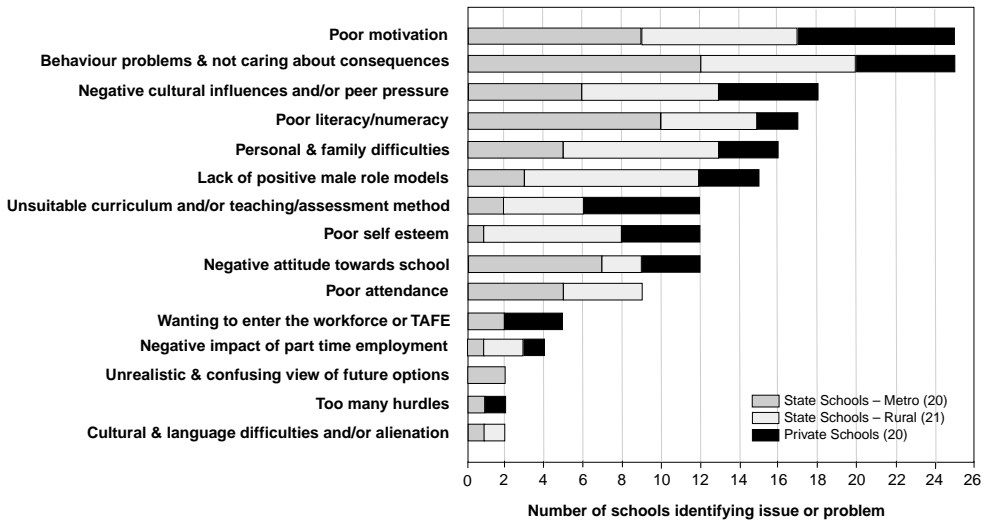
Figure 2 presents responses to the first question. Although poor motivation and behaviour are the two factors emphasised more than any other by the schools, most factors are identified in terms of deficiencies in the boys. Only 2 factors—lack of positive role models and unsuitable curriculum and/or teaching and/or assessment might be seen as controlled by the ‘system’.

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 3 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:

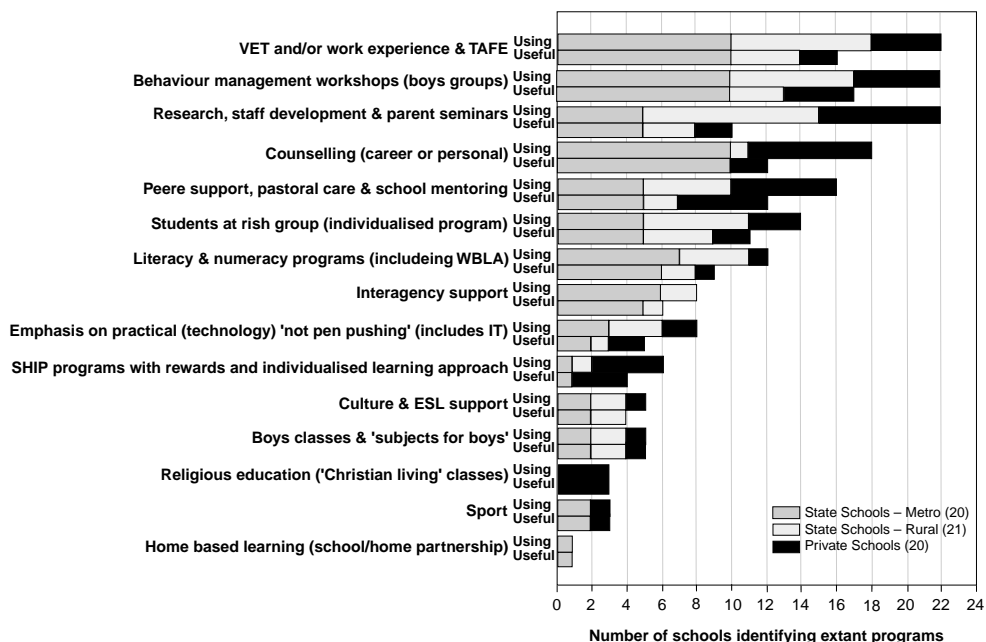
Figure 2: Issues and Problems Identified by Schools in the Introductory Questionnaire



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 2.
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

Figure 3: Extant Programs Identified by Schools in the Introductory Questionnaire



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.

Interestingly, the rural and private schools show a greater 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 warrant further investigation.

Reporting back to schools, at staff meetings, training sessions, small group discussions, conferences, and parent meetings, has been a central feature of this research. This has usually been done by addressing staff meetings or training sessions. Discussions with teachers 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.

2.2 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. Forty schools attended.

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 therefore comparisons between males and females must be avoided.
2. The narrow, misleading focus on 'fixing up the boys' must be avoided.
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.

2.3 Appropriate methodology

The methodology chosen was drawn from the phenomenological tradition and is based in the participant observer category. For this reason a decision was made to use a single researcher across the entire project to ensure consistency.

The conference with participating schools endorsed a choice of methodology that enabled us to gather the views of a range of 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 Private, Catholic and State sectors, and from both rural and metropolitan sites.

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. This reporting back was seen as an essential part of validation of views expressed.

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.

