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Connecting School Culture to
Boys' Learning:

**An investigation into how school culture affects boys'
learning in one New Zealand primary school.**

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Abstract

Boys' underachievement has become a topical issue in recent years. In response, one New Zealand primary school created a Boys' Project. It encompassed a range of interventions designed to address boys' underachievement by re-culturing the school to make it a more positive environment for them. This qualitative research is a case study of this school and it seeks to identify elements of school culture that support boys' learning.

The literature revealed contrasting and conflicting theoretical perspectives contributing to the debate around boys' achievement. From one perspective it is accepted that boys and girls are different and schools are expected to accommodate these differences. The alternative perspective suggests that differences between girls and boys should not be viewed as inevitable and that, for boys, schools and society should work to change undesirable attitudes and behaviours if their learning needs are to be addressed.

The research revealed that boys' underachievement is indeed a complex issue that is unlikely to be solved by short-term interventions or strategies. The research concludes that educational outcomes for boys will be positively affected by a school culture that fosters strong relationships, a focus on learning, and an understanding of how beliefs and attitudes about gender are influential on learning.

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1. Introduction

“I don’t know what it is with boys”, said the teacher of the seven and eight year old class as she sat down for her morning coffee, “but when they turn eight they change! It’s like on their birthday they suddenly become loud, restless and obnoxious.” “I know.” agreed her new entrant class colleague, “Take Sam for example, he was just delightful when he started school!” Her tone of voice indicated that Sam was anything but delightful now. In another school’s staffroom, a meeting focussed on children whose progress was ‘at risk’. Most of these ‘at risk’ children were boys. “What is it with these guys?” said one of the teachers, “They come from the same homes and backgrounds as the girls but they just don’t seem to be interested in learning!”

The “What’s up with the boys?” theme at this school also became a topic of conversation amongst teachers. Why did boys present more headaches for teachers than girls? Boys’ experience of school had become an issue in my professional life.

I have been a primary school teacher for 28 years. I am also the father of two primary school aged boys and a daughter who has just begun her secondary school education. Until the end of 2005 I had spent five years as deputy principal of a state, coeducational decile 2, urban New Zealand primary school of approximately 350 students. I was a deputy principal and had responsibilities for leading the senior syndicate (Year 5 & 6 classes) as well as wider responsibilities for curriculum and pastoral leadership. This is the school that is the focus of this study.

From 2000 when I arrived, the school went through a re-culturing process. Part of this involved a critical examination of the difference the school was making to the lives and educational outcomes of the students. Discussion and reflection amongst teachers were encouraged and during this process it became apparent that boys’ performance, particularly in literacy and behaviour, were causing concern. According to the school’s achievement data (nationally normed testing in reading, spelling and mathematics supported by school based assessments) it seemed that disproportionate numbers of boys were underachieving academically. Literacy was a particular area of

concern as was the fact that disproportionately high numbers of boys were represented in data related to ‘problem’ behaviours (stand-downs, and detentions).

That boys were on the radar in my school at this time was reflective of the wider political context that had begun to emerge in the preceding decade. During the 1970s and 1980s significant gains were made by the feminist movement in terms of drawing attention to gender relations and the plight of girls. The focus on boys in the 1990s has been seen by some as a reactionary response (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Coupled with this, is the movement in the late 1980s towards what Skelton (2001) refers to as the “marketization of schooling” (p.17) which focused on school effectiveness and school improvement. Schools were forced to identify aspects of their practice and performance which could be improved upon and this inevitably led to comparisons between boys and girls. Boys were perceived by some (Biddulph, 1997; Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Education Review Office, 1999; Noble, 2000; Pollack, 1998) to be underachieving in relation to girls. Consequently, there emerged during the 1990s a focus on the plight of boys which has become a growing area of interest (Skelton, 2001).

