

# What makes a 'Good Teacher'?: The Views of Boys

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## *Abstract*

The uniform view of 1800 secondary school boys, from 60 schools balanced across all sectors, is that a 'good teacher' changes everything. In focus group discussions, the views of boys about their declining rates of achievement and retention, quickly turn to teachers. They are profoundly clear about the direct and indirect connections between teachers and their own ability to deal with, and to gain control of, other factors influencing both their likelihood of staying at school and their level of achievement. This paper presents their views of what constitutes a 'good teacher'. Primarily, 'good teachers' are 'good people', but several other general features are of particular importance to teacher training, selection and professional development. 'Good teachers' are: (1) not necessarily male or female; (2) not 'slack', 'easy' or 'soft'; (3) always young in terms of their cultural age, but not necessarily their age in years; (4) varyingly but always institutionally non-compliant and non-conformist; (5) able to build relationships of trust and mutual respect; (6) an inspiration to students to work harder and achieve more. From the boys' experience of education, the gap between school and the world beyond is wide, but not as wide as the gap between the rhetoric of education and its practice. 'Good teachers', they say, close the gap, but there are just not enough 'good teachers'.

In response to the declining rates of achievement and retention for boys, the focus of attention, both in research and the implementation of corrective programs, has been on fixing up the boys. The boys themselves, it seems, understand the issues and problems very differently. Although they identify a broad range of factors, central to all of these is that they see themselves to be stuck with an unsuitable learning environment that they cannot change. Based on their experience with 'good teachers'<sup>2</sup>, they see this to be an unnecessary outcome. The fundamental problem, as they see it, is that there are just not enough 'good teachers'. Putting aside the adult preference to decide whether their views are right or wrong, the aim of this paper is to identify the way in which boys define 'good' teaching and the impact they believe it has on their level of achievement and their preparedness to stay at school.

The views expressed by the boys are taken from a study involving 1800 Year 9-11 boys from 60 South Australian secondary schools, balanced across all sectors (Slade & Trent 2000; Slade 2000; Trent & Slade 2001; Slade 2001). In groups of 10, the boys took part in one 90 minute open discussion group. Two groups at each school were chosen at random, with one group each from Years 9 and 11. A third group, from Years 9 to 11, was chosen by the school as boys identified as being 'at risk'. The boys were asked to draw on their own experiences and to focus their discussion on the issues and problems they believe to be an influence on their level of achievement and their preparedness to remain at school. The factors identified were summarized and made the focus of a second 90 minute discussion with each of the first 60 groups of boys. These boys were asked to critically review the summary, changing it where necessary, to ensure that it accurately presented the views expressed. Toward the end of each session with all subsequent groups, the boys were asked to critically review the ongoing summary in a similar way.

The views expressed by the boys were clear and uniform across the schools, year levels and levels of achievement. Differences of viewpoint were minor and resulted either from the boys' preferred practice of discussing general issues and problems in terms of local or particular examples, or the varying ways in which individual boys choose to respond. Despite their diversity, for all but a few boys, their general understanding and expression of the issues and problems remained profoundly uniform.

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<sup>2</sup>Statements made by the boys are recorded in quotes and in italics. I use quotations for terms like 'good teacher' to stress that I am using the boys' understanding. The emphasis in the work is on what the boys are saying. I have tried to avoid judging the 'truth' or 'falsity' of their views, not because these are not matters of importance, but because they are of little pragmatic value until we are able to make sense of the ideas and reasoning that inform their choices.

The boys identified a broad range of interconnected factors. Several popularly held views, that the problems start in the primary years, and that the issues and problems are reducible to matters of gender difference, gender equity, peer pressure or literacy and numeracy, have been rejected by the boys as simplistic to the point of being false. Issues about masculinity are conspicuous in their absence.

## Good teachers make all the difference

*I reckon that boys are leaving school because of the teachers ... you get pissed off with the teachers and just think 'might as well leave'. (Year 11)*

Despite the broad and complex association of factors, it seems that all but a small number of boys consistently and emphatically see their retention and achievement problems primarily in terms of their relationship with teachers, and what they see to be a proliferation of 'bad teachers' who don't listen, don't care and who are given too much power. A uniformly repeated view is that a 'good teacher' changes everything. One good teacher, alone, can make a bad lot tolerable and make achievement, in what is seen to be an otherwise repressive, oppressive environment, seem possible.

*I think it's hard for guys especially to build a, like, teacher-student friendship or relationship, and that doesn't give a very positive view of school. I mean, like, most might have goals and, like, have a vision for the future, but then because the bridge to that is to do schooling ... a lot of boys tend to pull out because, um, yeah, it just goes back to the teacher-student relationship. (Year 11)*

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

*At the moment I'm looking to leave school and get a full time job or something, because I'm sick of all the teachers ... they all harass me all the time ... (Year 11)*

*I had a teacher last year who didn't really like me all that much ... he didn't like a group of boys in his class ... and if we rocked up after the bell had gone ... he'd shut the door and lock it on you. (Year 11)*

*Yeah, I had the same problem as well. (Year 11)*

In the main, teachers are seen as structurally empowered, hypocritical bullies who must be defied; often at any cost. Most of the boys are clear about their deliberate intention to display resentment, mostly, and varyingly, in the form of resistance; both as identifiably 'inappropriate' behaviour and as a deliberate show of non-involvement in the work. As their achievement goes into decline, the problem compounds and they either 'hang-on', knowing they are not performing at their best, or they leave.