As the study evolved, a concern was expressed that perhaps there were group rather than individual responses being received. A questionnaire (Appendix B) was designed and trialled to ensure that the results could be validated by individual students. Although the sample was small, the results of the 90 responses indicate that what emerged from the focus groups was endorsed by individual students.

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'*. These comments led to a decision to try the ideas out on a small sample of girls. The responses can be found in Appendix A.

2.4 Limitations of the study

The study focussed on the views of adolescent males. Data was collected in South Australia only and some responses may therefore reflect this particular schooling system, e.g. Year 8 being the beginning of the secondary schooling years.

A decision to design a survey instrument was made late in the project and arose from the results. A small selection of groups in the second stage completed the trial Survey of Student Views, consisting of 100 statements that had been made by the boys at the first 20 schools (see Appendix B). 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.

There was insufficient time to obtain a large response, although preliminary responses show trends worth investigating. The representative sample used in the trial consisted of only 66 boys and 24 girls across each of the school sectors and year levels involved in the study. To date, we have only made use of the trial Survey of Student Views by providing percentages of participants who agree or strongly agree with the statements used. However, despite the size of the sample, the results are of sufficient interest to warrant both their inclusion as Appendix B, and the further development and refinement of the survey tool.

Insufficient time also did not allow follow-up in TAFE and universities and access to those who had left the system was limited and difficult. The researchers attempted to follow those who had discontinued but privacy issues made identification and location of these boys very difficult.

While it was the overt intention of the study to canvas the views of the boys and to record these as their reality, it is recognised that these have not been tested against differing views identified by some teachers, parents, academics and commentators. Given that many of these are stakeholders in the system, such dialogue and identification of strategies to allow success would seem to be an essential way forward.

The study also was intended to be qualitative, as an addition to the extant quantitative material. As such, although judgments can be made about the relative strength of responses, these have not been numerically measured.

3 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 mixed group)

3.1 A uniformity of viewpoint

Despite the broad diversity of the sample, the boys identified the same 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 (State, Catholic and Independent) and from rural and metropolitan settings (see Figure 1) in varying socio-economic locations. 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. In some smaller schools the entire cohort was interviewed, representing a range of achievement.

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 indicated that a range of factors influenced each other and influenced their views about remaining at school. While the threshold for a decision to leave or stay and achieve varies, the overall perceptions remain.

No matter what the decision is, there is a strong conviction, repeatedly enunciated by the boys, that the adult world is not listening. This was explained to mean, from the boys' viewpoint, both that they [*the teachers*' (representing the system)] don't seek, don't hear and don't respect the views

of the boys. It also means that adults prefer explanations that confirm what they already think, remain uncomplicated, and make their task straightforward. 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.

3.2 Simple solutions?

Although the boys frequently talk about single issues and isolated events, and in ways that appear disjointed, they are largely committed to the view that the issues and problems are, at all times, aspects of each other and can only be understood contextually; in the general context of their lives and their school experience.

Similarly, although they identify primary factors, they do not see the issues and problems as simple ones with simple solutions. They unhesitatingly acknowledge, for example, that they are often lazy, disorganised, uncompromising, obstructive, destructive, and so on. Nonetheless, they persist in seeing these contextually, both spatially and over time. They identify *'mucking up'* in class as a necessary or deliberate response to *'bad teachers'*, but they also see it in a context of circumstances over which they have no control and to which they believe they cannot respond in any other way. They uniformly claim that they *'muck up'*, with *'bad teachers'* but not with *'good teachers'* because good teachers change the context of events in a fundamental way. Similarly, they 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 trial Survey of Student Views, 92 per cent of boys and 100 per cent of girls agreed with the statement 'I get lazy when I don't like what I'm doing' (see Fig. 3, Time/Work Load, Item 65, Appendix B).

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.

3.3 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 or that who they are needs rejigging in terms of their masculine identity. 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 irritation and a feeling of being ignored 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.

3.4 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, whenever the topic was raised in their discussions. The constant cry that boys are illiterate seems counter-productive as it produces resistance to support programs. 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, which demand minimal change on the part of the system and teachers.

3.5 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. In the trial Survey of Student Views, 91 per cent of boys agreed with the statement that 'I think it's good to be clever', while only 38 per cent agreed with the statement

'Sometimes you don't do your work because you don't want to be seen as different from your friends' (see Fig. 3, Identity, Items 28 and 38, Appendix B).

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)

From the boys' perspective, 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'*. Indeed, in the trial Survey of Student Views, 92 per cent of boys agreed with the statement, 'Teachers don't understand us because we do things differently' (see Fig. 3, Item 55, Identity, Appendix B).

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. 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.

3.6 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.

3.7 Issues 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 examples 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.
- 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.
- 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 the lack of interest in new ideas and their cynicism about the value of established ideas and strategies.

In subsequent chapters, an attempt is made to discuss these factors in a way that remains consistent with the boys' emphasis on their interconnection and their contextually conditional relevance and significance, rather than as a list of separate factors.

4 Gender equity?

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 and computing facilities, 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.

4.1 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.