Both internationally and within New Zealand, the focus on boys began to receive widespread support. Books like *Raising Boys* (1997), *Real Boys* (Pollack, 1998), and a more recent New Zealand example *He’ll Be Ok – Growing Gorgeous Boys Into Good Men* (Lashlie, 2005), focused attention on the ‘plight’ of boys. Newspapers kept boys’ underachievement in the public eye with headlines such as: *Concern as boys lag behind girls in class* (New Zealand Herald, 2000), and *It’s time to give schoolboys a break* (New Zealand Herald, 2005). The popularisation of the issue drew the attention of politicians. In the United States, profile and political clout was given to the debate with Laura Bush saying, "I feel like, in the United States, that we've sort of shifted our gaze away from boys for the last several decades, and that we've neglected boys" (Norris, 2006). The media attention given to boys’ education focused the attention of governmental agencies on the issue.

The first response of a New Zealand governmental agency came in 1999 with the publication of the Education Review Office’s report *The Achievement of Boys* (Education Review Office, 1999) which suggested that schools should be assessing

and addressing the achievement of boys. A second report *Promoting Boys' Achievement* (Education Review Office, 2000) said that whilst 80% of schools showed an awareness of a gender gap, only 11% of these schools were responding to the issue. In 2001 the Ministry of Education published *Explaining and addressing gender differences in the New Zealand compulsory school sector* (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001) which produced twelve implications for addressing issues of gender difference in schooling. The attention of the popular press, politicians and the Ministry of Education towards gender in schooling produced a climate conducive for individual schools to examine experiences and outcomes for their boys.

It was within this climate that, in 2001, my school applied to the Ministry of Education for contestable 'Innovations Funding' to address the issue of boys' underachievement within the school, particularly in literacy. The first step, once the application was approved, was to engage in research which involved two pathways. Firstly, there was a more in-depth analysis of the schools' data in an attempt to quantify the extent of the perceived problem with boys.

The analysis of the school's data focused on literacy and behaviour to see whether the perceptions held about boys within the school were correct. A dominant perception was that most of the problems with disruptive behaviour were caused by certain boys and that this behaviour was getting in the way of not only their learning, but the learning of other children as well. Another perception was that many boys did not seem to like school and had a disinterested attitude to school work and their own progress. It was also believed that a disproportionate number of boys were underachieving, especially in the key area of literacy. The data analysis went a long way towards confirming these perceptions. Boys were shown to dominate statistics around disruptive behaviour. For instance, while 55% of the school student population was boys they occupied 75% of the detention referrals. When these were analysed more closely it was found that 54% of the total referrals were from a core of repeat offenders, 87% of which were boys. If this core group is disregarded boys made up only 62% of the remaining referrals. There seemed to be a group of boys whose behaviour indicated that they were disengaged with schooling. However, the possibility of making misinformed statements about the general achievements of boys based on data produced about a specific group has been pointed out in the literature

(Ferguson, 2004; Murphy & Elwood, 1998; Skelton, 2001). Therefore, the influence this group had on conclusions made about boys' achievement in the school needed to be considered.

The analysis of literacy data indicated that boys' achievement, particularly in reading, was significantly behind the achievement of the girls in the school. Progress and Achievement Testing in reading comprehension showed that of the children in Years 4-6 who achieved a percentile of 70 or more, only 40% were boys (55% of Year 4-6 students were boys) yet 61% of those who achieved in the percentile range of 0-29 were boys. Furthermore, Reading Recovery data for 2000 showed that 5 out of 6 children participating in the programme (83%) were boys. An interesting footnote to the 2001 data indicates that a funding cut prompted more girls to be accepted for enrolment in Reading Recovery because it was perceived that they could be pushed through the programme faster! There was a 50% boy/girl ratio in Reading Recovery that year. Analysis of listening and oral language data further supported the perception that in literacy boys were under-represented in higher achievement and over-represented in underachievement.

The achievement data indicated that some boys were doing well. However, it was also apparent that in literacy less boys than girls were achieving at and above the expected standards and that significantly more were below these standards, thus indicating that, as with the behaviour data, a group of boys seemed to be disengaged with schooling. However, whilst some boys appeared in behaviour and underachievement data others did not, indicating that the issue about boys' underachievement went beyond the influence of the core group of disaffected boys previously mentioned. Furthermore, the absence of a similar group of disaffected girls suggested that a focus on boys' experience of school was a worthwhile endeavour.

