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## **Boys Only: One Co-educational Primary School's Experience of a Classroom for Boys**

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*Abstract: Concern over retention of boys as well as poor academic performance and behaviour, in a New Zealand co-educational primary school, led the school to trial, a "boys-only class". This case study reports interview and questionnaire commentary obtained at the beginning and end of the year from the principal, the teacher, pupils and parents, to consider outcomes for male pupils at this school, in regard to learning and social behaviour. The commentary was generally positive, with an emphasis on the gains made in reading and social skills. Findings also suggest that a significant feature in learning progress of children was the teacher - a committed teacher delivering a classroom programme and environment to meet the particular needs of boys in this class.*

### **Introduction**

Over the last 10 years or so, data from New Zealand's National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) have continued to confirm information set out in Education Review Office (ERO - the Educational Review Office is the New Zealand Ministry of Education department that reports publicly on the quality of education in all schools. It is analogous to an inspectorate) reports of 1999 and 2000 and in reviewing relevant literature Irwin (2009) also concludes that through most levels of primary and secondary schooling, boys are achieving significantly worse than girls across a range of curriculum areas. This issue is not unique to New Zealand. Cresswell, Rowe and Withers (2002) and Lingard and Douglas (1999) note similar patterns in regard to the performance of boys in Australia and Britain, respectively.

In Western countries, in particular, the proposition that boys are the "new disadvantaged" in learning has been noted for some time in the academic literature and, from there, in media in many western countries. The key question in regard to this concern appears to focus on what can be done to improve educational outcomes for boys. As Martino et al. (2004) point out, answers to this question present mixed views, not only in terms of the most appropriate and effective approaches but also in terms of whether schools even need to engage in measures specifically for boys. Nonetheless, the three authors also observe that principals, teachers and parents of pupils seem keen to find effective ways to enhance the educational success of boys. It would be reasonable to assume if this is the case that exploring ways to enhance boys learning is also a relevant consideration for the professional development of teachers. Considerations about effective practices likely to enhance the learning environment for boys include changes to school structures and classroom programmes (Sukhnandan, Lee, & Kelleher, 2000 and Rowe, 2004). More specifically, those involved in a school committed to enhancing boys' learning may consider any number of measures, among them the establishment of single-sex classes and/or a focus on "boy friendly" curriculum" approaches (see, for example, in this regard, Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). The solution that any one school elects may, in fact, be quite unique to that community.

This article presents a case study of the reported progress of pupils in one class in a New Zealand primary school that sought to improve educational outcomes for its Years 7 and 8 (11- and 12-year-old) male pupils. This development was prompted by the school administration's concern over two broad aspects of these boys' experiences in the school. The first aspect was the boys' under-achievement academically, notably in literacy, a concern widely reported in a range of Western countries (e.g., Browne & Fletcher, 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). The second aspect was the boys' inattention (lack of focus on tasks), anti-social behaviour (particularly in the playground) and lack of positive experiences in school - again, an aspect noted in other school settings (e.g., MacDonald, Saunders, & Benefield, 1999).

### **Relevant Literature**

Irwin (2009) outlines a wide range of issues and strategies related to teaching boys in primary and secondary schools. He contends that boys want clear rules, consequences, consistency, fairness and firmness, and that the relationship the teacher establishes with each boy is critical for that boy's academic success. It may be that these approaches also pertain to girls, but Irwin's references to New Zealand studies over the last decade support a view that schools need to consider particular ways of engaging boys more effectively in education, especially in respect to improving their performance in art, music, writing, reading, and speaking, and to lowering their incidence of problematic behaviour. One strategy explored in Western educational systems for achieving these aims in primary schools is that of "boys-only" classes. Although research findings present contrary evidence as to whether boys actually do better in such classes (see, for example, Jackson, 1999; Sukhnandan et al., 2000), this option, although potentially problematic, seems to be one that some schools are exploring in an effort to meet the educational needs of boys (Martino et al., 2004 and Clay, 2007).

According to Irwin (2009), "... the success of boys only classes depends on a number of factors: the ability of the class, the teaching style being adopted, the commitment of the teacher, the flexibility within the timetable, the resources available, and the support of staff, school management and parents" (p. 135). One might argue that these factors are likely to be indices of most successful classrooms. Cushman (in press) and Lingard, Hayes, Mills, and Christie (2003) contend that the quality of teaching and the positivity of the relationship between pupils and teachers is central to effective learning for both boys and girls, irrespective of the gender of the teacher. They and other commentators also debate whether current teaching practice and classroom management does actually favour girls in primary schools. Cushman (in press) argues that schools need to consider both of these matters when determining the need to provide learning environments specifically set up for boys. Thus, what might be the significant overall success factor relative to provision of a boys-only class is that the teacher's teaching style and level of commitment and the resources and other community support all focus to best meet individual needs: the needs in this class being focused on the variety of needs of boys.

Entwined in these considerations are arguments that contend that boys have learning needs peculiar to boys and that they may need to be motivated to achieve across all areas of the classroom programme in ways that are peculiar to boys (Slade, 2002). Noble and Bradford (2000), Salisbury and Jackson (1996), and Sukhnandan et al. (2000), among others, maintain from their studies that when boys are taught in

boys-only settings, their teachers tend to provide a programme that they consider will suit boys and their learning. According to Younger and Warrington (2002), such programmes have more structure, greater variety of activity, and greater teacher direction than those used in co-educational and girls-only classes.