*If you get teachers that are really good, you can chat with them, have a good lesson, then you tend to get more work done. With teachers that are pricks to you, you tend to not like them, not try as hard, retaliate against them. (Year 11)*

*I'm on probation this year. I wasn't getting anything out of the lessons. I like to make them [teachers] feel shithouse. I get a good feeling out of making them really pissed off, cause they do the same to me. (Year 11)*

Although their reasoning shows a lack of experience in some areas, they are profoundly clear about their problems. They are also profoundly clear about the direct and indirect causal connections they see between teachers and their own ability to deal with, and to gain control of, other factors influencing both their likelihood of staying at school and their level of achievement.

*They don't put much fun and interest into the work. (Year 9)*

*He gives out sheets to people, then sits down and falls asleep. (Year 9)*

*Because we are doing sheets, it doesn't get through to our head ... with Mrs. xxx all we did was nothing but sheets, and that was so boring that everyone in her class just played up ... (Year 9-11)*

*All we do is copy off the board ... no one reads it ... teachers should go through it ... (Year 9)*

*When a relief teacher comes in ... our normal teacher has told the relief teacher what we're like and the relief teacher puts it down on us ... without even knowing what we're really like in a different perspective. (Year 9-11)*

*We just mess around in class because we're not learning nothing ... the teachers won't teach us ... it's not interesting ... (Year 9-11)*

Frequently, boys ask, with puzzlement and the expectation of an answer that they have been unable to find, why teachers simply can't 'relax', 'loosen up', 'cool it', and 'listen to our view on things'.

*School ... just needs to be a little bit more relaxed ... if you get to a class late or something, or you've got a class you don't really like, or the teacher's had a bad day, so he gets grumpy at you. (Year 9)*

Reflecting on what appears to be an intensely paradoxical predicament, they push the point even further, showing greater anxiety, deep resentment and a despairing need to know why teachers can't do a better job, and why too many of them appear to 'hate their job', 'hate the kids' and care 'only about their pay'.

*I hate teachers who hate kids. (Year 9-11)*

*Teachers only care about their pay ... they don't care about teaching you ... (Year 11)*

*Relief teachers don't even know the work ... (Year 11)*

*If you ask a question and you get it wrong, they [teachers] go off at you for no reason at all ... (Year 11)*

*They [teachers] don't even look like they are going to attempt to help you. They just sit there ... (Year 11)*

*They [teachers] don't even explain the work very well. That's probably one of the worst things they do ... they don't explain the work. They just give it to you, and that's the work you have to do for the lesson and they don't explain anything about it ... (Year 11)*

*Our maths teacher fell asleep in the class ... (Year 11)*

*Some teachers leave you in the class and just walk out ... they just walk around ... They're just gasbagging with other teachers ... (Year 11)*

*They [teachers] don't care about our futures. They've got their future, so ... (Year 11)*

*They [teachers] tell us that in Year 11, 'You don't have to be here. If you don't want to be here, just go' ... (Year 11)*

*Teachers teach four or five subjects and they don't know what they're doing ... They're the ones that just hand out the sheets ... (Year 11)*

*You misunderstand something and they go, like, 'You should have been listening harder', and that's not the reason ... (Year 9)*

*You can get teachers that give you piles of work, and you're doing heaps of work and it's not really helping you. Then you can get teachers that are a little bit more relaxed, doing stuff that's a bit more interesting, and that's helping you ... and you're not doing as much work.*

*But some people think you have to be writing big essays and all that stuff. (Year 9)*

Based on their experience in education, the boys are clear and uniform in their view that a key factor influencing declining rates of achievement and retention is that there are 'too many bad teachers'. Although they offer a wealth of negative comment, focusing on examples of the people and practices they have in mind, their reasoning and their judgement is strongly influenced by their experience with 'good teachers'. In doing so, the boys provide a usefully detailed and consistent account of the things that they believe constitute 'good' as well as 'bad' teachers and teaching practice. They do this largely by describing teachers, teaching practices and the curriculum in terms of what happens in the classroom, and whether it works or it doesn't.

*I have a class ... everyone in the class likes the teacher because he's relaxed. He gives us work that's interesting to do, and no one stuffs around in his class because of that. (Year 9)*

It's worth emphasizing that there are two threads to this argument:

- (1) 'Bad teachers' are thought to obstruct achievement and encourage boys to leave school early, but 'good teachers' don't.
- (2) 'Good teachers' are instrumental in making a bad lot tolerable, achievement both desirable and possible, and the prospect of staying at school long enough to finish Year 12 a plausible outcome.

It is important to note that the boys' willingness to identify both negative and positive features of teachers, teaching practices and the curriculum reflects a more balanced viewpoint than they are often thought to have. It also reflects a determination to call the circumstances as they find them, which in most adult circles is a practice that is highly valued but largely avoided.

## Good teachers change everything

Although the boys list more than 60 defining features of a 'good teacher', the emphasis is always placed on the personality of teachers; their ability and willingness to establish relationships of mutual respect and friendship with their students.

It is worth noting that 'slack' and synthetically 'nice' or 'groovy' teachers are not included as 'good teachers'. Indeed, they are often used as examples of 'bad teachers'. In much the same way, 'easy' or 'bludge' subjects are not considered 'good subjects'. This, of course, is consistent with their general view that a subject or a lesson can only be as 'good' as the teacher.