The second pathway the school took after the application was approved was to undertake a review of literature on boys and schooling. One teacher carried out this review, focusing on differences between boys and girls. She found that there was a wide range of information about how boys are 'at risk' but much less on how to address the problem. A list of boys' general needs and characteristics was produced.

This list indicated that boys were curious and competitive creatures who have difficulty multitasking and need time to process information. They are risk takers who need clear and consistent rules. Strong relationships with teachers are very important for their learning and they have a need to belong and be seen to belong to a group. Some classroom and school-wide strategies did emerge from the literature. The use of teaching methods using physical, energetic and challenging activities was suggested as were specific strategies around using discussion before they begin writing. The use of role models was promoted and it was suggested that schools recruit male staff (in 2002 approximately 25% of the total staff in the school were male). There was also seen to be a need for schools to educate teachers on how emotionally fragile boys are and how this fragility is hidden behind bravado, aggression and silence.

From this point on the principal took the lead in driving the project. Because of the complexity of the issue and the range of individual backgrounds and circumstances of the boys in the school he believed that no single initiative would dramatically influence learning for all boys. Rather, he used the knowledge gained from the literature about the differences between boys and girls and advocated a range of changes to create a culture within the school that might be more welcoming for boys. He believed that the difficulties were not with all boys and that the problems associated with boys also affected some girls. He believed therefore, that innovations should target perceived problems rather than boys per se, and that the school could use this opportunity to make a difference in terms of improving educational outcomes for both boys and girls.

A belief emerging from the review of literature was that fathers and other role models and mentors have a very important role to play in the lives of boys (Biddulph, 1997). This led to an investigation of the family structures of the students within the school. It was found that approximately one third of the children lived with mother and father, one third lived with their mother and her partner, whilst one third lived with just their mother. Amongst teachers there were discussions about the number of children in our school who lacked positive male role models in their lives. Positive male role models were deemed to be law abiding men who were kind, literate and placed value on

education. It followed, therefore, that fathers and men would have a role to play in improving experiences and educational outcomes within the school.

Some school-wide strategies were adopted. Because some boys often found themselves in trouble during the lunch breaks, an effort was made to engage boys in lunchtime activities. Structured games were organised and the school bought a lot of play equipment to support this. 'At risk' children were targeted and encouraged into organised activities whilst some were withdrawn during class time by a support worker and taught some social skills needed for constructive play. This involved a group of three or four children spending four or five sessions of 30 minutes playing in the sandpit where they were shown how to use the toys while sharing equipment was modelled and practiced.

Role models were brought into the school and a deliberate effort was made to avoid the over use of sporting heroes and to bring in males who had achieved academically. This included professional people from the community and high school students who had distinguished academic achievements. Efforts were also made to bring dads into the school. Because mentoring and role modelling were seen to be important, there was an effort to maintain and even build on the ratio of male staff members, thus allowing the children to interact with a variety of different men.

Intervention programmes were introduced. Some, like the reading and writing interventions, targeted learning needs but because of boys' underachievement in those areas tended to be dominated by boys. Others programmes, like the Perceptual Motor Programme (PMP or 'Smart Start') which was introduced for all junior children in an attempt to improve fine motor skills (seen to be a particular weakness with boys), were broad based and covered a large group of children. The 'Books in Homes' programme was also supported by the innovations funding and it was hoped it would help improve literacy amongst all students.

Some innovations targeted boys directly. One was an experience that became known as "Blokes Camp". This was a one night camping experience where fourteen boys went with the principal and about seven fathers or grandfathers to a bush location. Half the boys going on these camps went with a significant male from their lives

whilst the other seven did not have much contact with significant adult males in their lives outside school. This camping experience was designed as an opportunity for developing mentoring relationships. Literacy was a focus at the camp as were outdoor experiences like a high ropes course and raft making. The eventual aim was for every boy at the school to go on one camp during his middle or senior years at the school. Some fathers or grandfathers who do not usually interact with the school proved to be willing participants in this experience.