While mindful of the risk of assuming that all boys learn in ways peculiar to boys, various other researchers and commentators support Younger and Warrington's (2002) view that successful learning for boys ties in closely with such practices as using classroom activities in ways most likely to engage boys, guiding boys to read about and draw on their interests and skills, and selecting contexts for learning that incorporate their interests (Browne & Fletcher, 2003; Clay & Hartman, 2004; Hartman 2006). Sukhnandan et al. (2000) contend that boys-only classes, like boys-only schools, have the potential to benefit boys because teachers can focus on strategies and content likely to engage boys, in a setting where boys are not distracted or embarrassed during their learning engagement. This does assume a stereotype of boys and their learning however such views do paint a broad picture that may focus teachers on relevant classroom practices. Evidence is raised in the literature of the negative impact that male school subcultures can have on inculcating, among boys, poor attitudes towards learning and lack of motivation to learn. They accordingly argue for the creation of "a [classroom] culture where male students can achieve without fear of ridicule and where disruptive behaviour is not allowed to undermine learning" (p. 15). Fletcher, cited in Hartman (2006), and Hawkes (2001) contend that teachers need to provide and model a culture of respect and understanding when addressing the educational needs of boys. Fletcher also notes that a male teacher may add the bonus for boys of providing them with a role model of a confident and reassuring adult male, who can manage not only a safe learning environment but also manage his own emotions. This doesn't assume that men and women teach differently according to gendered teaching styles but does imply that teachers should endeavour to be aware of the effective ways to interact with their pupils.

Rowe, Pollard, and Rowe (2005) observed from their examination of the impact of teachers' professional development on classroom pedagogy that boys are most likely to develop an effective relationship with their teacher (whether male or female) if that teacher provides them with clear boundaries, short-term goals and targets, challenging tasks, and structured instruction. In regard to expectations of boys' behaviour in the classroom and at school, Rowe and colleagues maintain that teachers need to carefully monitor attention, establish routines, set out explicit criteria, offer choice in behaviour, establish appropriate natural consequences for transgressions, and provide opportunity to repair and rebuild behaviour. Holland (2007) contends that it is important to cater for the learning styles that boys appear to prefer. She, among other researchers, calls for kinaesthetic, visual, practical approaches to learning/approaches that emphasise physical movement and use spatial concepts. Although this suggests something of a general learning style being evident for all boys which there is little researched evidence for. There does however appear to be learning styles which some groups prefer and certainly practices may be supported in schools that emphasise ways (possibly stereotypical ways) to teach boys or girls. In supporting their recommendation of implementation of an "activities-based curriculum at schools" for boys, the authors of a parliamentary report on boys' education in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) maintained that boys respond well to explicit teaching with a focus on hands-on activities and to structured programmes that clearly step the learner towards achievement. There is of course an implication here that boys share a preferred approach to learning; this would be to minimise differences between

boys experiences of schooling and ways they chose to learn. These assumptions may be commonly held by teachers and indeed may encourage particular approaches to teaching boys.

A common approach taken by teachers wanting to enhance boys' achievement is to engage them in kinaesthetic activity (Younger & Warrington, 2002). Here, teachers typically structure the classroom timetable to accommodate frequent breaks and short, focused bursts of learning centred on cognitive challenges, many of which involve movement. This approach has increasingly found favour across the board in primary schools. In their consideration of ways of advancing boys' learning, Younger and Warrington also observe that teachers, pupils and parents commonly perceive "single sex grouping", whether within the co-ed classroom or as a class in its own right, "a constructive environment for learning" (p. 367). The authors note, however, that organising classrooms in this way does not guarantee that boys' underachievement will be solved: this strategy, they say, will not provide a learning panacea for all boys. Skelton et al. (2007) and Warrington and Younger (2006) outline clear contentions that a single sex classroom approach is more successful where it is a 'whole school' approach; where the focus is on achievement for all rather than on the gender differences; a focus for teachers to work on discrepancies for all children that engage through gender, class and ethnicity and to concentrate teaching on the success of each child. Iverson and Murphy (2007) warn that when gender is the underpinning rationale for classroom organisation there is risk of creating larger differences effecting development of boys and girls. In contrast, Martino et al. (2005) argue for the effectiveness of single-sex classrooms. Although it could be argued that it is far from surprising to find success in an exercise of setting up a single-sex (boys) classroom with the aim of reducing the gender gap in regard to performance of boys; the emphasis on gender for these boys in regard to class mates (as well as possibly matching the gender of the teacher) could well provide motivation for achievement of these pupils. Whether success is better forthcoming from deconstructing notions of gender or emphasising gender difference is debatable. This study included the reporting of learning progress of boys taught in a classroom established to emphasise catering for children's needs, with a focus on teaching to perceived needs of a single gender group. The outcomes of this case study clearly attest to perceived improved success of the boys in this single-sex class. This investigation did not seek to greatly explore the tensions that emerge around boys only classes; however the principal and classroom teacher were confident that this approach did offer a plausible opportunity to better engage boys in this school and were keen to gauge future progress of this reorganisation.

