

Title: Control and constraint: Issues of concern for boys in the middle years of schooling.

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Source: Primary & Middle Years Educator, 01/11/2003, Vol. 1 Issue 3, p3-10, 8p, 1
Black and White Photograph, 2 Charts

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: TEACHERS
EDUCATION
INTERPERSONAL relations
BEST practices
EMPLOYMENT practices
TEACHER-student relationships

Abstract: Within the context of acknowledging that positive teacher-student relationships are central to improving educational outcomes, boys' desire for greater control and autonomy over their everyday school lives and their resentment with being controlled and constrained by their teachers' enactments of authority, is presented in the article. With the purpose of developing more equitable relations that are informed by sound educational research and gender theory, call for schools to construct professional learning communities is supported. Given the impasse in boys' education and the unacceptable levels of disengagement continuing to characterise the middle years, this holistic response as critical in working towards 'best practice' is seen.

ARTICLE ONE

[An overview of this article](#)

This paper draws on the data from a broader study to focus on relationship issues at the centre of boys' experiences of school in the middle years. Within the context of acknowledging that positive teacher-student relationships are central to improving educational outcomes, we present boys' desire for greater control and autonomy over their everyday school lives and their resentment with being controlled and constrained by their teachers' enactments of authority. With the purpose of developing more equitable relations that are informed by sound educational research and gender theory we support the call for schools to construct professional learning communities. Given the current impasse in boys' education and the unacceptable levels of disengagement continuing to characterise the middle years we see this holistic response as critical in working towards 'best practice'.

[Introduction Improving the educational outcomes of boys: the importance of quality teacher-student relationships](#)

Education Queensland's blueprint for improving students' achievements in the middle years of schooling, See the future: The middle phase of learning state school action plan (Queensland Government, 2003) highlights five key action areas: focus and accountability; curriculum, teaching and assessment; achievement; transition; and teachers. We already know that teachers are central to enhancing outcomes for students (see, for example, Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002). More specifically, in relation to improving boys' educational

outcomes the quality of teacher-student relationships and pedagogy are most critical particularly for those boys at educational risk (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Meyenn, 2002). Alongside quality pedagogy, what matters most in improving learning outcomes are positive teacher-student relationships characterised by friendliness, mutual respect, firmness and ongoing support (Lingard et al., 2002). Despite this compelling case, there is no explicit mention of relationships in See the future.

Within the context of continued disagreement on how best to address issues of masculinity within the school environment recent work has foregrounded the significance of teachers drawing on sophisticated research-based understandings about gender in their development of generative relationships with students (Lingard et al., 2002; Education Queensland, 2002). This is particularly critical given that research continues to confirm "that various constructs of masculinity are implicitly involved both in teachers' interventions, and in the ways in which these interventions [are] taken up in classrooms" (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002, p. 128). Teachers' essentialist understandings of gender, for example, invariably homogenise gender difference as pre-given and natural (Alloway, 1995; Clark, 1993). Within this paradigm, negative elements of masculinity tend to be normalised because they are also seen as pre-given and natural (Keddie, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000). This often reduces teacher interventions to those characterised by authoritarianism in their attempts to control (rather than transform) boys' problematic behaviour (Lingard et al., 2002).

The significance of this in the sphere of boys' education is highlighted in the associations made between how teachers model authority and power and the maintenance of students' disruptive behaviour. Boys have been found to adopt the authoritarian styles of 'power over' conflict resolution that many teachers apply in their attempts to control disruptive behaviour (Askew & Ross, 1988; Browne, 1995). This model of authoritarianism can be associated with how boys take up ways of being male in their wish for control, agency and power (Davies, 1993). Ironically, the dominating and controlling behaviour of particular boys may be perpetuated, and even exacerbated, when these same behaviours are employed by their teachers. To these ends, it seems that "[t]he first imperative of some teachers when teaching boys appears to be 'controlling' rather than teaching them" (Lingard et al., 2002, p. 4).

The potentially negative impacts teachers' authoritarian relations have on some students in terms of rebellion against school cultures have been detailed (Lingard et al., 2002). In *So what's a boy?* Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) illuminate boys' feelings of oppression and powerlessness within hierarchical school structures. They detail boys' disengagement: with being controlled and constrained by authoritative school cultures that are not understood; with a lack of autonomy and involvement in school decision-making; with a lack of connection, agency and mutual respect in their relationships with their teachers; and with not feeling listened to or understood.