Another intervention targeted directly at boys was the provision of a support worker who, in addition to providing lunchtime sports, was able to take small groups and work on small scale building projects with them. The boys chosen for this activity included those who by the afternoon were often having difficulty connecting with the classroom programme. In some cases these boys had been diagnosed with conditions like autism or ADHD, whilst others were known to be experiencing traumas or other distractions from their lives outside of the school. They made things like sandpit toys, trolleys and a land yacht. Other boys were chosen for these groups because they were known to be passionate about building and were seen to be good role models for the other boys they worked with.

Teaching pedagogy in the school was also addressed and practices that were believed to be good for meeting boys' needs were promoted. These included the use of clearly defined goals so that children knew what they were learning. Instructions were to be kept short and simple. Emphasis was made on the need to build strong relationships with boys so teachers were encouraged to show an interest in their lives outside of school and become familiar with the things they are passionate about. Again, these practices were believed to be good for all students but were seen to be particularly relevant to meeting the needs of the underachieving students – who were predominantly boys.

Another strategy targeted directly at boys was the formation of a boys' only class in the middle school (7-8 year olds). This was initiated by a teacher in the middle school who had noticed that with many boys social difficulties and negative attitudes to schooling seemed to become more prevalent at this age level. She was the same teacher who undertook the literature review and had compiled the resulting summary

of possible teaching strategies. Some of these were giving boys short instructions one at a time, using drama as a teaching tool, and careful selection of reading book choices that many boys prefer (e.g. non-fiction over fiction). She worked on developing teaching strategies that would be more effective with boys. It was hoped that what she learnt could be passed on to other teachers and become part of a wider pedagogical practice in the school.

Many strategies have been used in the school to try to produce more positive outcomes for boys in the school. Underlying these strategies have been two key principles. The first is that learning, particularly literacy, is a worthwhile endeavour and is therefore a 'cool' thing for boys to be involved in and aspire to. The second is that happy children learn better so school must be a fun place, with things happening that boys can look forward to.

It has been mentioned that the principal took a lead in the project. Whilst programmes and innovations in the school were discussed with and supported by teachers they often did not appear to be directly linked to the project or its funding. Prior to 2000 the school had been through traumatic times and had been undergoing a re-culturing process, so change and innovation were a welcome fact of life. Many of us failed to link what was happening in the school with the boys' project. Therefore, it was interesting for me to attend in 2004 a meeting where the principal was giving an overview of the boys' project to a group of educators. At the beginning of the presentation, my thoughts were that this was going to be short. However, as he spoke I began to make connections. Rather than coming up with a nifty 'This is how we fix the boys' programme, most of our resources had gone into a range of areas that sought to improve the experiences our children have at school and to redress deficiencies in their learning. Because identified problem areas were dominated by boys, they would be major beneficiaries of these changes.

The innovations funding project began in 2002 and whilst the Ministry of Education funding has now ended, many of the practices initiated continue today. However, evaluating the impact of the innovations has been difficult. The school has a transient student population so it is not practicable to compare the assessment data for cohorts over a period of time. Furthermore, it is recognised that changes to the culture of the

school will not instantly translate into improved assessment data. Where assessment data is able to show a change in achievement levels, it might not be possible to directly attribute these changes to the interventions for boys. The belief is held amongst the school management and teaching staff that the creation of a positive school culture for boys will influence their attitude to learning and that, for individual children, the benefits of this will be felt over a long period of time.

The aim of my research is to position the boys' project in the wider context of the debate around boys' education and to dig deep in an attempt to find out how the changes have affected the schooling experiences of boys within the school. As a result, this thesis is organised as follows; Chapter two is the literature review, which scopes the literature on boys' educational issues. I will attempt to identify the key strands of thought and then locate the school's initiatives within these strands. Chapter 3 outlines both the methodological base for the research, and an appropriate research method. After the research data has been collected, it will be evaluated in light of what the literature has revealed. The final chapter outlines conclusions and recommendations that I hope will be useful to the school. If a wider audience is able to glean information that can be applied to other settings, that will be an added bonus.