The literature discussed suggests there are many factors that may contribute to a successful classroom learning environment but the opportunity for a teacher to focus on the learning needs of one gender, incorporating appropriate teaching approaches, lesson content and organisation of the programme, provides effective learning for boys. It is not contended that the single-sex organisation of the classroom alone that leads to achievement of boys but that many factors contribute. Other considerations, such as the nature of teacher interaction with pupils and pupils' interaction with one another, children being appropriately challenged and achieving success in their learning, and the children's sense of enjoyment of the curriculum presented and the learning experiences provided, may also be relevant for any one school endeavouring to structure the classroom programme and environment to suit the learning needs of its male pupils, as the following case study account attests. Although the literature doesn't indicate a clear preference for 'boys only' settings for teaching, it does suggest the

importance of teaching to the needs of pupils and many writers offer recommendations of programmes and approaches that boys respond well to. A school looking to embark on a boys only setting is likely to feel supported by the rationale for such classes and have in mind suggested approaches while being aware that there are views contrary to this type of class organisation.

## **The Case Study**

### **Study Focus, School, and Boys Only Class**

A case study approach was undertaken to consider what would occur during the year and possible influences of any learning changes for this class of boys. The intention was to consider this contemporary situation gathering views of participants during the occurrence. This qualitative research approach is aligned to phenomenology in its description of the subjective reality of those associated with this event. As in many other case studies related to teaching and learning the value of this approach is in its illustrative strength (Yin, 2003); in this case an opportunity to capture an example to better understand learning progress of children in a boys only class setting. The study relies on gathering data typical of a qualitative research approach; through interviews, discussion and reflection of key parties in this school community. Something of a quantitative aspect is evident in this report in the use of ratings of preferences to compare beginning to end-of-year responses. In line with proponents of the legitimacy of a qualitative approach this researcher considered the validity of the investigation from a basis of criteria other than traditional criteria for quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It was considered important that the results were believable from the perspective of the participants, that results may be seen to be transferable to other contexts, that the context of the study was evident and that a study by others could potentially confirm this interrogation. A key aspect of the integrity of this project was to maintain internal consistency in seeking responses from participants through equivalent but specific questions, to illicit views from each of the key respondent groups – principal, classroom teacher, parents and classroom pupils.

The focus of interest for the school was to consider advances, if any, in the academic achievement and social skills of this group of Years 7 and 8 boys through the first year of a boys-only class at a full primary school (Years 1 to 8). With approximately 450 pupils, the school is relatively large within the New Zealand context. Situated in a city, it is designated a state school and is funded as decile 9 (i.e., ranked as a moderate to high socioeconomic community). The school has close to even numbers of boys and girls.

The establishment of the boys-only class was a response to recommendations put forward by ERO in its 2007 report on the school. The recommendations stressed the need for the school to enhance its programmes for Years 7 and Year 8 pupils, particularly in respect of the academic achievement and wellbeing of boys. After discussing the matter with school staff and members of the school's board of trustees, the principal concluded that this would be a school priority, especially given that parents of many of these boys were considering sending their sons to local intermediate schools (seeking greater academic challenge and behavioural direction) instead of having them continue at their current school.

It needs to be noted that the school sought to redress perceived concerns with boys' progress and achievement and so initiated an organisational solution that was manageable for this school. This implies the treatment of boys as a homogeneous

group, differentiated from girls with limited group differences being considered within the selection of the class of boys. Although being aware that this class organisational approach may be a simplistic solution in relation to the complexities of individual learning success of children, it was a move to encourage the school community to consider the progress and needs of a group of senior boys who were seen to be underachieving.

At the end of 2007, the principal informed the school community of the decision to set up a boys-only class for 2008 and also announced that a current staff member, strongly committed to the notion of a boys-only class, would be teaching the class. This teacher, a male in his fourth year of teaching, had developed a high profile in the school since his appointment as a first-year teacher. He had particular interests in music and information technology, had produced several school musicals, and been involved in developing computing in the school. On completing his teaching degree, he had spent an honours year of study focused on boys' education.

The principal invited parents and guardians of eligible boys to express interest in including their children in this programme. Approximately 35 children/parents were keen to take part. After considering which children could potentially work well together and which children would be most likely to benefit from the experience, the principal and teacher selected 22, mixed-ability, Years 7 and 8 boys to join the class. The class was allocated a stand-alone building. The stand-alone aspect, it was thought, would help the children gain their "own zone".

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected at the beginning and end of the 2008 school year (late February and in early December, respectively). The process included conducting individual semi-structured interviews with the school's principal and the teacher of the boys-only class, and giving out questionnaires to the pupils of the class and to their parents/guardians. The interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, centred on questions concerning the community's response to the classroom set-up, anticipated and observed success for the class and its individual pupils, and anticipated and experienced challenges in relation to the class and its pupils. The questionnaires were designed to elicit responses to key aspects: best things about being in this class; concerns about the class; preferred subjects/successes; likes/dislikes relative to the school; expectations for the future of a boys-only class. From a range of potential questions a set of six aspects were selected for each audience; the questions for the pupils being trailed with a group of children of similar age. Questions were designed/selected with a view to eliciting responses that prompted consideration of benefits and concerns (and would allow for a diversity of answers) in regard to children's progress and achievement. End-of-year questions were phrased as close as possible to the beginning-of-year questions to facilitate effective comparison of responses. Data collected was summarised in three stages (recursive abstraction) to allow discernment of trends/patterns through distilling the key messages evident from participant comments. Comparison of a range of individual responses to the final summaries was undertaken to verify the accuracy of the summary conclusions stated. It was important to this researcher to also report quotations of typical responses to indicate something of the subjective nature of this case study approach and the authenticity of the summarised data.