*We just sit there stuffing around. He doesn't give us stuff to do. I mean, and he does nothin himself. He comes in, yeah, sayin it's boring and 'I'd rather be somewhere doin somethin else', like.*

*Yeah! But he doesn't give us stuff to do.*

*But, if you're a teacher and your students don't perform, you still get paid. (Year 11)*

*He's a heaps good teacher, but if you get on the wrong side of him, you're stuffed. He stirs you up but doesn't humiliate you. (Year 11)*

Subjects that are regarded as inherently boring and irrelevant are often tolerated, and in some instances actually liked, because the teacher is considered a 'good teacher'. The criteria are decidedly flexible and there is no clear 'model' teacher. 'Good teachers', on occasions, do the sorts of things that characterise 'bad teachers' but these imperfections are readily tolerated. This is in part because their general value is too great to be eroded by particular or isolated events. Perhaps more so, it is because teachers are considered 'good teachers' more because they are seen to be good people in a very general sense, than because they fit rigid criteria in any particular sense.

*Mrs. xxx, we joke around with her, and then Mr. zzz comes in, and like, 'You bastards get to work'. She comes in and goes, 'What's goin on. Get to work you little bastards', like, just jokin around.*

*Yeah! She's alright. You respect a teacher you can talk to. Give respect, get respect.*

*With the strict teachers, you can get into even more shit, and you don't care. (Year 11)*

*She did suck up to the girls, but she was still a good teacher. We had fun. (Year 9)*

The compulsory Year 11 course, Australian Studies, is universally considered to be the most boring, repetitive and irrelevant, so much so that not even a teacher identified as a 'good teacher' was expected to make this course interesting.

*Australian Studies is shit. You just turn off. It's a waste of time. The subject needs to be majorly altered. It's not the teacher [previously identified as a 'good teacher']. (Year 11)*

Although the boys express doubts about the value of schoolwork, it remains generally true to say that boys want to achieve. They believe that they can achieve, and that a 'good teacher' can make this possible. Furthermore, most boys prefer to be on good terms with their teachers.

*And there's nothing better than having a good joke with a teacher, I don't reckon. If you make a teacher laugh, I reckon that's ... [thumb's-up, meaning very good]. (Year 11)*

## Features of 'good teachers': a selection

From the perspective of the boys, the 'good teachers' are those who, among other things:

- listen to what you have to say;
- treat you like a friend;
- show you respect as a person;
- are able to treat you like an adult, especially in the sense of treating you as they would like to be treated themselves;
- are relaxed and enjoy their day;
- are able to laugh, especially at their own mistakes, instead of trying to conceal them;
- are flexible, but rigorous and consistent;
- explain the work;
- are organized;
- take the trouble to explain their judgements;
- find ways of making the work interesting, and come up with new and interesting things to do;
- respond when boys ask questions in class, and don't make them wait until they have spent time with the students they prefer;

- let you talk and move about in the classroom;
- let you go to the toilet if you need to, and even if you can't prove that you need to;
- don't keep picking on people who have a reputation, pushing them to retaliate by blaming them for whatever goes wrong and niggling them until they do something wrong;
- don't run to the staffroom and swap gossip about kids they don't like;
- don't write out slabs of stuff on the board and expect you all to write it down at the same pace and to learn from it;
- don't humiliate you in front of the class;
- don't pick on or discourage you so that you'll leave school;
- don't tell you that you'll never be any good and should leave.
- don't mark you down because of your behaviour;
- give you a chance to muck up and learn from it.

With 'good teachers', they say, 'we want to work' and 'there's not a lot of muckin around'. The problems created by the school environment are much more manageable, and 'we're going to achieve more because we want to achieve more'.

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

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

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

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

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

*You feel a lot worse if you haven't done the work for a teacher that you respect than for a teacher that's been bugging you for the last year. (Year 11)*

## Good teachers are taking risks

From their remarks about 'good' teaching and from the way in which the boys discuss the necessary features of 'good' teaching, it is clear that they are identifying teachers who go beyond the policies and pretence of education and its contemporary rhetoric about trust, respect, excellence, valuing difference, or the general demands of thinking in terms of interdependence and relativity.

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

Essentially, they are describing teachers who, professionally and personally, are taking risks by listening to their students, responding, respecting, trusting and valuing their students' views and experiences more than the rules, the policy directives, the legal precedents, their training, their career paths, the reputation of the school, and the views of small but vocal groups of parents.

Ironically, the boys' description of 'good teachers' suggests that they are usually, and perhaps necessarily, non-compliant and non-conformist, although mostly of the quiet kind. The examples and the reasoning used by the boys in their discussions, suggests that this characteristic might be understood in two ways:

- (1) These teachers might be idiosyncratically or ideologically driven to display personal, institutional or professional non-compliance and non-conformity, resulting in them being seen to be 'good teachers' by boys who find these characteristics appealing.
- (2) It might be an outcome, not necessarily one that is wanted by these teachers, of their commitment to personal, professional and cultural integrity and their determination to be successful at teaching, as distinct from being institutionally successful teachers.