This disengagement is a particularly significant area of concern in the middle years literature. The predominantly controlling and managerial character of student-teacher relations in Queensland classrooms (The State of Queensland, 2001) is of clear concern in constraining boys' educational outcomes (Keddie, forthcoming). Developing appropriate pedagogic approaches for boys (and girls) in the middle phase of learning necessarily involves positive and generative, rather than authoritarian and controlling, teacher-student relationships (Alloway et al., 2002).

[The Study](#)

It is against this backdrop that we present a case study of a boys' school in Queensland, Australia. Established in the last year of the 19th century, 'St Hollick's' has an enrolment of 718 boys in Years 5 to 12 from a relatively diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds. The school's pastoral care framework supports the construction of positive relationships through the promotion of the personal qualities of love, respect, acceptance, compassion, friendship, excellence, freedom, charity and social justice.

This paper reports elements of a larger scale research project, the purpose of which was to assist St Hollick's in their pursuit of 'best practice' in boys' education. Drawing on the report Addressing the educational needs of boys (Lingard et al., 2002), the research was framed around the two factors seen as most significant in enhancing the learning outcomes of boys: relationships and pedagogy. This paper explores issues concerning the former of these and, in particular, the boys' thoughts and feelings concerning what they liked and disliked about their teachers; and the teachers' understandings and knowledges about gender, masculinity and working with boys in the middle years.

[Student survey](#)

A simple student survey was constructed to explore the boys' thoughts and understandings regarding their teachers. This invited responses to three questions:

1. What do you like about your teachers?
2. What do you dislike about your teachers?
3. What do your teachers think about you?

The teachers distributed the survey to all of the 718 students at the school, although only the results for students in Years 5-9 are reported here. Table 1 describes the student sample by year level.

[Teacher survey](#)

In examining teachers' assumptions and understandings regarding issues of masculinity and drawing on socio-cultural research in this area (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003), a teacher survey was constructed. The survey asked St. Hollick's staff about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of 32 statements (using the scale: 5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 2 = disagree; 1 = strongly disagree). We have selected seven items for discussion in this paper, as follows:

- Girls and boys are essentially different and should be treated differently.
- Boys are naturally active, boisterous and high-spirited.
- Before teachers can meaningfully engage in 'teaching' they must establish firm levels of control over their classes.
- To curb boys' disruptive behavior teachers need to assert their authority.
- It's important for there to be a clear social and emotional distance in relationships between teachers and students.
- Traditional masculine ideologies need to be challenged because they perpetuate inequality.
- Some boys suffer educational disadvantage because they are boys.

These items were selected because they are associated with issues of behaviour and behaviour management and in particular issues of power, authority and control. As they related to student-teacher relationships, these issues emerged as dominant themes in the boys' responses to the student survey.

There were 46 teacher respondents, a response rate of 85%. We present the interpretations which follow as only a snapshot of aspects of teacher-student relationships at St Hollick's.

Interpretation What the boys liked about their teachers

The importance of positive student-teacher relationships emerged as the major theme and characterised most of the boys' responses to this question. Strongly resonating with research in this sphere (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003), the teacher figure that the boys reported to respond positively to was caring, friendly, interested, helpful, supportive and understanding; fun and easygoing; and respectful and fair.

Care and friendliness appeared to be understood by the boys as enacted through teachers demonstrating interest in their lives and indicating a willingness to help them:

- They help me when I don't know what to do. (Year 5)
- I like that my teachers care about me and my education and how they take time to help you to understand. (Year 7)
- They are helpful, caring, nice and easy to get along with. I like it when they do stuff for you. (Year 8)
- When you don't understand a question — they don't get up you — they explain it over and over again until you get it. (Year 9)

The boys' responses also indicated how they appreciated teachers' 'easygoing' natures — the fun and humour that characterised their relationships with teachers:

- They're sometimes funny. (Year 5)
- They are caring, friendly, funny and don't give us a hard time. (Year 6)
- My teachers like to have fun and every time we do a subject they make it most of the time fun. (Year 7)
- They're not too strict. They sometimes make jokes and have a sense of humour and they don't get up me for trying like some teachers I've had. (Year 8)

Another significant theme that emerged in analysing the responses to this question related to issues of respect and fairness. These issues were explicit, particularly in a number of the older boys' responses, in terms of what they valued in their relationships with teachers:

- They let us express our opinions. (Year 7)
- When they talk to us as people and treat you like an equal and do not patronise (patronise?) you or treat us like we are five. (Year 8)
- Some of them act like friends not teachers and they listen to you when you need help. (Year 9)
- Some of them listen to suggestions and talk to you like a human. (Year 9)

In their relations with teachers, these responses illuminate boys' desire for legitimacy, respect and agency. Student-teacher relations based on these qualities are seen as central in

improving educational outcomes through enhancing boys' engagement in school and their feelings of self-worth and self-determination (Lingard et al., 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003).