Questionnaires were sent to the parents and guardians of all boys in the class, and all agreed to complete them. The February questionnaire included an introduction to the researcher, outlined the nature of the project, and sought permission from parents to have their child answer the questionnaire in class. The children's and parents' responses were accorded anonymity: no names were recorded on the questionnaire sheets. However, assigned coding of questionnaires allowed the later matching of each child with his parent/guardian and thereby allowing comparison of responses.

It should be noted that this case study undertook to report responses from the school community as to their perceptions of the value of the organisational change instigated and there was an intention that the outcomes of this case study could inform the ongoing consideration of the potential of boys only classes within this school. Potentially by way of illustration this study could assist inform current teacher education about the relevance of boys only classes in other school settings.

## **Findings**

### **Interview with the Principal: Beginning of the Year**

The principal confirmed that changes to the senior class programme were motivated by school management concerns, both before and after the ERO report, as well as by community disquiet about the success of boys at the senior level, as evidenced by parents wanting to move their sons to other schools during Years 7 and 8. While the principal was aware of recent concerns about the declining educational achievement of boys nationally and of ways of arresting this slide, a significant factor in her decision to set up the boys-only class at this school was having enthusiastic support of a well qualified teacher to take responsibility for the class. The principal emphasised that improved behaviour outcomes of these boys was also an impetus for setting up this class. She and the class teacher wanted to have what she termed "a settled class group", whose members (senior boys) would have a sense of pride and responsibility in themselves and their school and thus become role models within it.

The principal along with the class teacher, having invited interest from parents of potential pupils for the class, selected those boys they thought would most benefit from the class and adjust well to this setting. Their decisions were based largely on the classroom teacher's knowledge of the boys from having taught many of them in previous years. There was concern that some boys might not be as keen to be involved in this programme as their parents were and that boys keen to get into the class could be disappointed at not having been selected (these concerns proved unfounded during the year).

The principal considered that the success of the programme during the year and in future would very much depend on the confidence, skill and enthusiasm of the classroom teacher. Success would be assessed in respect of the pupils' learning achievement, development of positive attitudes towards learning, and improved standards of behaviour. She envisaged that if the programme worked well, this advance would become evident not only within the school but also to the wider community.

It is noted that in enlisting the support of a popular and capable teacher who agreed to teach this class, and in selecting a group of boys who were considered likely to benefit from this programme, the potential achievement of these pupils was well prepared for.

**Interview with the Principal: End of the Year**

According to the principal the community had been very supportive of the programme and the classroom teacher; no negative comments had been received during the year. She considered that the teacher and the boys had formed an effective learning culture and that the boys were actively engaged in their learning. They appeared to be positive about the class, and the parents had commented positively about the success of the programme, particularly in regard to the boys' engagement in reading. Test scores and assignment grades indicated the most significant academic success for the boys over the year was reading. Boys in this class, she said, had "evidently been turned on to literacy". Comments from other teachers in the school about the class and its achievements were positive, particularly in regard to how the class had worked as a unit and its contributions to school activities. The principal considered that the programme had diminished the negative behaviour of senior boys and changed the community's views about senior boys in the school. The school's board of trustees had expressed their awareness of the success of the programme, particularly commenting on the improved behaviour of boys in the playground.

When considering the future of the boys-only class the principal contended that all success data at this stage supported keeping it. This class did provide a setting where teaching directed at boys' needs could be applied. However it looked as if the number of boys returning the next year into the senior classes of the school might not be high enough to warrant a separate class. Many of the current year's Year 6 children (and their parents) were opting to enrol in intermediate schools the following year. This situation may relate to parents having heard that the boys-only classroom teacher was leaving the school. However she said the venture had raised awareness of the potential that a classroom programme focused on the needs of boys had for their learning achievement and general behaviour. The principal wanted to make sure that the success of this class was promoted within the school and the wider community in the hope of encouraging existing pupils to continue through to Year 8. Moreover, if the community, having seen the success of the class, determined this as a reason to keep boys at the school, then it would seem appropriate to continue this approach.

**Interview with the Classroom Teacher: Beginning of the Year**

The classroom teacher considered that the boys were unsure as to how their new class would differ from their previous classroom experiences, but they seemed to think that the learning activities would be different. They thought they might do things that they would not do if there were girls in the class. The teacher observed that parents also were not sure what a boys-only programme might involve, but they were keen to have their sons in it because they hoped the class would help them achieve socially and academically. Several parents had told him that they thought the classroom might be a relatively boisterous setting, but they did not mind because this type of environment would probably suit boys.

In line with these thoughts, the teacher was keen to develop the boys' social skills. His aim was to have the class recognised as the "most well behaved in the school". He therefore intended to implement a social skills programme he had developed. Called "Forty Rules", the programme, based on *The Essential 55 Rules*, developed by American teacher Ron Clark (2003), prescribed using good manners, set out how to be a good winner and a good loser, offered advice on how to greet people, and taught personal hygiene.