Both of these are worthy of further research and may offer useful avenues for the kind of corrective strategies that are needed to effectively deal with interconnected problems. It is important to stress that the characteristics identified by the boys should neither be seen as crudely and narrowly appealing maverick eccentricities, or displays of anti-establishment politics on the part of a small

number of teachers, nor should they be misunderstood as the outcome of simple techniques to achieve popularity. From the examples and reasoning used by the boys, they are clearly identifying characteristics that appeal to all of them, despite their broad diversity. They are also identifying a diversity of teachers, many of whom describe themselves as conservative.

The second of the above ways of understanding the non-compliant, non-conformist characterization suggests the presence of a criterion of 'success' or 'successful teaching' that is agreeable to both teacher and student. It also suggests the presence of a criterion that may prove to be the benchmark from which all other efforts to improve the educational experience, and its outcomes, should be measured. Paradoxically, it follows from this aspect of their description that teachers who are successful at teaching, are only able to be so by juggling a commitment to two conflicting worlds; one being the real world of the classroom and the other being the hierarchical, bureaucratic and often highly political world of the institution. It is a central claim of the latter, that it exists for the purpose, and with the aim, of making the outcome of the classroom more effective. Nonetheless, it follows from this interpretation of what the boys are saying about 'good teachers', that this institutionally declared educative aim can only be achieved by teachers who are prepared to 'close the classroom door', excluding or ignoring the kind of institutionally imposed constraints that inhibit their ability to get on with the job of establishing and maintaining trust and mutual respect with their students. Ultimately this is the only effective and reliable basis for the kind of educative relationships that result in real learning and real achievement. Paradoxically, it is also the only way that these teachers can effectively achieve the declared aim of the institution. 'Good teachers', it seems, may be achieving these results at the individual cost of working within this paradoxical dilemma. This, of course, is the kind of dilemma that generates objective, rational despair, which too easily produces stress and an allostatic load that is more commonly known as overload (McEwen 1998a; 1998b; Slade 2002).

It is also evident, from the criteria used by the boys to describe 'good teaching', that these teachers display a genuine, practical commitment to the ongoing democratization and liberalization of the young; a social process that is as much culturally driven to include the young as it has been for all other social groups. In doing so, these teachers are effectively offering a resolution to the cultural paradox our students face each day, and to the resulting despair that seems to shape and direct their educational outcomes more than any other factor. In general, they are offering, at least by example, the view that solutions can be found in the consistent and up to date application of our cultural reasoning. In particular, these teachers offer an effective resolution to the nagging paradox that 'school is preparing us for our future, right? But school is way out of date'. A more threatening dimension of this paradox is that by offering an up to date science, the 'out of date' school is both preparing students for a future whilst it offers reasons to believe that the survival of our species is in doubt. In identifying 'good teachers' as reasons to believe that there are cultural resolutions to these contemporary paradoxes, these boys are also finding reasons to believe in themselves, in their own judgements, and in their future. Their experience with 'good teachers' gives them sufficient reason to believe in others, in the value of learning and of working toward long term goals. Perhaps more importantly, the boys' experience with these teachers provides reasons to believe that what needs to be done in their lives can be done, and that their confidence in the logic that led to the recognition of paradox, and from there to objective despair, was well founded, rational, but resolvable. Although the impact of 'good teachers' is identified as one that makes them feel 'better', they also feel vindicated and genuinely optimistic.

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

From what the boys are saying it is also apparent that 'good teachers' are making practical sense of the contemporary demands on education, from industry, the community and our increasing involvement in the processes of globalization. They are also making practical sense of the demand that we go beyond the dominant commitment to fragmentation and certainty that continues to direct and restrict the formal educational offering in Australia. In short, these teachers are making practical sense out of the need to think in terms of interconnection and relativity. For several decades, education has managed to make little more than theoretical sense of this need, perhaps because of its appeal to those who are committed more to 'political correctness' than to the broader cultural agenda of maintaining pragmatic, theoretical and spiritual consistency.

## Good teachers might be male or female

It is particularly interesting that ‘good teachers’ might be male or female. Indeed, the apparent disregard for the gender of teachers is consistent with the boys’ view that gender is not a major factor influencing rates of achievement and retention, and that adults concern themselves with gender issues too often, usually in a bid to avoid more fundamental issues. Whether a teacher is male or female is not the fundamental issue, if indeed it is an issue at all. When ‘good teachers’ are described, the gender of the individual is coincidental or epiphenomenal.

*One teacher is excellent. She talks to you like you’re a human; you’re a person. The rest of the teachers are just like robots. They go to work, get paid, go home. They don’t care what you think, what you feel. She will do anything in her power to get you to pass. She gives out her phone number to students who are struggling, so they can ring her and ask her at home. No other teachers do that. They don’t care. She’s down to earth, got a personality and can take a joke. (Year 9-11)*

Importantly, teachers who express viewpoints, attitudes, judgements or prescriptions that are claimed to be, or seen to be, gender based or gender biased are regarded as ‘bad teachers’, whether the bias is identifiably male or female.

## Good teachers might be old or young

‘Good teachers’ are not necessarily young, but it helps. Young teachers are thought to be ‘closer to where we are’ and ‘enjoy what they are doing’ more than most older teachers. They also ‘try harder’ to ‘have fun’, and to make ‘the work more interesting’.

