



The following is the preface from a 2007 publication by Amanda Keddie and Martin Mills. Amanda is a Research Fellow within the Griffith Institute for Educational Research, Griffith University and Martin is a Professor of Education in the School of Education at The University of Queensland. Their book, *Teaching boys: Developing classroom practices that work*, is published by Allen & Unwin. The preface is reprinted here with permission from Allen & Unwin.

Following the preface, Amanda and Martin provide the reader with further insights into what this new publication offers.

Teaching Boys

Developing classroom pra

by **Amanda Keddie**

Preface

Jason is an excessively fidgety 12-year old boy with a mischievous grin who insists on writing on his arms and gently stabbing himself with his pen. While his teacher is talking, he is consistently off-task, smirking and nudging Jeremy, the amused boy next to him. His teacher reprimands him a number of times, eventually separating him from Jeremy later during whole-class reading time so that he and his mate are sitting on the mat at least three metres apart. While momentarily sullen, Jason is not to be deterred—furtively glancing between the desired spot next to his friend and his teacher, he surreptitiously inches his way back to sit beside Jeremy.

Adam, also 12, says he hates coming to school and would like to “get rid of all the teachers”. One game he plays to ‘outsmart’ his ‘high and mighty’ teachers involves skipping class. Instead of going to music class, Adam and his friend Tim sometimes hide in the school grounds for the duration of their music lesson, returning to their regular class group at the appropriate time. On one occasion, Adam smuggled 16 cans of *Coke* into school in his backpack (*Coke* is banned at his school). He and his friend Tim drank the whole 16 cans during lunchtime and laughed at their teacher’s surprise when they needed to visit the toilet all afternoon to “wash their hands”.

In a Year 9 classroom, Ben is trying to get a laugh from his classmates. He extracts a rubber band from his backpack and attaches a thick felt pen to it, stretching the band back in a launch position. He skilfully aims the projectile at the roof but misses and hits the fan instead—the felt pen ricochets and

hits another student. He muffles a swear word but laughs at the positive response from his classmates—his audience is delighted by his antics. Attempting to prevent further disruptions, his teacher moves him to sit beside a quiet girl named Prue—she is not impressed.

Three serial pranksters in the same Year 9 classroom, who regularly partake in a strange habit of ‘humping the air’ in unison and simulating sex behind girls’ backs to get a laugh, are colluding in a dare. One of the pranksters, Chris, dares his mate Josh: “I’ll give you a buck to pinch Kelly’s arse.” Josh—who, according to one girl, “hits on any female who is warm and vertical”—after accomplishing his task on this stunned girl, walks away casually, only the smirk on his face and his mates’ raucous laughter giving him away.

In a primary classroom, three small Year 1-2 boys are plotting an attack on their enemy Brian, an eight-year old from another class who, according to the boys, is a “fish-face dork” who “screams like a girl”. After the three of them ‘lay into’ Brian at recess, the chief instigator, Adam, brags to his peers about the incident, describing in detail how he “bashed the crap” out of his enemy and drew blood when he bit through Brian’s shirt.

Whether they are low-level disruptions or more serious altercations, such stories involving boys are familiar and, whilst not representative of all boys, are certainly typical of particular boys’ behaviours. Here we see the boy who refuses to engage with schoolwork and continually disrupts those around him for a ‘laugh’; the boy who rejects teacher authority as a test of masculinity; the boy who teachers attempt to ‘civilise’ by seating him beside a girl; the boy who thinks that sexual harassment of girls is a joke; the boy



who is led on by the peer group; the boy who is a perpetrator of violence against a student who is 'different'; the boy who is a victim of other boys' violence; and the boy who does not participate in either violence or sexual harassment, but colludes and encourages other boys to do so. These behaviours are sometimes excused through the all-too-familiar—and dangerous—notation that it is just 'boys being boys'. However, these behaviours are often harmful to others. Certainly Kelly, on the receiving end of a sexual dare, and Brian, the victim of group violence, are cases in point. Indeed, far too often such behaviours have dire consequences. While writing this preface, we are alarmed by the main story in a local newspaper [3]. The story tells of an attack on 13-year old Daniel Browne. Daniel, an anaphylactic who is allergic to peanuts, is the victim of a bullying incident. As payback for an earlier altercation he has had with another boy, who is aware of Daniel's sensitivity to peanuts, he is pelted and taunted with the remnants of a peanut butter sandwich. Moments later, Daniel suffers acute anaphylactic symptoms, is rushed to hospital and spends the next five hours in emergency before he is finally stabilised.