The primary aim, though, was to see the boys fully engaged in learning. He was particularly keen that the boys become motivated readers. He therefore intended to engage the boys with books that he felt sure would interest them, and he particularly wanted to encourage them to take up regular silent reading. He wanted the children's reading engagement to be comprehensive over the year, with the boys reading a variety of books (including novel-length stories), reading regularly (daily), reading in class and during recreation times, reading to themselves, and gaining sufficient competency to read aloud to junior pupils in the school. An important feature of the reading programme would be a boys' reading club.

The teacher said he also wanted to set up a daily classroom programme that incorporated regular water and activity breaks to help refocus the boys on their learning. Having the boys experience short bursts of learning-related activity, he surmised, would make the boys feel they were being active throughout the day and that they were not having to "sit around" learning over long periods of time. The teacher said he also intended to implement "optional chairs", an approach that allows pupils to move around and work in different positions and places in the classroom.

Right from the start of the school year, the teacher had impressed upon the boys, and said he would continue to do so, that their major learning focus was to strive to have achieved, by year's end, more than mediocre standards across a wide range of subject areas. He wanted the boys to experience, and thereby realise, that boys can achieve to high levels. Unlike their experience to date in co-educational classes, a boy would be the "top of the class" in every area. The teacher wanted these children to think that school is a "cool" place to be at and that they could provide strong, positive role models for all aspects of school activity - academic, social, sporting.

In addition to voicing these aims and hopes, the teacher expressed a desire to look for aspects of the programme that might evolve during the year and which he could capitalise on to meet the evident needs of boys as a group and as individuals. He was aware that the school would be looking for improvement in learning in all areas of the curriculum, but particularly in literacy and numeracy. He also cited his awareness that if this class were to continue in future years, parents and the wider school community would need to see strong evidence of its value.

#### **Interview with the Classroom Teacher: End of the Year**

The feedback that the teacher said he received during the year from parents and from pupils in the class as well as from members of the board of trustees was very positive. He had not received any negative comments, end of year cards were all very complimentary, and the five or six regular parent visitors to the classroom were enthusiastic about what their respective sons had learned and enjoyed. The classroom pupils were particularly positive about the way classroom activities had been conducted, and they expressed pleasure and pride at being able to do activities and work within the classroom environment that differed from that experienced in previous classes. Other teachers in the school had also commented on the boys' positive behavioural change, particularly in regard to playground interactions and social skills. Other pupils (including girls) had asked about being in the class next year.

The most satisfying and outstanding outcome of the class for the teacher was the gains the boys made in the reading programme, with STAR (Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading - one of the two main standardised tests that New Zealand primary school teachers use to assess their pupils' reading achievement) test results

indicating the largest gains for any class in the school. He noted evidence of improved skill in and attitudes to writing, which he attributed to the improvements in reading. Marked progress was cited in the boys' confidence in their ability to complete planned tasks and their pride in displaying that work, including displaying at school assemblies. He also expressed pleasure in the boys' improved social skills and manners in the playground and in their greater positivity about learning and being at school.

Overall, the teacher considered the class had progressed well and that the community saw the boys-only class as an asset to the school. He said he was keen to see further development of spelling skills and more individual health and fitness goals in future classroom programmes. He considered that the success and continuation of a boys only class hinged on the availability of a teacher with a passion for this type of classroom approach.

#### **Questionnaire Survey of Parents/Guardians: Beginning of the Year**

Fourteen guardians (mainly mothers of the pupils) completed the questionnaire. The reasons the parents gave for applying to have their son enrolled in the boys-only class varied. Several responses (6 out of 14) related to the opportunity to have their child taught by the teacher assigned to that class. Other responses focused mainly on the opportunity for their son to experience a more supportive and focused learning environment. Five of the parents said they would have sent their child to an intermediate school if this opportunity had not been offered. Although most parents (10 out of 14) had not personally experienced schooling in a single-sex school or classroom (and thus would not seem to be reacting because of their own schooling experience/expectations). The only expressed concern about the boys-only approach was that the boys might think they were more important than the girls because of being in a "special class".

Successes parents wanted to see eventuating from the year, all related to their child's progress in social development and the enhanced opportunities to engage in learning; developing friendships, team building, pride in achievement, enhanced self-esteem, respect for the teacher/male role model, not showing-off as males, opportunity to think and ask questions, not being distracted by girls, firm guidelines, and practical activities in lessons. When considering what they thought their child would gain most from the class, the parents' main emphasis was the development of self-esteem and positive social/emotional development: positive attitude to learning; enjoying learning; wanting to go to school; leadership opportunities; opportunity to succeed not being overridden by the presence of girls; sports and physical activity; interaction with boys; opportunity for the boys to find their own strengths and weaknesses, extend their social skills, and improve their concentration; clearer discipline; sense of achievement in completing tasks; and preparation for high school.

A footnote on one questionnaire sheet sums up how most surveyed parents viewed what was important to them in regard to the year ahead for their child: "Mr \_\_\_\_ brings a great attitude for these boys, and his way of teaching so far makes my son want to go to school. He relates to what interests his students and not just the curriculum he has to teach."