Interestingly, from the trial Survey of Student Views, although 88 per cent of boys and only 46 per cent of girls agreed that 'Girls get a better deal at school', their agreement becomes more uniform when the statements refer to the way teachers treat students. For example, 91 per cent of boys and 88 per cent of girls agreed with the statement, 'The way teachers treat boys and girls differently is a big problem', and 73 per cent of boys and 75 per cent of girls thought that 'Teachers give more help to smart students' (see Fig. 3, Items 35, 33 and 36, Fairness, Appendix B). While this data may seem to conflict with

the literature which shows that teachers spend more time with boys, these perceptions show that it is the nature of the time spent which is being discussed.

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, both in the focus groups and the Survey of Student Views, 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 (see Fig. 3, Appendix B).

Not surprisingly, the boys resent 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 a genuine failure to understand how the adult world could make such large mistakes about the obvious.

4.2 Single sex classes

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. From the trial Survey of Student Views, it would seem that the girls are firmly in agreement. Only 14 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls agreed with the statement, 'Girls and boys should be divided into separate classes' (see Fig. 3, Item 80, Environment, Appendix B).

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.

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.

5 Teachers and schooling

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. However, it is clear in the boys' responses that they believe 'the teacher' implements and directs the system and the culture of the school.

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 skills of teachers; their ability and willingness to establish relationships of mutual respect and friendship with their students.

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, lack knowledge and skill and who are unnecessarily, inequitably, inconsistently, and usually unsuccessfully, authoritarian and who waste their time. Interestingly, from the Survey of Student Views, 83 per cent of both boys and girls agreed with the statement, 'There are too many bad teachers', and 92 per cent of both girls and boys agreed that 'Friends can often explain the work much better and quicker than the teacher' (see Fig. 3, Item 37, Respect for Teachers, and Item 31, Support, Appendix B).

From their remarks about good teachers, the boys are identifying teachers who go beyond the 'policies and aims' 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 and respect them for who they are, while making 'reasonable' demands of them. 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.

6 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, i.e., 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 own logic, they seem left with the unwanted conclusion that the teachers, schools (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 many, 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. 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). The cheery optimism of teachers, counsellors, or perhaps parents, who say that they understand, but who offer no real solutions, merely confirms the paradox.

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)*

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 (McEwen 1998).. Interestingly, not being able to resolve paradoxes of this kind is also thought to influence human behaviour and the ability to learn.

7 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 by teachers. 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. Interestingly, principals are often talked about positively—so too are many of the deputies/assistant principals whose job it is to deal with the 'problems'.

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 from

their point of view 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'*, or *'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)

From the Survey of Student Views, it is evident that most boys and girls not only agree strongly with statements like, 'We do the same thing over and over ... its pointless and so repetitive', 'You learn a lot more from doing things', and 'Some subjects aren't hard, they are just not relevant', they are also in agreement that 'The work is boring because the teachers are boring', and 'Teachers could make the work more interesting'. However, 100 per cent of both girls and boys agreed with the statement that 'It's easier to work hard in subjects you like' (see Fig. 3, Items 97, 42, Relevance, and Items 1, 15, 41, 90, Interest, Appendix B).

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.

In the trial Survey of Student Views, 91 per cent of the boys agreed with the statement, 'Computers are the way of the future' and yet around 50 per cent of these boys believe that 'Computers at school are a waste of time because nothing ever works', and that 'There is no point using computers at school because there are too many restrictions'. Although not all boys have access to computing facilities at home, 78 per cent of them find that they 'mostly use computers at home'. 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 the major issue. 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. In the Survey of Student Views, 76 per cent of boys agreed with the statement that 'Teachers don't know much about computers and they won't let you tell them'.

8 Retention

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, many have decided that the conditions and the educational experience will not allow them to remain and succeed. 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 for boys, 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, or part way through, 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’.

In the trial Survey of Student Views, 92 per cent of boys agreed that ‘There are not enough goals in Years 8, 9 and 10’, 88 per cent thought that ‘It’s not until Year 11 that things get serious’, and 87 per cent that ‘As you get older your priorities change and getting good marks becomes more important’. For many boys, however, the changes come too late.

Unfortunately, the prospect of coming back to do Year 11 or 12 at another time, for all boys, is simply rejected by them. 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.

9 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.

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 judgment 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. Interestingly, the data from TAFE indicates that their views are 'idealised' and non-completion is high here, as in first year University.

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. VET in schools is not seen as the same alternative, because it is controlled by the school. 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 despite the claims that these are adult learning environments. 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' as defined by the boys.

It is 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' and is often defined in schools as girls' behaviour. 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.

10 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. At Year 11, and at about 16 to 17 years of age, these boys have an impressive curriculum vitae; in terms which are important to them.

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 are seen not to be achievers, or have their achievements acknowledged.

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 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 comes 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'. The responses on the questionnaire to teachers, who are concerned about the issues, reflects some of the same approach, similarly directed at 'fixing up the boys'. It would seem that the boys themselves see their problems very differently.

The boys see themselves stuck with an unsuitable learning environment that they cannot change, largely because it is constituted by teachers and a system which is unresponsive to their perceived needs. 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 the pre-conditions for their decisions about retention and achievement. 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.