*But, then again, it seems to be the younger teachers that know what we’re going through at the moment, that seem supportive. Like, Mr. xxx and Mr. xxx. They are really good and they will have a joke and laugh with you. And they won’t just say, ‘Get lost! - don’t want to know you’. (Year 11)*

When the boys talk about young teachers being ‘closer’, this is not explained simply in terms of age in years. Young teachers are more likely to ‘treat you like a friend’, to know about ‘the things we’re interested in’, to be ‘up to date with computers and other stuff that’s important’, to display more commitment to the students than the rules and policies of the school, to understand the kinds of issues and problems that school creates for young people, and to ‘understand our point of view’.

More generally, young teachers are thought to be culturally more up to date in themselves, in the sense of being paradigmatically more in tune with the contemporary world. Not surprisingly, teachers who meet the boys’ criteria for ‘good’ teaching, are often thought of as ‘young’ teachers, regardless of their age.

Being young in years is thought to predispose a teacher to be a ‘good teacher’ but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. Not all young teachers are thought to be ‘good teachers’.

*Yeah, but some young teachers are living in the past though. (Year 11)*

*Mr. xxx’s not that old and he’s probably one of the biggest bastards around.*

*... he’s our year level coordinator and I’m too scared to even go near him.*

*He’s my maths teacher and he’s always talking about how I ask too many questions.*

*He’s dodgy, man! (Year 11)*

Nonetheless, teachers who are identified in the boys’ discussions as being boring, and who are thought to have ineffective, irrelevant views or methods of teaching, are those who are often said to have had ‘too many years on the job’ or who have ‘been at it too long and need to go and do something in the real world for a while’. In contrast, ‘good teachers’ are said to be more ‘connected’ to the world beyond school, partly because they display signs of this connection in a range of ways, but also because they display less signs of being disconnected.

There are two important aspects to this view:

- (1) The boys draw a clear distinction between what we might call the ‘cultural age’ of teachers and their ‘age in years’. ‘Good teachers’ may be old or young in terms of their age in years but they are necessarily culturally aware, up to date, or connected, and for this reason they are regarded as being ‘young’ in terms of their cultural age.

*Yeah, Mr. xxx is alright, and he’s probably one of the oldest teachers here.*

*Yeah!*

*He really is the oldest teacher here.*

*He's more laid back.*

*I think it's personal experiences he's been through in his life.*

*Yeah, exactly.*

*Yeah, he acts like a twenty year old. He's decent. Yeah. (Year 11)*

Teachers who persist in trying to control the lives of the young, whether through approval or disapproval, or by trying to enforce established, traditional or 'preferred' standards and practices, are talked about as 'ancient', 'out of date' or as 'control freaks' who are 'out of touch' or just 'not part of the real world'.

Primarily, the ideas, attitudes and practices of individual teachers are what distinguishes them as 'good teachers' or as 'bad teachers'. In other words, the measure of a 'good teacher' is the extent to which they are successful at establishing effective, culturally up to date educative relationships with their students; relationships that are based on trust and mutual respect. These are the kind of relationships that reflect the processes of democratization and liberalization that are increasingly transforming the lives and expectations of young people. Given that this is a transformation that is reflected in the lives of the young beyond school far more than within their school experience, the cultural 'connectedness' that boys find in 'good teachers' is made more pronounced and more highly valued by being the exception, but not the rule; by being the difference that characterizes 'good teachers' rather than the norm that characterizes good schools. It is in this sense that a teacher who would be regarded as particularly normal and up to date as a person outside of school is described by the boys as a radical within the school.

In brief, culturally up to date teachers, who are more flexible, accepting of change and difference, prepared to value and facilitate diversity, and who display the kind of approval that is not aimed at dominating or controlling the young, are more warmly regarded, irrespective of their age.

*Mr. xxx is a top bloke. Like, he'll talk to you. Like, he'll talk to us. Like, 'What did you do on the weekend?', 'How ya goin guys' ... Like, we do stuff with him. He's a good bloke.*

*And you always do well in those subjects.*

*And then you've got your down right cockheads, like, Mr. xxx. He says stuff like, 'Oh! don't use God's name in vain and all that kinda shit'.*

*Absolute wankers. Ya don't know how they got to be teachers.*

*Yeah! Teachers need to be more, like, related to the kids.*

*Yeah! There's a big generation gap.*

*There's a lot of older teachers.*

*A teacher should be more your mate than a teacher, I reckon.*

*Nah! More like a boss that you can relate to. Like, one you work with and not against kinda thing.*

*Ya should respect your teacher cause that's someone you want to be like. (Year 11)*

*Basically all the teachers we've named [as 'good teachers'] are all teachers that socialize with students and don't consider us as students but more as friends. (Year 11)*

Most boys express the view that the majority of their teachers are old in terms of age in years<sup>3</sup>. Although this is not thought to make them necessarily out of date, it does predispose them, and thereby the school environment, to be less in tune with changing attitudes, beliefs and practices, less directed by contemporary challenges, and less focused on preparing for a future that is based on the reality of the present.

*All those older teachers ... are trying to keep the traditional schooling within, when it is changing - like they are driving a car that way but they are trying to push it back this way. It's stupid. (Year 11)*

- (2) With more importance, the boys are also drawing attention to the consistency with which cultural age is displayed, both in terms of viewpoint and practice. A key feature of 'good teachers' is that they are culturally consistent.

Most of all, those who are seen to be old in terms of age in years, young in terms of cultural age, and consistent in the expression of their cultural viewpoint and its application in practice, appear to be the most highly valued and respected.