What the boys disliked about their teachers

To the second question: "What do you dislike about your teachers?" issues of legitimacy, respect and agency were interpreted as particularly dominant themes in analysing the boys' responses. These issues seemed to be associated with the boys' feelings about the power inequities characterising their relationships with their teachers. Here, the boys reported feeling unfairly treated by their teachers: indicating dissatisfaction with being overpowered, controlled and positioned as inferior, particularly when they saw teachers using their position of authority in ways that they disliked:

- They're mean, too loud. (Year 6)
- They're very impatient and angry and they can be mean and unforgiving and give bad judgment. (Year 7)
- There are some teachers that are mean and really smart to you. (Year 8)
- They yell and scream and get angry at you and push you around. Some take their power too far. (Year 9)

The boys' concerns at being overpowered and controlled seemed to be associated with what they saw as unreasonable punishments. While evident in all year levels, this seemed to be more of an issue in Years 7-9:

- They get up you if you sharpen your pencil if he or she is out of the class and they see you out of your chair. (Year 5)
- They keep you in for no reason at all. (Year 6)
- They keep a close watch on you if you do something small that's wrong and then they blame you for something that you didn't do. (Year 7)
- When other people play up in class and we all get punished for what other people have done. (Year 7)
- When they keep the whole class in when there are only about three people misbehaving. (Year 8)
- The things I dislike about my teachers are that if you do something wrong a little bit they will make it out to be some big commotion. (Year 9)

In further association with issues of power and authority, many boys reported that they did not feel listened to and that they felt that some teachers favoured or singled out particular students. This was a consistent theme in all class levels from Year 8:

- When they don't listen to you and never help you and they single some people out and have teacher's pet. (Year 8)
- They sometimes treat those that have achieved more things with more respect to those that haven't and when you break your neck to get an assignment done by the due date and you're told you'll fail if you don't hand it in on time and other kids are allowed to get extra chances and time at no cost. (Year 9)

The boys' feelings of oppression and powerlessness (associated with a lack of connection, agency and mutual respect in their relationships with their teachers) parallel very strongly

Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli's work (2003) and are clearly implicated in constraining educational outcomes (Lingard et al., 2002).

What the boys thought the teachers thought about them

Responses that clearly indicated that the boys perceived that their teachers thought of them in positive terms outnumbered responses that indicated that the boys believed that their teachers didn't think of them in positive terms by a factor of around two to one. Clearly implicated in enhancing boys' social and academic outcomes through perceptions that their relationships with their teachers are positive, typical of the constructive and generative responses were:

- I'm nice and quiet and I always bring the role (roll?). (Grade 5)
- I think they like and respect us. (Year 6)
- I think they think that I always try new things and do my best. (Year 7)
- I like that the teachers like about me is I try very hard — get it right and I don't stop trying. (Year 7)
- That I do not give them much trouble as some people. (Year 8)
- I hope that my teachers believe I am well mannered and work hard. (Year 8)
- I think that they think I am an obedient and good person who is considerate to them. (Year 9)

Implicated in constraining boys' social and academic outcomes and in particular their sense of self-worth through perceptions that their relationships with their teachers are not positive, typical of the negative responses (more prevalent among the older boys) were:

- That we are lowlife scum. (Year 7)
- They hate me. (Year 7)
- Sometimes they like me — mostly they think I'm dumb. (Year 8)
- 'What a little shit'. (Year 8)
- I'm not smart. (Year 9)
- Deadbeat, lowlife. (Year 9)

Teacher assumptions and understandings of boys and schooling

Responses to the teacher survey produced the outcomes described in Table 2, below.

In analysing these descriptive statistics there seemed to be overall teacher agreement with three statements:

- Girls and boys are essentially different and should be treated differently.
- Boys are naturally active, boisterous and high-spirited.
- Before teachers can meaningfully engage in 'teaching' they must establish firm levels of control over their classes.