11 Conclusion

This study has provided an opportunity to gain an understanding of how adolescent males view their educational experiences and how they respond to those experiences. There has been no attempt to discuss whether the boys' perceptions are 'right' or 'wrong' because, in a sense, this is not the most important issue. What is important is that a system which is at least in part failing its participants, acknowledges and deals with the realities as they are experienced by those participants.

The origins of the study lay in a concern that both in the literature and in practice, that a deficit model of boys has been operating and that the gap between educational institutions and their clientele is greater now than ever before. If these concerns were valid, then it seemed likely that irreconcilable paradoxes might result. The study shows that indeed this is the case.

The findings of the study raise serious questions concerning teacher education and teacher professional development. It is pertinent to ask in what ways are teachers made aware of the prevailing needs of their students and how are they encouraged to find ways of being 'good teachers' as described by these students.

The study also identifies further areas for research into the impact of the school culture, curriculum, effective computer and technology availability and use, and what genuine adult learning environments might be like.

On the basis of discussions with the boys and staff in participating schools, and the value that they have attached to research done in this way, it seems that it would be useful if:

- The trial Survey of Views was developed and used, with a larger national sample, to give more quantitative definition to the views of boys, expressed and summarised in this study; and
- The current study was extended to seek the views of all groups involved, particularly those of girls, teachers, parents and boys who are already out of school, having chosen or found it necessary to leave school early.

It also seems desirable that there be a comprehensive examination of the current models of schooling at the senior level, involving an investigation into:

- The success and suitability of the various existing senior school models and practices;

- The preference of boys for more adult learning environments in the senior Years 10, 11 and 12 and in what way this differs from the current senior school offering;
- The suitability of university or TAFE environments as templates for senior schools; and
- The value and feasibility of more flexible offerings to senior students to enable more diversity, specialisation and flexibility in the direction and mode of senior study and in the number of years over which it is completed.

The statistics in both secondary and tertiary institutions indicate that, to a large extent, these systems are failing to achieve their stated goals; of education, flexibility and the provision of options. This study provides a fabric and some illumination as to the phenomena which are influencing boys' decisions to continue with their formal education and to achieve in the system.

Appendix A

The views of other student groups

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. The focus group results largely supported the boys' claim, as did the responses of girls to the Survey of Student Views (Appendix B).

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. Interviews with these groups need to be undertaken to see whether the same phenomena are operating.

Appendix B

Quantitative methodology and data analysis

A large amount of rich qualitative data, in the form of recorded focus group discussions, has resulted in a detailed account of what boys believe to be the issues and problems that explain the apparent decline in rates of achievement and retention. To date, their views have been summarised and returned to the boys for further discussion and verification. A broad range of interconnected factors have been identified and reported.

The usefulness of these data in its current form, however, has limitations. The procedures employed were efficient and effective at gaining the trust and views of participants; views that may not have otherwise been recorded using more structured and directed forms of research. Barton and Lazarsfeld (1969) have argued that less formal qualitative analyses often reveal the unexpected.

Concerns remain about the validity and reliability of the findings, as occurs with any qualitative approach. The discussion in the focus groups was student directed, with the researcher intervening only to focus discussion or to gain clarification of the views expressed. There were no structured sets of questions or lists of issues to be addressed. Essentially the interviewer adopted an unstructured approach by entering the research situation with no prior theoretical preconceptions, with the view that the resulting hypotheses should be based on real life, as perceived by the boys, rather than those generated through behavioural theory.

The computer program NUDIST (QSR, Melbourne) was initially considered for the task of developing a coding scheme, and ultimately a conceptual model. However, initial inspection of the recordings questioned the appropriateness of such a method. Since NUDIST automates the coding process, concerns arose about the loss or misinterpretation of subtleties and nuances in the boys' language and mode of discussion. For example, many of the terms describing unpopular students, like 'nerd' or 'dork', were equally applied to schoolmates and clearly used as inseparable aspects of their humour and friendship.

For the reason noted by Miles and Huberman (1984:63), that coding 'is not something one does to get data ready for analysis, but something that drives ongoing research data collection', we were prompted to consider a quantitative method. Our aim was to determine the major factors influencing

adolescent male educational patterns in addition to removing concerns about researcher subjectivity, and issues of validity and reliability.

Development of the survey of student views

The self-reporting technique was considered to be the most appropriate method, since it can be readily scored and interpreted objectively and reliably. In addition, the development of a self-reporting tool would allow for a high level of consistency in administration to large numbers. An appraisal of established attitudinal surveys was initially conducted, both to familiarise the researchers with the structure and types of items comprising the tools and to determine the suitability of these tools for this study.

Keeves (1974) considered five scales important in measuring students' attitudes to schooling. Three of these scales were non-curriculum specific and included attitudes towards school and school learning, motivation to achieve in school learning, and respect and confidence in self. Peck (1989) found that students who display feelings of confidence and self-respect generally perform well academically. Accordingly, the surveys that we appraised generally contained a component that examined self-esteem and respect.

The Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) designed by Coopersmith (1967:1) defines self-esteem as, 'a set of attitudes and beliefs that a person brings with him or herself when facing the world', providing 'a mental set that prepares a person to respond'. The SEI scale is formulated within a framework of self-evaluative attitudes towards social, academic, family and personal areas of experience.