**Questionnaire Survey of Parents/Guardians: End of the Year**

Eleven responses were collated, again mainly from mothers of the pupils. Their views on what the best outcomes had been for their child were similar to the expectations they held at the beginning of the year, but by this stage were more specifically expressed. The positive outcomes included the following (in order of the most commonly cited outcomes): teacher as a positive male role model; respect for the teacher; involvement in sport and physical activity; being with children with similar interests and being part of a team; being challenged in respect of learning; no distraction by or competition from girls; sense that being a boy is special; feeling good about himself; no bullying, access to a boys' book club; low teacher to pupil ratio; easy to communicate with teacher; more friends; balance of academic and physical activities; regular activity breaks; boys showing more respect for girls; learning things "outside his comfort zone". Seven of the 11 parents had nothing negative to say about the class or their child's achievement in it. The four parents who did express concern referred to the lack of spelling to learn at home, handwriting having got worse, difficulty of ascertaining son's progress according to the teacher's portfolio system of assessment, and son rushing some work in order to get to break time.

When commenting on the academic learning progress of their children, the majority of the parents (7 out of 11 responses) noted the increase in reading ability, interest in books, and desire to read. Parents also noted progress in five other areas of learning - maths, technology, physical education, writing, and public speaking. One parent applauded her son's willingness to "give new ideas a go", which she thought was a product of an absence of ridicule from class members. Most of the parents (7 out of 11) indicated no concerns about their son's progress in curriculum areas; the four remaining parents mentioned (as noted above) concerns relating to spelling and handwriting.

In terms of the social and behavioural changes evident to parents, all comments (except two, which indicated "no change") stated positive developments for the boys: greater confidence; improved social skills; child felt he was heard by the teacher; child felt able to express himself to the teacher because teacher was empathetic; was proud of being in the class; made new friends; able to stay working in class all day without being removed; joined in more school activities; child realised he was really good at something. When commenting on the progress their sons had made over the year, the parents made these points: senior pupils' behaviour changed completely compared to previous years; polite group; "best I've seen"; son enjoyed class/enjoyed his experiences; supportive and loyal to classmates; related well to classmates.

Comments were all positive in regard to the boys-only class as a means of enhancing boys' education. All parents rated the class as "excellent" or "very successful" and commented that they were very impressed with this approach to boys' learning. Most said the boys-only environment suited their child while two considered it worked well for some of the children. All thought the children had achieved a wide range of skills, developed respect for one another and for other people and some commented that the boys had provided positive role models for other boys in the school. Several parents said they were sorry that the girls in the school did not have "something similar". Most emphasised the importance of the teacher - "great with the right teacher", "the right role model as the teacher", "teacher makes the difference". In looking to the future, the parents' comments were in the vein of "the children should get the same opportunity" in the years to come.

Two comments from parents summarise many of the views regarding the success of the boy's only class:

- "Should definitely be continued so long as the majority of feedback is positive and progress is monitored closely."
- "Teacher probably had more of an impact than just with the boys in this class." (The reference here was to the school-wide contribution that this teacher had made and particularly in the example in terms of the positive changes evident to the rest of the school in this class of pupils.)

#### Questionnaire Survey of Pupils: Beginning of the Year

All 22 pupils in the class answered the questionnaire. Although the questionnaire was administered early in Term 1, the class programme was already well underway, with some key classroom programmes established, reading in particular. The boys' comments on what they liked best about (1) the class and (2) the school, their ratings of subjects they were learning, their assessment of their overall experiences in the class, and their articulation of concerns might have been different if the questionnaires had been undertaken before the first day in the new class.

When asked to identify what they *liked best about the boys only class*, 12 boys noted reading. When asked to list other "best things" about the classroom programme, the boys offered a varied list: doing cool stuff; fun subject stuff; dissecting fish; lots of game time; cool games; lots of fitness; the reading club; using computers; strategies used during maths; learning maths. Also enjoyed were the broader aspects of the programme; notably that the teacher was "friendly" and "funny", being together as boys only ("no girls", "don't have to do things with girls"), having lots of friends, doing boys' activities, such as playing tackle games, writing stories, "learning more stuff", having a lot in common with others in the class, and being able to make mistakes and have "no one laugh at you".

Asked what they *liked most about the school*, eleven of them again cited reading—"reading every day", "reading good books", "allowed to read aloud". Ten identified having fun - "playing games", "time to play", "class games", "sport" and having friends at the school. Other responses referred back to features of the boys-only class rather than of the school as a whole. This list included a broad range of aspects; "being in the class" or "being in a boys-only class", using computers/ICT, receiving a "good education", learning "important stuff", learning "fun stuff", the fitness and the associated "beep" tests, camps and trips, writing, music and dance, maths, the teacher (commonly cited), technology, lunch, the book club, art, playing rugby, and singing.

Many of the things the boys listed as *not being liked at school* were similar to the list of liked aspects, showing that the children varied in their interests and inclinations relative to both their class and the school. In general, one to three students listed each of the various liked and not-liked aspects. The most noted not-liked aspect (seven students) was *not* having opportunity to play tackle games such as bullrush and rugby. Other aspects listed as not liked were the fitness test, the beep test, homework, maths, "boring stuff", lots of work, "having to do stuff", getting told off, singing, "kids that get on your nerves", children who were not friends, science, writing, physical education (PE), and too many rules. Also mentioned was a desire to have more games and more lunchtime.

When the boys were asked if they had any concerns in regard to the class, and if so what were they, 15 of the 22 pupils said that “nothing” or “definitely nothing” worried them. The five aspects of concern noted by the seven remaining children were: not enough Year 8s in the class, playing tackle games, not enough rugby/tackle games, the punching bag (which was hung up in the classroom), and doing homework.