2. Literature Review

This study uses one primary school as a context to focus on boys' learning. My review of the literature revealed a range of at times contradictory perspectives on boys' education which, in turn, drew my attention to school culture and its possible influences on the learning of boys and girls.

This review firstly focuses on the range of theoretical perspectives on boys' education. It is noted that whilst within the current debate on boys' education there is some consensus that boys are causing concern, different views emerge as to whether there is a current underachievement 'crisis'. The broad concept of masculinity is then discussed. Two strands of thinking emerge and Skelton's (2001) 'personal' and the 'political' strands are used to categorise them. The personal strand is influenced by essentialist thinking and is where many boy specific interventions and programmes can be found. The political strand is influenced by social constructionist thinking and challenges much of what the personal strand has to offer. The political strand views boys' education issues in the broader context of gender equity and power relationships within society.

Theoretical perspectives point to aspects of schooling that can be identified with school culture, the second focal point of this review. School culture is influential in student learning and is therefore relevant to an investigation of boys' schooling experiences. By linking theoretical perspectives and school culture there emerge areas of focus which will drive the research into the school under study's attempts to make a positive difference for boys' learning.

It is worth noting that it is not my intention in this review to critique the numerous strategies that are often promoted for addressing boys' learning needs. These will only be dealt with if and when their relevance to this study is made apparent during the course of the research. Rather, I have restricted the review to the theoretical perspectives because they define the underlying assumptions and perceptions of the issue which will be the foundations upon which possible solutions are formed.

Boys' Education – Theoretical Perspectives

Boys' Underachievement?

Quantitative data have been used to consider how boys compare with girls in a number of areas. However, wide ranging and definitive conclusions are difficult to draw because defining and measuring achievement can be a contentious process. For example, the Education Review Office report "*The Achievement of Boys*" (1999) produced data to show that boys did not perform as well as girls in school certificate.

Only one quarter of boys' *School Certificate* results are at grades A or B compared with one third of girls' results. This reflects a similar pattern of under-achievement by boys at all levels of schooling. Such a skewed result for the education system is clearly unacceptable.

(Education Review Office, 1999)

But a Ministry of Youth Affairs paper "*Educational Achievement of Young Men*" (1999) drew a different conclusion regarding underachievement. A range of different examination results were used. Whilst areas of variance in specific achievement levels between the genders were noted the report concludes that "there is no conclusive evidence ...of either gender academically under-achieving" (1999).

The fallibility of using examination results to make all encompassing conclusions about relative gender achievement levels is a point made by Skelton (2001). She cites the work of Lynne Reed who argues that issues like data selection, the influence of ethnicity and social class, and the socially situated nature of assessment practices, have an impact on the ability of statistical 'evidence' to accurately determine that boys are academically underachieving. The problems of data selection may be evident in the two reports mentioned above. The "*Educational Achievement of Young Men*" (1999) report acknowledged a gender difference in School Certificate results but also used a range of data from other assessments to help draw its conclusion. Furthermore, its broad focus drew attention to a range of areas around boys' educational experiences, thus allowing it to analyze more than academic achievement

as a measure of success at school. For example, boys' over representation in statistics around problem behaviours is discussed in the report because it sometimes leads to them leaving or being removed from school. Also, boys' predominance in reported disruptive behaviour can adversely affect the learning of not only the individual boys concerned but also the other students (boys and girls) around them.