The Eastern Caribbean Education Reform Project (1998) developed and administered a survey to over 5000 students assessing their school related feelings, attitudes, motivations and aspirations, and their main determinants. Factors considered important include family characteristics, such as family type and mothers' level of education, as well as student outcomes. The latter focus on attitudes to school, the sense that attending school has a long term purpose, feelings of competence, self-esteem, and level of effort.

The Self-Description Questionnaire III by Marsh (1984) examines, among other factors, physical appearance, general self, honesty and trustworthiness, physical abilities, verbal skills, emotional stability, parent relations, general school relationships including those with the same sex and with the opposite sex.

Finally, the School Learning Environment Inventory, currently under development at Flinders University, explores students' beliefs about what their school is like and examines the factors of cohesiveness, diversity, formality,

speed, material environment, friction, goal direction, favouritism, difficulty, apathy, democracy, 'cliqueness', satisfaction, disorganisation, and competitiveness.

Although aspects of each of these surveys touched on issues raised by the boys, with some items mirroring the boys' statements, the clinical wording and lack of relevance of many of the items resulted in the belief that the administration of such widely used tools would have a negative impact. It was feared that the students would feel that they had misplaced their trust in the researcher, and that they would resent and resist what they had already described as the 'boring, repetitive and irrelevant' pen and paper exercises that they are required to do in class. We were also concerned that this would bias their responses, a problem highlighted by Keeves (1974).

In order to minimise the impact of our concerns, a survey was constructed from the boys' actual statements, presented in their own language and addressing the issues they had raised in the focus groups. Interestingly, some of the items from the established surveys and the boys' statements are similar, reflecting the attitudinal nature of their beliefs.

The term 'attitude' has been widely used in educational research and can be defined as:

... a personal disposition common to individuals, but possessed to different degrees, which impels them to react to objects, situations, or propositions in ways that can be called favourable or unfavourable.
(Guilford 1954:456-7)

Furthermore, Keeves (1974) pointed out that an attitude is internalised; it is personal, but also common to groups of individuals; and it cannot be directly observed. Although many of the statements presented by the boys were suitably worded, some statements required paraphrasing to elicit attitudinal responses.

The process of selecting statements began with a thorough examination of the focus group discussions. Statements were extracted based on the clarity of the issue addressed and then initially organised into categories as they became apparent. Categories, and the statements comprising them, were checked for consistency and where similar statements were found, the most explicit and clear item was kept. Care was taken to ensure that all issues raised by the boys were represented.

Through this process, 100 of the boys' statements, listed in Table 1, were selected and sorted to reveal 13 general areas of importance:

Compliance	Parents
Environment	Relevance
Fairness	Respect for teachers
Identity	Success
Interest	Support
Information Technology	Time/Work Load

In developing attitude measures for this investigation, the Likert Scale was selected because it was easy to administer and appeared to be the most meaningful type of attitude scale for use in group testing. In the trial of the survey, only 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' responses were allowed. However, Keeves (1974) had shown the desirability of including an 'uncertain' response, in order to reduce the non-response rate for specific items. This was confirmed by a number of students who created their own 'uncertain' column during the trialling of the survey.

Due to the nature of the construction of the survey, the normal distribution of attitudes is not present. Since the statements were derived from the focus group discussions, and since the views expressed by the boys in these discussions were primarily and uniformly negative, the statements are primarily negative. To create a balance of negatively and positively worded statements would be artefactual and remove the very authenticity and honesty that is the strength of the tool which we sought to construct. Table 1 provides the survey items organised into the categories.

Table A.1: Students' statements survey item numbers organised by categories

Compliance

- 14. The school likes to show off their best students to show us the way we should be
- 29. It's like the school is trying to put you down if you're not as good as the best students
- 40. If you get forced to do work you don't want to do it
- 54. Girls know how to suck up to teachers better
- 60. I just don't care about homework
- 92. Girls don't say what they think because they want to keep a good reputation

Environment

- 10. It's hard to organise my time because there's too much to do
- 11. School is like a prison
- 21. I work better in a group
- 22. If school was more relaxed it would be okay
- 46. The only good thing about school is the social life
- 48. Kids are having problems at school because there are not enough teachers and resources
- 66. I don't use the library because the librarian is too bossy
- 67. School comes last because I value all the other things I do more
- 80. Girls and boys should be divided into separate classes
- 88. The school makes too much fuss about cigarettes

Fairness

- 4. Teachers think that they are always right and students are always wrong
- 25. Teachers make the rules to suit themselves
- 26. Girls can cope with the work load because the teachers help them a lot more
- 33. The way teachers treat boys and girls differently is a big problem
- 35. Girls get a better deal at school
- 36. Teachers give more help to the smart students
- 39. Girls can get away with more
- 43. If a boy hasn't finished an assignment he gets a zero, but a girl would get an extension

- 44. Teachers hold grudges
- 50. I don't care much about how I present my work
- 53. If something goes wrong boys always get blamed for it
- 69. At school you get punished for stupid things
- 76. Librarians make their own rules