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<sup>3</sup> The average age of teachers in government schools in SA has increased from 39 years in 1991 to 45 years in 2001. Given that there are more younger teachers in country schools, the current average age in most metropolitan schools would be closer to 50 years. Furthermore, the 21% decline in overall numbers of permanent teachers in the last ten years has come largely from the under 30 years age group (Slade 2002).

## Good teachers are just good people

Despite their ongoing remarks about the urgent need for better teachers and claims that teachers need to be re-trained and brought up to date with the world beyond school, the boys quite uniformly declare that *'ya can't train good teachers'*, because it is mainly a matter of *'their personality'*.

*If the teacher doesn't see it that way, well, there's a low mark.*

*Yeah, exactly, and I think it's goin to be damned hard for the government to change the perception of the teachers, like, upon us.*

*It's not going to happen quickly.*

*Nah, exactly, it's not going to be okay. Ya can't just go, here's a lot of money, let's do this to make it change. Ya can't do it. Ya can't, like, open their head and say, 'Okay, you've got to do this now'.*

*Well, you could, but it probably wouldn't shut again. (Year 11)*

*It's just their personality. Whatever kinda person they are, really. (Year 9)*

*Some teachers just shouldn't teach. It's just not their thing. They don't have the right personality, or somethin. (Year 11)*

Basically, *'good teachers'* are good people. Good people are easy to be with, work with, work for and to even work hard for; they offer no obstacle to mutual trust and respect, they are consistent in the full sense of the term and openly seek to be so, and they offer no reason to doubt that they genuinely listen and genuinely care.

*It's his character. He's just, like, easy to do stuff with. (Year 9-11)*

The emphasis in teacher training, from the viewpoint of boys, should be more upon selecting people for teaching who have the right kind of personalities or characters, than upon academic training aimed at credentials and accreditation.

*You really need to be a people person to be a good teacher, and like, uni doesn't really teach you that. (Year 11)*

This suggests that the boys have no confidence, either in the capacity of *'bad teachers'* to change, or in the tertiary education system to produce more *'good teachers'*. Indeed, the boys are not optimistic about the likelihood of changing people in or through the current institutionalized process of education. Some of them are clearly pessimistic, relying on the kind of reasoning that is both characteristically *'in your face'* and difficult to challenge, without running the risk of offering them another example of why their view makes sense. It goes like this:

- Institutional education, as we know it, is more about rewarding those who conform and comply with the dominant view of the *'preferred'* person, than it is about helping them learn to become *'good'* people.
- The *'preferred'* student is one who conforms or complies with the preferences of *'bad teachers'*.
- *'Bad teachers'* have the numbers, the positions and hence the power to ensure that their preferences dominate.
- *'Preferred'* students are more likely to get the kind of credentials that will allow them to join the teaching profession.
- Therefore, the profession is self-replicating; teachers and schools as systematically unable to change, *'good teachers'* will necessarily remain a small minority, and necessarily struggle to live between two worlds.

*The people who've got control are the one's who have to change; have to give up being control freaks, seein everythin the way they want to - but then they'll see this boys' stuff you're doin their way, I bet. They'll pick on the stuff that suits them, so they won't really have to do nothin, eh?*

*The people who've got control are the one's who have to change; have to give up being control freaks, seein everythin the way they want to ... Anyway, the ones who do well at school are the ones who are like the teachers. In twenty years they'll be running the schools and nothin will have changed - except most of em'll be women. But that's no big difference. A control freak's a control freak. Men or women, doesn't matter. (Year 11 early leaver)*

The less pessimistic form of this view simply stresses that although most teachers are academically qualified, they are just not suited to teaching, or that their personalities are more suited to the kind of teaching that no longer works and can no longer be considered effective teaching.

A more hopeful interpretation of these views might be that they are focusing on particular personality traits and the characteristics displayed by teachers working under particular conditions. The view that these teachers may have more suitable personality traits or characteristics that are not displayed or applied, doesn't feature strongly in the boys' discussions. It appears that most of the boys are thinking that what they see in teachers is all that there is or might be in the personalities of these people.

*How they are as a person is how they teach.* (Year 11)

The boys seem not to be critically aware that the premise 'How they are as a person is how they teach', does not necessarily support the conclusion that 'How they teach, is how they are as a person'. Using their reasoning, the conclusion may be true, but it may also be false. Furthermore, on several occasions some of the boys talked about having had experiences with particular teachers that challenge this conclusion. One teacher, for example, who had been identified as a 'bad teacher' was said to have been 'a lot different when we were on camp'. Of another, it was said that 'on tour last year he was really good ... nothin like he is at school'. Nonetheless, these experiences appear to be rare and not sufficient to raise doubts about the general view that the teacher is the full extent of the person. Of course, had these experiences not been separated from the school environment, and had the school environment not been one that is thought of as being detached from the world beyond, their impact may have been greater, or at least not so easily dismissed.

It is worth noting that embedded in the reasoning used by the boys elsewhere in their discussions, we find an indication that most of them might readily entertain a more positive, optimistic belief that the personality displayed by 'bad teachers' might actually and easily be changed. The belief is based on a general and strongly held conviction among the boys that pragmatic reasoning is universally persuasive and effective, that is, that everyone prefers better outcomes and that better outcomes are those that work better for everyone. In this case it informs the view that, ultimately, everyone involved with schooling wants a better deal. The reasoning is usually of the straightforward kind, and always used with conviction:

- The things that make someone a good teacher are obvious.
- 'Good teachers' get better results from students and enjoy their job more.
- The outcome is that school is a better place for everyone.
- Hence, most 'bad teachers' will want to be 'good teachers'.