Despite the questions over the use of national assessment data to make generalizations regarding relative gender achievement levels, there does seem to be acceptance amongst numerous theorists that many boys' experiences of school are different from girls and that these differences cause concern (Biddulph, 1997; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Frank, Kehler, Lovell, & Davison, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Noble, Brown, & Murphy, 2001; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002; Skelton, 2001). For example, boys are more likely to be involved in violence and in boisterous or other antisocial behaviours that inhibit learning (Biddulph, 1997; Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Skelton, 2001). However, Alton-Lee and Praat (2006) point out that whilst differences in behaviour patterns between boys and girls are evident in literature, often the reasons for these differences are not discussed. They state that, "To explain these patterns, the role of gender in social well-being and behaviour needs to be theorised" (2006, section 11.5).

Masculinity

Central to any theories about boys' learning is the adoption of an understanding of masculinity. Law, Campbell and Schick (1999) define masculinity as "those ideals, traits and practices that shape what members of a social group construe as appropriately 'male'" (p.13). A 'social group' in this context refers to a group in society that comes together for a common purpose. A school is an example of a social group. 'Appropriately male' refers to the common understandings within a social group as to the expectations people have of male behaviour. However, the different expectations and experiences people have of masculinity makes it problematic to reach agreement as to what behaviours are 'appropriately male'. Clatterbaugh (1990) points out that because social reality (expected roles and behaviours) for men in modern society is in a state of flux the task of describing masculinity is a difficult one. He outlines three components of masculinity. The first is *masculine gender role*, which explains the set of behaviours, attitudes, and conditions that are generally found

in the men of an identifiable group. The second component is *stereotype of masculinity*, the general idea of what most people consider to be the masculine gender role. Finally there is *gender ideal*, which expresses what people think men should be. Clatterbaugh contends that perspectives of masculinity differ sharply in their descriptions of it, largely because they disagree on what to include in the masculine gender role. Sometimes they also disagree on gender ideal and he points out that “there is further disagreement regarding the existence of a single masculinity as opposed to many masculinities” (p.3). Divergent views of masculinity (and femininity) reflect differing ontological and epistemological positions (refer to Chapter 3, Methodology) are brought to the discussion and influence how it is seen and interpreted. Consequently, wide-ranging, and at times conflicting, theoretical perspectives of masculinity arise which impact on the ways the issues around boys’ education are viewed and dealt with.

Theorists use a range of ways to conceptualise the different views of masculinity but whilst they use different terms their understandings indicate broadly similar categories (Skelton, 2001). Clatterbaugh (1990) describes six main approaches; conservative, men’s rights, spiritual, pro-feminist, socialist, and group-specific. However, he points out that not all writings can neatly be slotted into one or other of the categories. He states that:

...most of the six perspectives posit one underlying cause or pattern that shapes masculinity and male reality more than any other. Thus, one perspective may agree with another regarding the general list of causes of masculinity but disagree about which ones are most significant... Many of the disagreements among our six perspectives are actually differences over the best explanation of masculinity.

(Clatterbaugh, 1990, p.5)

Skelton (2001) has taken Clatterbaugh’s six main approaches and loosely categorised them as ‘personal’ and ‘political’ constructions of masculinity. The ‘personal’ strand accepts the gendered nature of behaviour and expects schools to do the same. Schools’ failure to change and adapt to boys’ different educational needs is believed to be a contributing factor in creating the perceived gender gap. On the other hand the

'political' strand challenges the gendered nature of behaviour. The political strand promotes an agenda for change in what children learn as 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviours. In other words, by modifying the masculine behaviours that are deemed to be barriers to learning, it is believed that learning outcomes for boys and girls can be improved.

It is worth noting here that in much of the theorising coming from the political strand, masculinity is a major area of focus, particularly the way it is seen to be constructed. Connell's (Connell, 1989; 1994) work is seminal in this area and has led to a 'gender relations' approach which takes a critical look at how masculinity is lived out. It focuses on the many ways masculinity impacts in on boys' participation at school and on how different ideas of masculinity and femininity affect students' expectations and relationships.