Identity

- 5. Teachers make you feel like you're dumb
- 28. I think it's good to be clever
- 38. Sometimes you don't do your work because you don't want to be seen as different from your friends
- 55. Teachers don't understand us because we do things differently
- 58. TAFE would be better because they treat you more like adults
- 59. Because of my reputation I get accused of things before anyone else
- 71. Nerds are antisocial and just do school work
- 91. Being smart is not the issue, some students just get paid out

Information Technology

- 12. If work is written up on computer you get more marks
- 23. If I do it on computer I put more effort into the presentation
- 34. Computers teach me how to spell better than anybody
- 47. Computers are the way of the future
- 49. Computers at school are a waste of time because nothing ever works
- 68. There is no point using computers at school because there are too many restrictions
- 75. Teachers don't know much about computers and they won't let you tell them
- 89. I mostly use computers at home

Interest

- 1. It's easier to work hard in subjects you like
- 15. You learn a lot more from doing things
- 41. Teachers could make the work more interesting
- 61. Using computers makes the work more interesting
- 90. The work is boring because teachers are boring
- 93. I get lazy when I don't like what I'm doing

Parents

- 24. My parents get more worried about detention than I do
- 74. I don't get any support from my parents because they don't understand the system
- 78. I want to leave school but my parents won't let me
- 81. My parents think school is too important
- 85. My parents will even lie to get me out of trouble

Relevance

- 3. Most of the stuff we do at school has nothing to do with everyday life
- 7. The sooner I leave school the better
- 16. You don't need to understand the work because you'll never use it
- 18. Years 8, 9 and 10 are a waste of time
- 30. There are not enough goals in Years 8, 9 and 10
- 42. Some subjects aren't hard, they are just not relevant
- 51. I come to school because I want to get a good job
- 62. School is only about getting the marks you need to get a good job, it's not about learning
- 64. Being organised is not the issue, I just don't value school work
- 73. It's not until Year 11 that things start to get serious
- 83. I'd rather be at work, TAFE, or a senior school
- 84. School work should be related to real jobs
- 96. As you get older your priorities change and getting good marks becomes more important
- 97. We do the same thing over and over again. It's pointless and so repetitive

Respect for teachers

- 2. I would have more respect for teachers if I was on a first name basis with them
- 13. If you like the teacher you'll get the homework done
- 27. I deliberately muck around more if the teacher is crap
- 37. There are too many bad teachers
- 52. Teachers repeat themselves because they think you don't understand
- 56. I find it hard to like most adults
- 57. Younger teachers are usually better because they are not that different from us

- 70. If I don't like the teachers, I don't ask questions
- 77. Teachers swap gossip about kids they don't like
- 79. I hate teachers who hate kids
- 94. To be a good teacher, you need to have the right personality
- 100. The age of a teacher doesn't matter, it's more the sort of person they are and if they can take on new things

Success

- 6. You can be successful even if you don't do well at school
- 17. Finishing Year 12 doesn't mean that you will be successful
- 72. I only need to be as successful as my parents
- 95. Getting good marks is not as important as having a life

Support

- 8. I don't feel like there is any real help at school
- 19. School should care more about education and less about controlling your life
- 31. Friends can often explain the work much better and quicker than the teacher
- 63. Most teachers are just like robots, they do the work, get paid, go home
- 87. Teachers just mark tests and give them back, they don't discuss them with you

Time/Work Load

- 9. The work load is often impossible because assignments come all at once
- 20. Teachers load up the work deliberately to put you under pressure
- 32. School work should only be done at school
- 45. Homework means you can't have a life
- 65. There are other things in my life that are more important to me than getting the homework done
- 82. Homework gets in the way of family life
- 86. Homework is never my best work
- 98. I'm usually too tired to do the homework properly
- 99. Because I always leave my work to the last minute it's never the best I can do

The survey was administered to 66 boys from schools in rural, metropolitan and private sectors, and to 24 girls from one private school on the fringe of the metropolitan area, having both rural and metropolitan students. The survey was conducted directly following the discussion group session, and administered and collected by the researcher. Conducting the survey in this manner was thought to minimise response bias, since the participants had gained trust in the researcher and the issues were fresh in their minds. Future use of this tool may involve students who have not participated in discussion groups of this kind. It may also be administered by a teacher known to the students, or over the internet. Further trialling under these conditions to determine the stability of the tool is suggested.

The data were manually compiled and descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel. Figure A.1 provides a summary of the data by comparing, on a gender basis, the percentage responses of 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to each item. So, for example, item 9, in Time/Work Load, 'The work is often impossible because the assignments come all at once', shows that 91 per cent of boys and 96 per cent of girls, in the surveyed sample, either agree or strongly agree with this statement. However, since trialling of the survey is still at the preliminary stage and further data collection is required before validity and reliability testing can begin, the results are not presented as conclusive findings. Rather, the results provide an additional quantitative estimation and a method of triangulation to support the qualitative findings in this report.