We can see, for example, this kind of general conviction embedded in the reasoning used by a Year 9 boy. He had been involved in rehearsals for a school stage production, and missed a lesson. He found the teacher during a lesson break and, although he was given a brief outline of what was required for homework, he remained unclear, and found it difficult to do the work correctly.

*I did the wrong thing for homework. I misunderstood what he said. So, I told him I did the wrong thing and I didn't really want to read it out. So then he yelled at me and wanted me to read it out, but I didn't want to read it out because I was embarrassed about it. So then he told me to get outside ... It doesn't help to go outside, you're just missing more of the lesson.*

*You shouldn't get into trouble for things like that ... they should just read it after class.*

*If you miss some work you should be able to catch it up at home or something. You shouldn't get blasted at in class.*

*I have a class ... everyone in the class likes the teacher because he's relaxed. He gives us work that's interesting to do, and no one stuffs around in his class because of that.* (Year 9)

In discussions involving the staff of participating schools, it has often been argued that teachers are prevented from being the kinds of people that the boys are talking about as 'good teachers'; that they are forced by institutional and professional constraints to be policy, management and curriculum directed, to the point of being boring, authoritarian 'robots'. Many teachers said that they shared the boys' views on most things, and that they thought themselves to have been poorly supported as teachers, and inadequately trained from the outset. They argued that their tertiary training and subsequent professional development was probably best described by the words used by the boys in summarizing most aspects of school life as 'boring', 'repetitive' and 'irrelevant'.

The boys, on occasions, argue that there is not enough government support for schools, that teachers don't get enough free time to help students, that there are too many students in classrooms, and that teachers are under pressure to cover a set amount of work in a set time, whether or not all students can keep up.

*If the teachers had less people to teach, like, if they were only teaching, like, two different classes or something, they wouldn't be going, 'Oh, I can't do it this session, cause I've gotta do this for this other lesson'.*

*And you're having a lesson and your teacher's marking different classes' stuff. Like, thanks for teachin me. (Year 11)*

*Our teacher tries to rush it through, to keep up.*

*It's cause they have to keep with the time schedule, otherwise they would be able to go through it more thoroughly and you would be able to learn it better. (Year 11)*

From their discussions, it is reasonable to assume that all boys would support this view in principle. They often claim, for example, that what prevail as '*community standards*' in schools are no more than views and preferences of a vocal minority of parents and influential or empowered staff who bully the rest into complying. Together, arguments of this kind suggest that the boys would support the view that more teachers would be '*good teachers*' with the right kind of training, and if the prevailing conditions in schools made this possible. These arguments also suggest that even the most disaffected boys would consider as plausible the view that if most teachers were free to be more client focused and client driven, in the way they go about teaching, and in what and where they choose to teach, they would be far better teachers than they are at present.

Not surprisingly, most boys are not aware of the extent to which they share many of their concerns about teachers, schools and the educative process with the teachers they have come to see as the immediate source of their problems. Indeed, most of the boys I spoke with didn't know that their teachers talk in similar ways about their own educational experience, and about the failure of their tertiary training and much of what has followed, to be useful, let alone client focused or client directed. During the reporting back process to schools, teachers have spoken of the need to conduct similar, independent research, aimed at summarizing their views. Many feel that this would reveal, among other things, a perceived need for a major review and redirection of teacher education and professional development. Many argue that while teacher training continues to be delivered by detached tertiary institutions, using an outdated 'student as conscript' model, the provision of more client sensitive, client focused and client friendly teachers in secondary schools would be hard to achieve, despite the demands of a rapidly changing world. Although many younger teachers resent the added life burden of an educational debt, it seems that they are more resentful of the inadequacy and inappropriateness of their training than with its cost. For all of its problems, fee for service in education, as in any other area of the market place, is always more acceptable if the service is valued, and if it visibly delivers the capacity to provide the kind of services that are similarly valued.

Nonetheless, the view most profoundly, consistently and uniformly expressed throughout the boys' discussions, is that if some teachers can manage to be '*good teachers*' under the prevailing conditions, all teachers can; those who don't should change, and those who can't should leave. In all of their discussions about teachers, and perhaps in a bid to see genuine and immediate changes, the boys return to this argument. Based solely on their experience with the '*good teachers*' they know and value, and who create the demonstrably achievable 'bottom line', the boys conclude that if one can do it, they can all do it.

## **The way to go is to let the clients choose**

The solution favoured by many boys, to the difficulties of providing appropriately trained teachers, and of motivating existing teachers to meet the needs of the current students, is simply to give students the freedom to choose their teachers and their subjects. In short, to allow the logic of the market place to decide who should teach and who should not.