A leaning towards essentialist understandings of gender might be seen as reflected in the teachers' agreement with the first two of these statements. Agreement that Girls and boys are essentially different and should be treated differently suggests a homogenising of difference within the gender categories and a lack of awareness that treatment along gender lines can perpetuate inequity and disadvantage (Clark, 1993; Alloway, 1995; Davies 1993; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998). Similarly, the agreement that Boys are naturally active, boisterous and high-

spirited also suggests a homogenising of gender in the sense that boys' active and boisterous displays of masculinity (which often escalate to disruption) are constituted as natural and fixed parts of being male.

In this sense, problematic behaviour tends to be excused, tolerated or punished. These understandings are not conducive to teachers seeing boys' disruptive behaviours as amenable to questioning and transformation through appropriate teacher intervention.

The boys' resentment at feeling overpowered, controlled and positioned as inferior can be seen as associated with the teachers' overall agreement with the third of these statements. There is, apparently, a reasonable level of consensus among these teachers that boys need to be controlled (by their teachers), revealing perhaps a lack of willingness to take the sorts of pedagogic risks that would be key factors in more democratic and generative relationship environments.

There is no such clear picture of staff consensus on the other four items:

- To curb boys' disruptive behaviour teachers need to assert their authority.
- It's important for there to be a clear social and emotional distance in relationships between teachers and students.
- Traditional masculine ideologies need to be challenged because they perpetuate inequality.
- Some boys suffer educational disadvantage because they are boys.

On each of these items the 'most typical response' indicator of mean camouflages the bi-polar distribution of the data. Examination of the frequency distributions, however, shows that this group of teachers is split on beliefs about the power and authority that might characterise relationships between teachers and students. This division is perhaps reflective of the dissonance that continues to characterise the boys' debate. We see in this a clear challenge for finding a way forward in the promotion of positive teacher-student relationships in the middle years at St Hollick's, given that asserting authority and maintaining social and emotional distance are favoured by a significant proportion of the staff, even if these do not represent the consensus position.

In interpreting these results we contextualised teachers' understandings about the use of authority, control and distance in their relationships with boys within their tendency to lean towards essentialist understandings of gender. As pointed out before, teachers are not likely to see how they can effectively challenge and transform boys' disruptive behaviours through appropriate interventions if they think of these behaviours as natural and inevitable. In such circumstances, relations of authority, control and distance might be seen as the only strategies that will work and alternative responses might be seen as involving too great a level of personal and professional risk.

Along similar lines, while general agreement might be one interpretation of the data for the item: Traditional masculine ideologies need to be challenged because they perpetuate inequality, the frequency distribution indicates no consensus view. Half the staff either agrees that traditional masculine ideologies need to be challenged because they perpetuate inequality, but more than a quarter of the staff disagrees, while the remaining quarter neither agrees nor disagrees. Those who disagree are holding a position that sits counter to key

research that seeks to problematise the power relations that perpetuate hierarchical and inequitable understandings and enactments of masculinity (and femininity).

There is similar staff division apparent in the frequency distribution for the item: Some boys suffer educational disadvantage because they are boys. While we might see this division as seemingly representative of the climate currently characterising public debate in this sphere we might also see agreement with this statement as leaning towards homogenising and essentialising gender. Needless to say, while the issue is far from simple, we know that gender itself is far from the most accurate predictor of educational disadvantage, and indeed, that positioning boys' gender as a factor of disadvantage can be counter-productive (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000) not least because it tends to advance a 'poor boys' discourse and ignore many boys' educational successes (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

Discussion and conclusions

If we are to acknowledge the central significance positive teacher-student relations have on improving academic and social outcomes then this snapshot of relationship issues at St Hollick's can be seen as further illuminating particular areas of concern in the sphere of boys' education and in the connections to the middle phase of learning. In this paper we have highlighted boys' desire for relations of care, support and respect with their teachers and their resistances to being overpowered, controlled and positioned as inferior. We have also juxtaposed boys' resistances within teachers' general tendency towards essentialist understandings of boys' behaviours and a belief in establishing firm levels of control, and some teachers' belief in exerting their authority with boys and maintaining their social and emotional distance.