Figure A1 Percentage responses of Agree or Strongly Agree by item and gender

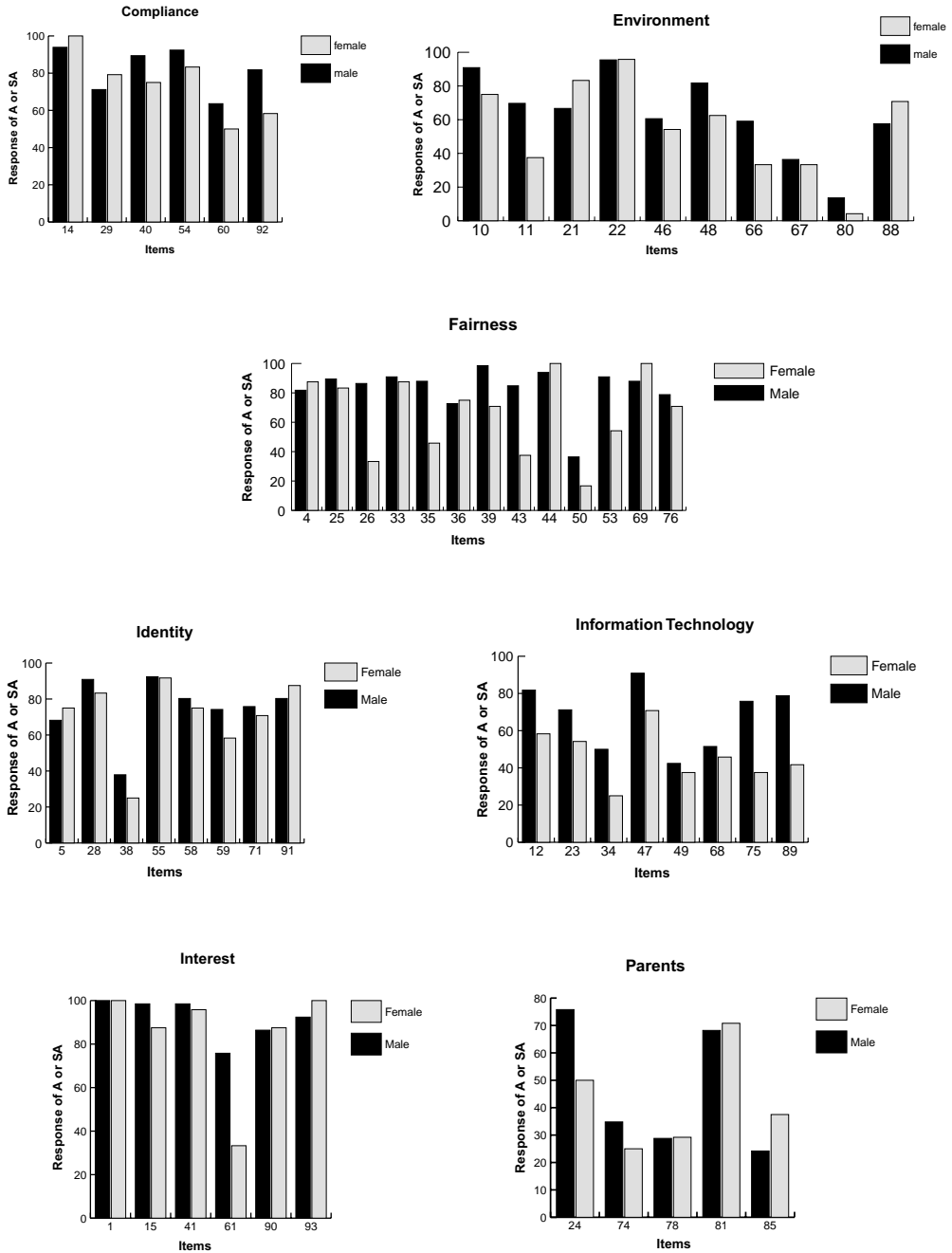
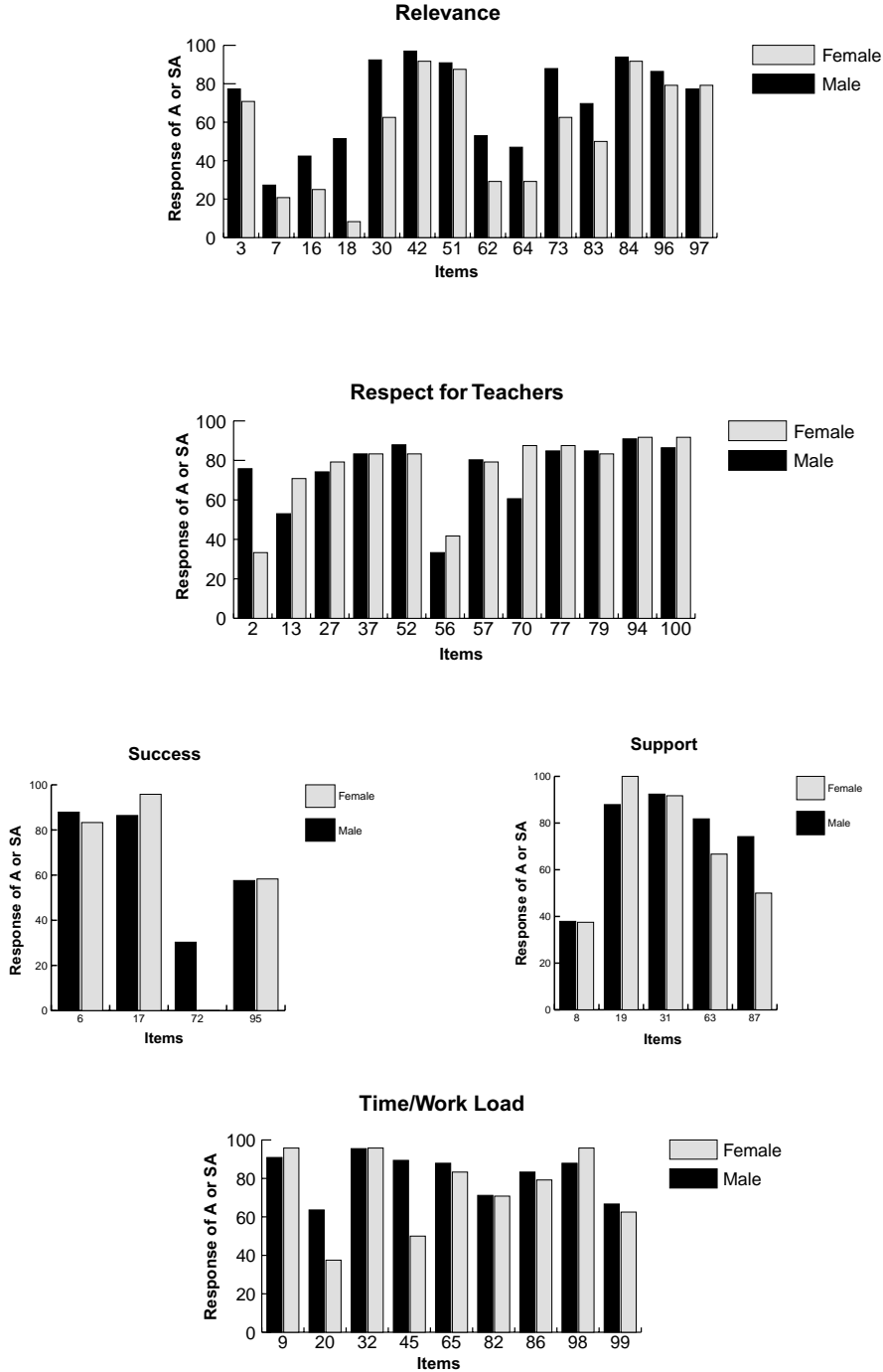