ctices that work

One does not need to go into many classrooms to observe the importance of addressing issues of masculinity in the education of boys. Common to all these stories is a version of dominant and subversive masculinity that is detrimental to the learning success of *all* students. The problematising of such ways of being a boy, we contend, is imperative to pursuing the goals of gender justice in schooling, and should be central to the teaching of boys. It is such teaching that we foreground in this book. In *Teaching boys: Developing classroom practices that work*, we highlight those educational issues that involve boys—both as a social group and as individuals. Through the in-depth stories of Jennifer, Ross, Rachel and Monica¹, we provide insight into how such issues might be addressed in gender-equitable ways. Drawing on these stories, we offer teachers and others research-based and constructive suggestions as to how the 'problem' of boys can be addressed through classroom practices that encourage boys to appreciate a diversity of masculinities, whilst challenging the more 'toxic' forms that limit their and others' educational experiences. We also stress the need not to lose sight of the many educational issues still facing girls in schools. Thus, central to *Teaching boys* is an acknowledgement of and concern about

¹ Pseudonyms are used for the names of all the teachers, schools and students mentioned throughout the book.

how social privilege continues to be inequitably distributed within the broader gender order.

With these considerations in mind, the book offers teachers a framework for developing contextually driven and sustainable approaches to addressing issues of boys' education. While we do not offer prescriptions for working with boys, *Teaching boys* provides practical suggestions and associated professional development material that reflect our focus on pedagogies, critical reflection and gender justice. We realise that in addressing issues related to boys' education there are no quick fixes, and that teachers and others working with boys in schools will need to be persistent in their attitude to the challenges they face while maintaining hope that change is possible. To these ends, the teacher stories provide stimulus for a series of professional development activities and discussion points which we hope will assist in the development of strategies that will address significant aspects of boys' education in local contexts. While it is not intended to 'solve' all the issues involved in teaching boys, we hope this book promotes discussions about pedagogy and gender justice, and that it is useful in developing a practice of persistence and hope along the path towards gender equity.

More about this publication . . .

What we have tried to do in *Teaching boys* is to provide a detailed account of the work of teachers who are having success with boys in their classrooms. What we have found is that teachers who make a difference for boys do so within a framework that is concerned about the limited options open to boys; are concerned with the ways in which boys' behaviours affect each other and girls; reject deficit models of boys through having high expectations of them, academically and socially; and acknowledge the ways in which gender is affected by matters of class, race and ethnicity.

A central premise of this book is that 'privilege' as it relates to gender has to be a key concern of the pedagogical decisions made in relation to the teaching of boys. However, at the same time, the ways in which some boys experience discrimination based upon factors such as race/ethnicity and sexuality, alongside some boys' failure to live up to idealised forms of masculinity, and many boys' experiences of powerlessness by being discriminated against because of their youth [7; 2; 8], have also to be considered. Our approach then is one that suggests both schools and classrooms, where they are not doing so, have to change to meet the needs of all students, including boys of various ethnicities, sexualities and physical abilities. Here we acknowledge that there are ways in which *some* boys are not served well by many aspects of the schooling process [see for example, 9,10; 1; 12; 11].

With these considerations in mind, the book aims to provide a framework for developing practical, contextually driven and sustainable approaches to improving boys' educational outcomes. To these ends, the four in-depth teacher stories and a variety of teacher voices from broader contexts we present in this book are intended to provide stimulus for a series of professional development activities and discussion points. This framework is structured in a way that we hope supports teachers to examine how the 'personal theories' underlying their actions in classrooms might be implicated in either enabling or constraining boys' (and also girls') academic and social

outcomes [5]. A key purpose of this book then is to assist teachers in moving beyond a narrow focus on boys' educational strategies to a broader focus on pedagogies and critical reflective practice [4].

The teacher narratives

The four teacher narratives presented in the book are constructed from interviews and observations that sought to explore philosophies and practices in relation to teaching boys. Each teacher's story highlights the key research-based understandings about gender, masculinity and schooling imperative in teachers critically reflecting on the nature of their strategies and their potential effects within a social (gender) justice framework [4; 6]. In *Jennifer's story: A fresh look at taken-for-granted ways of being* we explore how her respectful approach and intellectually challenging classroom environment provides a highly productive context for pursuing gender justice. Jennifer teaches Years 11 and 12 in a large inner-city P-12 co-educational government school. We look at how she tries to broaden students' understandings of masculinity and femininity through her resistance of traditional power-driven teacher-student relations and in her scaffolding of critical literacy. Jennifer's gentle but consistent and firm approach rejects the authoritarian relations that tend to perpetuate boys' investments in dominating behaviours. While she positions all students in her class with agency and a voice, she is very clear about defining what behaviours might or might not reflect gender/social justice. A key strength in Jennifer's practice is how she draws on visual and written texts to support students' challenging of narrow gender constructions. The chapter highlights how she does this with texts such as the tragic play *X-Stacy* (written by a local playwright, of a girl who dies at a rave culture party), the television show, *Arrested Development* and the film *The Crow*.