In presenting the boys' comments and the teachers' assumptions we think that we have provided another window on what might be seen as a controlling and managerial climate: there is nothing in the data presented here to contradict the earlier findings of the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard, Ladwig, Mills, Bahr, Chant, Warry, Ailwood, Capeness, Christie, Gore, Hayes. & Luke, 2001). We hope we have also made clear how this climate can be seen as perpetuating boys' investments in controlling and dominating behaviours and how this is at odds with the development of generative teacher-student relationships and with the facilitation of an environment where boys can explore understandings of masculinity, and problematise issues of power and control.

This leads us to the issue of how teachers' assumptions and beliefs about boys continue to be implicated in constraining students' educational outcomes in the middle years. Consistent with Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) we point out that teachers understanding gender beyond a paradigm of pre-determined biology is crucial in moving beyond authoritarian strategies and controlling relationships. If relationships based on mutual respect, care and compassion are to be facilitated in meaningful and contextually sensitive ways it is critical that teacher practice acknowledge boys' problematic behaviour as invariably associated with the socio-cultural dimensions of masculinity, power and legitimation. This provides the framework for teachers to develop productive pedagogies that seek to enhance boys' understandings of the multiple ways masculinity is constructed, performed, negotiated and navigated in different contexts (Alloway et al., 2002).

With particular relevance for pedagogy in the middle phase of learning, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) and Lingard et al. (2002) discuss how mutually respectful teacher-student

relations are central to teachers developing meaningful connections with boys so that issues of masculinity, power and marginalisation can be explored in affirmative and generative ways. A significant issue raised in this study relates to the importance of breaking down power inequities between students and teachers in reconciling disparities between schools' pastoral care rhetoric of respect and compassion and students' school life realities. That this more democratic approach to relationships might be a key element of a holistic response to the unacceptably high levels of disengagement in the middle years would seem compelling.

Lingard and his colleagues (2002) illuminate how boys' social and behavioural outcomes are enhanced through democratic disciplinary approaches. Here, within the context of positive teacher-student relations, power is shared in classrooms and students reflect critically on the consequences of their actions and resolve conflict by talking through issues rather than resorting to inappropriate behaviour. This encourages students to accept responsibility for their own behaviour and learning. Against a backdrop of well informed and coherent whole school policy and support these approaches are particularly effective in enhancing relationships between boys and their teachers and creating an environment that can facilitate productive pedagogies. These are the issues that will be the crucial factors in seeking success in the five key action areas of See the future.

The lack of consensus in the views held by the surely not atypical teachers in this study indicates how challenging it may be to develop and implement whole school approaches in these areas. We call for the construction of professional learning communities focused on enhancing learning outcomes as vital in teachers and schools developing contextualised frameworks and strategies that draw on educational research. Regular, continued and informed dialogue and collegial support concerning how best to deal with these issues will help schools extend their pedagogical and strategic repertoires beyond under-theorised and simplistic approaches. Such informed professional dialogue is particularly important, given the current impasse in boys' education and the unacceptable levels of disengagement continuing to characterise the middle years.

Legend for Chart:

- A - Year level
- B - Distributed
- C - Returned
- D - Year level response rate

TABLE 1: STUDENT SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

	A	B	C	D
5	5	25	8	32%
6	6	51	24	47%
7	7	61	37	60%
8	8	113	64	57%
9	9	123	66	54%
Total		373	199	53%

Legend for Chart:

- A-Survey items
- B-Numbers of responses SA
- C-Numbers of responses A
- D-Numbers of responses N
- E-Numbers of responses D
- F-Numbers of responses SD
- G-Mean

TABLE 2: TEACHER SURVEY RESPONSES – DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

A

	B	C	D	E
	F	G		
Girls and boys are essentially different and should be treated differently.	8	25	7	5
	1	3.8		
Boys are naturally active, boisterous and high-spirited.	5	25	11	5
	0	3.8		
Before teachers can meaningfully engage in 'teaching' they must establish firm levels of control over their classes.	5	24	10	7
	0	3.7		
To curb boys' disruptive behaviour teachers need to assert their authority.	1	16	11	13
	5	2.9		
It's important for there to be a clear social and emotional distance in relationships between teachers and students.	4	19	5	14
	4	3.1		
Traditional masculine ideologies need to be challenged because they perpetuate inequality.	5	18	10	10
	2	3.3		
Some boys suffer educational disadvantage because they are boys.	1	9	12	19
	2	2.7		

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE)

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