This questionnaire asked pupils to rate 12 subject preferences on a five-point Likert scale (1 = hate it through to 5 = love it) so that a comparison could be made of preferences at the end of the year. The boys asked that information and communication technology (ICT) and fitness be added to the list because they also wanted to rate these. Averaging the ratings given by all pupils in the class to each subject area produced the following list, ordered from the most-liked to the least-liked subject: reading, ICT, fitness, music, art, writing, PE, technology, maths, social studies, Maori language, drama/dance, health, science.

### Questionnaire Survey of Pupils: End of the Year

Twenty-one boys filled out the end of year questionnaire (one pupil being absent). The two aspects most commonly cited as *the best things about being in this class* were playing physical games/outside games (17 respondents) and reading (11 respondents). Other responses were as diverse as those in the Term 1 survey. Much of the focus in these responses was on aspects relating to the classroom environment: lots of game time and/or cool games; lots of fun (“boring stuff seems fun”, “fun work” such as maths); getting on together; lots of friends; helping one another; their teacher; being with boys only “who like the same stuff”; no girls; “doing stuff with the car” (an activity occasionally set up in the playground, specifically for this class); maths; music; doing things they would not normally do at school; fitness and activity breaks; no talking while the teacher is talking; writing having been made fun; choice of seating in the classroom; plenty of opportunity to use ICT; and the positive attitudes of their classmates. Few concerns were expressed: 18 of the 21 children said they had no concerns. The three comments expressing concern were quite specific: “the teacher surprising us”; “sometimes the class is messy”; “when the class gets smelly”.

The end-of-year responses from the children about what they *liked most about school* again produced a wide range of aspects, some of which were curricular and some of which related to the learning environment. The number of respondents nominating each aspect was far more evenly spread in this fourth-term survey. In general, the items listed were mentioned by between two and five children. The aspects that the boys most liked about school were as follows (ordered from most mentioned to least): senior playground or the senior playing field; lots of sports and PE gear; sports time; lunchtime and eating lunch; music, in general, and music lessons and instruments, in particular; reading, ICT skills and the ICT room; the range of activities available / “doing lots of things”; physical activity”; maths; plays and productions; buddy reading; being big buddies (a support programme in which senior pupils provide junior pupils with reading support); the library; the rugby team; “our teacher”; the technology programme; being with friends; being in a boys’ class; writing stories; and school camp.

Except for eight children who expressed their disapproval of the school not allowing games involving tackling or contact sports, the end of year analysis of what the children *did not like about school* was typically a broad list of aspects stated by individuals: “can be boring if not enough activities”; detention; uniforms; having to

give a speech in front of the class; science; maths; technology; “no lollies [sweets, candy] allowed at school”; rules; too few trips; other classes not having to do as much silent reading as the boys-only class, and they should do this; restricted area for play; homework; no rugby posts; sports challenges; being at school for six hours; and physical activity leaders.

Compared to the list of factors produced in Term 1, this list appears to be more of a representation of the children’s efforts to think broadly about aspects of school and to offer suggestions for future changes to those involved in running the class and the school.

All pupils except one (“Don’t know”) expressed views in support of continuing a boys-only class at the school with several adding suggestions on what to include in future programmes. Thirteen children provided the following types of comments: the class is “brilliant”, “perfect the way it is”; what we did this year is great; plenty of fun activity; lots of learning; good to have boys getting along with one another. Individual suggestions for the future included more sports and fitness, more outside learning, setting up a four-man rugby tournament, having a drum kit in class, continuing the car-based activities, “having things more organised”, having a boys-only class for boys other than Year 7s and Year 8s, and keeping the present teacher.

The boys’ ratings of their curriculum subjects were similar to those in Term 1. The most-liked subject was fitness. This was followed in order of preference by music, ICT, reading, physical education, art, writing, maths, technology, drama/dance, health, social studies, science, and Maori. This list indicates some changes in the order from the Term 1 list, but only in respect of two or three places. Only four children changed their rating of subjects by two or more places (on the five-point scale) over the course of the year, and they typically applied this change to only one or two subject areas. Most subjects had similar numbers of children rating them either higher or lower by one point, and more children gave higher rather than lower ratings to each subject. In general, though, there is little to indicate discernible patterns of change, of significance to this case study, in regard to ratings during the year for the class as a whole; what changes are evident relate more to some individual preference shifts.

#### **Comparison of the Parents’ and Pupils’ Questionnaire Responses**

When comparing the questionnaire responses from parents and from pupils, similar patterns of viewpoints about the boys-only class emerged. These patterns were particularly evident in regard to the contribution of the classroom teacher, opportunity to learn, and development of social skills. By year’s end, both groups noted particular progress in reading skills and enjoyment of reading, and most of the parents and most of the children had “no concerns” about the experience of being in the boys-only class (7 out of 11 parents, and 18 out of 21 children). Both groups supported a view of success of this class over the year and were positive in their support for the school continuing to offer boys-only classes.

Some differences in the patterns of responses between parent and child were evident. The survey of views at the beginning of the year indicated the importance for parents of clear guidelines and discipline in the classroom/an aspect not mentioned by the children. Parents were more specific than the children when considering academic progress in class, and they paid more attention than the children to the social aspects developed during the year. Children noted more specific aspects in regard to class and playground activities, particularly physical games and playtimes. Some children rated

high interest in curriculum areas that their parents noted as subjects of concern for development (reading, spelling, and handwriting), but the children also rated fitness, music and ICT highly.