Figure A1 continued



References

- Barton, A. & Lazarsfield, P. 1969, 'Some functions of qualitative analysis', in *Issues in Participant Observation*, eds G. Macall & J. Simmons, Addison-Wesley, Reading.
- Browne, R. & Fletcher, R. 1995, 'Introduction', in *Boys in Schools: Addressing the Real Issues*, Browne, R. & Fletcher R. (eds), Finch Publishing, Sydney, pp. 2-7.
- Collins, C., Kenway, J. & McLeod, J. 2000, *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School*, Report to Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Analysis and Equity Branch, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- Coopersmith, S. 1967, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*, Freeman, San Francisco.
- Delors, J. (Chair). 1996, *Learning: the Treasure Within*, Report to UNESCO of the International Committee on Education for the Twenty-first Century, UNESCO, Paris.
- Eastern Caribbean Education Reform Project.1998, *Student Attitude Survey Research Report*. OECS. [Online] <http://www.oeru.org/publications/Survey-summary.htm> [2000, July 14]
- Epstein, D., Elwood, J., Hey, V. and Maw, J. 1998, 'Schoolboy frictions: Feminism and 'failing' boys', in *Failing Boys?: Issues in Gender and Achievement*, Epstein, D. (ed), Open University Press, Buckingham, pp. 3-18.
- Guilford, J.P. 1954, *Psychometric Methods*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Keeves, J.P. 1974, *Some Attitude Scales for Educational Research Purposes*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Hawthorn.
- Kenway, J. 1997, 'Boys' education, masculinity and gender reform: Some introductory remarks', in *Will Boys be Boys: Boys' Education in the Context of Gender Reform*, Kenway, J. (ed), Australian Curriculum Studies Association, Deakin West ACT.pp.3-7.
- Marsh, H.W. & O'Neill, R. 1984, 'Self Description Questionnaire III: The construct validity of multidimensional self-concept ratings by late adolescents' *Journal of Educational Measurement*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 153-174.
- McEwen, B. 1998, 'Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators', *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 338, no. 3, pp.171-179.

- Medlin, B. 1989, 'Objective despair: How to beat it', in *Greenhouse '88: Planning for climate change*, Dendy, T. (ed), 1989, Department of Environment and Planning, Adelaide.
- Miles, M. & Huberman, M. 1984, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, Sage, Beverly Hills.
- Pallotta-Chiarolli, M. 1997, 'We want to address boys' education but...', in *Will Boys be Boys: Boys' Education in the Context of Gender Reform*, Kenway, J. (ed), Australian Curriculum Studies Association, Deakin West ACT, pp.17-21.
- Peck, G. 1989, *Students' Attitudes Towards Technology*, Unpublished Masters Thesis, Flinders University, Adelaide.
- Spradlin, W. W. & Porterfield, P. B. 1984, *The Search for Certainty*, Springer-Verlag, New York.