Rightly or wrongly, the boys show great confidence in market place logic. They see themselves as consumers and they believe that the market place has the capacity to provide what is best for consumers through the forces of supply and demand. They claim that the adult world has double standards in this respect. They say that they are constantly told by adults, especially teachers, that they need to '*shape up*' if they want to get a job. They are also told that their poor performance at school is the result of a poor effort on their part, that they have nobody else to blame but themselves; that the real world of the market place is unrelentingly competitive, selective and insensitive in its preference for the best. Although the boys express a strong dislike for the inconsistent way in which they see teachers, and often parents, using this argument as a reason why they should comply, conform and work hard at school, they offer no challenge to the argument itself. Market place mechanisms remain largely unchallenged, even by boys who spend much of their

free time working in the fast food industry or packing shelves in supermarkets for relatively low wages, usually at the risk of poor or poorer performance at school. However, these boys want to know why the same arguments and the same mechanisms don't apply to the provision of relevant courses, suitable teachers and appropriate school environments. In other words, they seem less concerned about difficult tasks, hard work or the rigours of a competitive work force, than they are about being denied their choice of teachers and courses.

It is clear that an increasing number are leaving early, whether they are making the choice to go or whether the choice is being made for them. It is also clear that those who choose to stay are becoming increasingly detached. Although far less clear, it is arguable that the rate of increase is commensurate to the rate at which boys are losing interest in the consequences attached to choices which appear to be no choice at all. In the case of some boys, this becomes a loss of interest in the notion of consequence itself.

Many boys in the private school sector are very mindful that their parents pay for their education costs. They say that they get regular reminders of this fact, by both parents and teachers. They repeatedly express the desire to speak for themselves, and to choose as they would do, if they were empowered consumers or clients in any other market place exchange. Some of these boys are of the view that their parents are increasingly inclined to accept their judgement and to support their choices. Indeed, the most satisfied group of boys in this study were at a private college specializing in Year 11 and 12 academic courses. All of these boys had come from another school. Most of them had come from other private schools, seeking better teaching and a better school environment. In all cases, 'better' was determined pragmatically in terms of finding the conditions under which they would do their best. In all cases, this translated into getting 'what we're paying for'. Primarily, this is understood by the boys to mean 'good teachers' and a learning environment that is culturally up to date and self-referentially consistent. Other factors, that more traditionally make a school marketable, seem to be of little value.

*I'm only in Year 9 now, but I'm waiting to go to xxx [the senior college]. My sister's already there, and she says it's really good. I'd like to go there now, but I have to wait until Year 11. That's nearly two years.*

*Why can't this school [his current school] do what they're doing? If they did, I'd stay here'.*  
(Year 9)

It is worth noting that most of these boys would prefer to have stayed at their previous school, and to have exercised their market styled choice from within. This indicates a need to develop flexibility in the offering within schools, rather than between them. In other words, these boys were not looking to leave the school. They were simply looking, first and foremost, to choose their teachers and perhaps their course of study and learning style.

Although most boys can see ways of changing the curriculum and the school culture, the success of any of these is thought to remain contingent on having more 'good teachers'. Indeed, from their reasoning it is clear that having more 'good teachers' would effectively solve most problems. It is also clear that if a strategically necessary condition of getting enough 'good teachers' is to 'get rid of the bad teachers', they see no reason why this should not be done, immediately. They see themselves, and the girls, as the most qualified to know who can teach and who can't; who should stay and who should go.

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

In their discussions about 'good teachers', the boys were asked how many 'good teachers' they thought they had experienced in secondary school. A lengthy review of teachers usually followed this question. In most of the 60 schools, the number remained between 10% and 20%. Although this is a percentage of the teachers they had experienced, which is less than the total number in the school, it does represent the percentage of their collective experience spread over four years. At some schools the percentage was higher but it was rarely above 30%.

*Eighty percent of the teachers at this school are absolute shockers. They've got no idea ...*  
(Year 11)

*Teachers are in it for themselves, basically.*

*... the thing is that there is only one or two teachers that are willing to help you do better. But it seems to be the majority of teachers that don't give a hell. Like, just, like, go away. I don't want to know about it.*

*And when they do help you, they've got, like, you can tell. They help you but, like, you can tell by the smirk or the attitude that they really don't want to be there. (Year 11)*

## **Not genuinely listening, is not listening at all**

Most of all, the boys have uniformly expressed the view that the adult world, which in their school experience is most often talked about in terms of teachers, does not genuinely listen to their views and is not genuinely interested in their concerns. They use several reasons to support this claim, but two are of particular relevance:

- *'they [adults/teachers] usually just say that we're wrong or we don't understand'.*
- *'they [adults/teachers] do nothing about it' that is 'even when they say they're listening, nothing changes - so they can't be'.*

Given the imperatives of our time and our culture, and the pressing need, locally and globally, to think and act in terms of interconnection and relativity, in and through education, it would seem that the boys are drawing attention to the central aspect of a much broader problem, namely, that we are failing to listen to ourselves, individually, as a community, as a culture and as a species.

In the main, current strategies emphasize the importance of matters like curriculum, assessment, credentials, policies, programs, guidelines, career paths and accountability, focusing largely on fixing up the boys and satisfying a despair driven adult need for control and certainty in a world that is fundamentally understood in terms of fragmentation. The boys, on the other hand, have emphasized the importance of people, their cultural age and their commitment to being culturally, particularly in the sense of philosophically, up to date and consistent. In their focus group discussions, the boys emphasize personalities, attitudes, ideas and values, particularly the way in which these influence what happens in the classroom, but more particularly, the extent to which individual teachers display a commitment to pragmatic, theoretical and spiritual consistency. In other words, instead of focusing on the institution, they focus on the individual; instead of focusing on status and the exercise of power and correctness, they focus on the extent to which integrity, in all of its individual, professional and cultural senses and dimensions, is retained or lost in the way a person does what they do.

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