## Conclusions

The commentary in respect to the boys-only class given by the school's principal, the class's teacher, its pupils and their parents was, overall, positive about the outcomes for the boys in the class. The outcomes attracting the most mention were improvements in the boys' educational achievement, their attitudes towards learning and school, and their social behaviour. Particular mention was also made, especially by the principal and the parents, of the important role the teacher played in promoting a classroom experience deemed attractive to boys. Their view was backed up by the children, who nearly all said that one of the best things about their class and/or school was their teacher.

The most prominent positive outcome in regard to the boys' learning appeared to be their advances in reading skills and enjoyment of reading. A key factor of boys' tendency to underachieve in literacy widely noted in the literature is boys' reluctance to fully engage in reading. In this case study, the teacher set down as a main goal for the class raising the boys' engagement with reading and, from there, their achievement in reading. He consequently established a strong reading programme. The various components of the programme evidently proved their worth: when answering both questionnaires, the majority of boys expressed enjoyment in reading and rated reading highly as a preferred subject. Testing of their reading skills later in the year, using a norm-referenced, national test, confirmed that this enjoyment had generally translated into improved reading ability.

The preference ratings that pupils gave in regard to reading and their other curriculum subjects remained much the same over the year with ratings appearing to relate to individual preferences. What came through more clearly in the boys' comments on their subject-based learning was *how* they were taught. As a group, the boys clearly indicated their enjoyment of "hands-on" activities, having a classroom programme that timetabled activity breaks, and doing things they considered particular to their class.

Development of social skills was another strong feature of the children's learning during the year. Their own comments and those of their parents, the principal and the classroom teacher highlighted greater confidence in work with classmates and in groups, pride in sharing achievements within the school, the incorporation of manners in social interactions (including those in the playground), and being seen as a respected part of the school community.

For all of these aspects, but particularly the high esteem in which the classroom teacher was held, there was a high congruence of views of all parties surveyed. The principal, parents and pupils all attested to the significant role of the classroom teacher in the success of this class, and they generally considered the quality of the teacher to be the most important component for the success of future boys-only classes. Although not seeking to particularly interrogate the significance of the class teacher in this case study, it became apparent that this particular teacher was considered by many as a key to the boys learning progress. What is difficult to establish is the effect this teacher may have had in a situation other than in the boys only class setting provided. It is notable that many parents were keen to have their child in this class once they knew

who the classroom teacher was to be and that some parents indicated they would remove their child from the school once they realised that teacher would be moving elsewhere. This suggests that at least for some parents, the value was about the opportunity for their child to be taught by that particular teacher as much as the single-sex setting organised. Comments from all audiences did report that the boys-only class as of itself was an important factor in enhancing the boys' academic and social skills. This study would seem to support a key message for pre-service teacher education that a significant factor in effective classroom learning is having a teacher who can provide a learning programme and environment aligned with the particular learning and socialisation needs of their pupils. Aspects of the classroom programme instigated by this teacher are also worthy of pre-service teaching consideration. Having teacher trainees consider the incorporation of programme approaches that meet the needs of their class can assist children's success in learning; examples in this classroom being '40 rules', 'optional chairs', 'boys reading club'...

This study sought to report the perceptions of a school community in regard to achievement of boys, over one year, placed in a boys only class, in an otherwise co-educational Primary school. It is evident that for the changes being sought for this group of boys, this classroom set-up, as conceived by the school's principal and the classroom teacher, was a success. This study was a qualitative one involving consideration of one class, in one school. It is accepted that qualitative methods produce information that focus on the particular situation studied and more general conclusions are typically only informed assertions. The findings from this study could be considered limited in terms of representing or guiding outcomes for other boys-only classes in other school settings. This report does not attempt to conjecture whether other selected groups would achieve in a similar fashion or consider the effect this teacher would have on pupil achievement in a different classroom environment. However I contend that the outcomes reported from this case study does illustrate support for the potential successful achievement of boys in a boys only class setting. It was evident that 'boy facilitated' teaching approaches noted in the literature have been applied successfully in this classroom. This report adds to information informing the debate about successful learning settings for boys and also supports notions of the pivotal role that the teacher may have for effective learning in such a class.

Schools that instigate programmes that start from a basis of achievement for all, irrespective of gender, also report learning successes for pupils. This may well be highly dependent on staff fully conversant with strategies to assist in developing underachieving learners. The case study outlined suggests that a boys-only class has potential to succeed when run by a teacher who can create an environment and impart a programme that is conducive to boys' learning. The progress of pupils in this class is relevant for consideration by schools and teacher educators to inform the potential for best practice to enhance learning for boys in primary schools. A key message to take from the study is not one the study sought initially to consider. It is one that alludes to one of the greatest challenges for effective classroom teaching and learning - that of having teachers with the levels of passion and enthusiasm required to develop programmes that meet pupil needs. This case study also illustrates how a boys only programme can be an effective way to provide for enhancing learning progress. Ongoing investigation helps inform the discussion as to the significance for boys of the organisational setting, the programme provided and the teaching response to specific needs of pupils.

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