Ross's story: Afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted, highlights his challenging of inequitable relations of masculinity, class and culture. Ross teaches in a large, well-established, and prestigious boys' Catholic school. In this chapter, we explore Ross's understandings of masculinity as a hierarchical construction particularly as this relates to his challenging of students on a range of social issues. To these ends, we detail Ross's attempts to transform the sense of elitism, materialism and Anglo-centrism, that he sees characterises the life-worlds of many of his students, through a critical pedagogy that promotes 'thinking from another angle'. We bring to light how Ross promotes a recognition of the 'missing voice' through supporting his students in their field work with marginalised groups. In Ross's story we also explore issues relating to boys and gender role models, and more specifically, to the ways in which particular types of role models can work to reinscribe but also disrupt traditional notions of gender.

The following chapter is *Rachel's story: Challenging 'power-driven' notions of being male*. Rachel teaches in an edge-city government co-educational high school. Her story brings to life a passion for gender justice that drives a commitment to fighting against the gender stereotypes that she sees as constraining boys' lifeworlds. We explore how Rachel's behaviour management strategies, which draw heavily on William Glasser's notions of *Choice Theory* and *Quality World*, and her classroom pedagogies, challenge and seek to broaden boys' 'power-driven' notions of being male. To these

ends, we examine both Rachel's one-on-one conciliatory approach with boys as well as her classroom practice. Elements of her unit entitled *Boys' Stuff*, which explores with a group of boys understandings about what it means to be male, are detailed in this chapter. The unit is designed to facilitate boys' critical reflection and questioning on how masculinity is socially constructed and policed within various contexts such as the school, the peer group, the family and the media. To these ends, Rachel supports the boys' examination of important issues such as risk-taking and representations of males in the media, as well as the discriminatory practices of homophobia and sexism.

Monica's story: Schooling children for life beyond school, is the final teacher narrative. Monica is a teaching principal in a remote primary government school situated in an economically depressed area. In this chapter we identify how accounting for specific social and cultural issues and factors of inequity relevant to a particular context is central in working for gender justice. We draw attention to how Monica does this in her present teaching situation, where the predominance of boys in her class and the broader gendered assumptions and understandings of the rural community, mean that she must focus on ensuring that girls in her class 'can be heard'. Monica's story also draws our attention to how broader social factors constrain her efforts to teach in socially just ways. In working 'against the grain' of these factors, we explore how Monica attempts to broaden her students' 'horizons' and challenge limited notions of masculinity and femininity through teaching for and about active citizenship within a context of enhanced community/school relationships. Along these lines, we illustrate how Monica's unit 'Students Making it Happen at Warilda', which is designed to encourage student awareness and their sense of responsibility towards caring for their health and their local environment, supports gender justice principles.

At the end of each of these teacher narratives we outline a series of activities, which draw on the teachers' stories, to assist in the development of strategies to address various aspects of boys' education in local contexts. These activities are not designed to 'solve' issues in teaching boys, but to promote discussions about the appropriateness of various ways of addressing issues of boys' education. We hope that these activities will be useful for teachers both in terms of developing socially just classroom practices and in relation to the development of school structures that promote gender equity.

We conclude the book with a hope that the current moment of boys being constructed as victims is coming to a close. We are eager to see an approach to the education of all students that encourages them to engage with the world in ways that will make it a better place for all to live. Whilst, at times we are not overly optimistic about this eventuality, we do draw hope from the work that many teachers do with the students in their care. We have seen teachers in this, and other, research who make a difference to students' lives. They are teachers who strive to ensure that their students' opportunities are not limited by restrictive notions of gender, and that their students understand and challenge their own privilege, as well as having an understanding of their own rights. They are teachers who reject deficit models of students, they believe that all of their students can achieve, and they refuse to lower standards and expectations based on spurious notions of gender difference. These teachers also are concerned to ensure that the work undertaken in class has meaning for their students, being well aware that for many students,

boys and girls alike, who are underachieving, are doing so because they see no relevance to schooling. These teachers make schooling meaningful. And most of all, and importantly for students in their classrooms, they care about their students. They create a classroom environment that scaffolds students' learning, that encourages students to take risks and where being different is not perceived as a problem. We thus present the teacher narratives in this book based on the presumption that what teachers do in the classroom matters, and that their work can contribute to a more just and equitable world.

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