Although the extremes of the theoretical strands appear somewhat contradictory they might best be viewed as extremes of a continuum. Some positions taken utilise and blend aspects of both perspectives. A personal strand argument will accept gendered behaviour as inevitable but might allow for the impact of socialisation influences in explaining this difference. Whilst arguments from the political strand will challenge the role of power relationships in creating gendered behaviour, some views from within the strand might still acknowledge the existence of certain innate gender differences (Skelton, 2001). Baker (2006b) suggests that educators probably unconsciously blend both approaches. Therefore, to investigate and evaluate approaches to improving learning outcomes for boys, my study should use an understanding of both strands.

Nature versus Nurture Debate

It is appropriate to pause here and discuss how the nature versus nurture debate might influence viewpoints on masculinity. Within the personal strand the acceptance of the fact that boys and girls behave differently is often grounded in an essentialist belief that these differences are, to varying degrees, innate (Biddulph, 1997; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Noble, 2000; Pollack, 1998; Sommers, 2000). From the 'nature' viewpoint Sommers (2000) is forthright when she states:

A growing body of empirical data that is rarely if ever mentioned in the gender-equity training seminars strongly supports the experience of parents and the wisdom of ages: that many basic male-female differences are innate, hardwired, and not the result of conditioning. In the past few years, there have been important developments in neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, genetics, and neuroendocrinology that all but refute the social constructionist thesis and point to certain inborn gender differences.

(Sommers, 2000, p.86-87)

An opposing view is that gendered behaviour, rather than being the result of innate differences, is socially constructed (Connell, 1994; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Hines, 2001; Mac an Ghail, 1999; Martino & Berrill, 2003). Connell (1994) states that:

Masculinity understood as a configuration of practice in everyday life, is substantially a social construction. Masculinity refers to male bodies (sometimes symbolically and indirectly) but is not determined by male biology. Masculinities vary greatly between different cultures, between different periods of history, and between different social locations in the same culture.

(Connell, 1994, p.9)

Sommers (2000) determinedly argues against social constructionism, describing it as a “crude view” (p.88). She also suggests that research showing ‘sex differences’ is unwelcome in some quarters because, historically, perceived innate differences have been used against women. She concludes, however, that “the corrective to that shameful history is not more bad science and rancorous philosophy; it is good science and clear thinking about the rights of all individuals, however they may differ” (p.92).

Whilst there is support for the view that technological advances in biological research tools (MRIs, PET scans, Spect scans) have given more credence to nature based theory (Gurian & Stevens, 2005), care must be taken in accepting the findings of a limited range of studies. For example, Kimura (1992) researched the functioning of the brain and drew the following conclusion:

Women and men differ not only in physical attributes and reproductive function but also in the way in which they solve intellectual problems. It has been fashionable to insist that these differences are minimal, the consequence of variations in experience during development. The bulk of the evidence suggests, however, that the effects of sex hormones on brain organization occur so early in life that from the start the environment is acting on differently wired brains in boys and girls.

(Kimura, 1992, p.81)

But Hines (2001) challenges these conclusions. She conducted similar research to Kimura and reached startlingly different conclusions. She points out that ultimately, “a scientist's preconceptions, or stereotypes, can influence his or her conclusions, both regarding individual data or the big picture that findings in a field suggest” (p.553). Her main point regarding the importance of innate influences on behaviour is that, “We determine the importance of hormones (and/or genetics) by manipulating other factors. Thus, regardless of whether hormones (and/or genetics) eventually prove to play a role in human cognition, we decide the extent to which they control our destiny” (Hines, 2001, p.554).

The nature versus nurture debate is likely to continue. Research using new technology is leading to interesting discoveries in the area of cognitive differences in brain functioning and this will have implications for educators in terms of understanding how children learn. However, regarding gendered behaviour, biology is but one element in a broader picture (Skelton, 2001). This leads me to believe that the important difference between the personal and political strands is not nature versus nurture, but the different positions taken regarding the acceptance of gendered behaviours as being inevitable. A personal strand approach to the school in my study is likely to accommodate gendered behaviours, irrespective of their cause, and promote the development of educational strategies that adapt the school environment to accommodate these differences. A political strand approach, on the other hand, may be resistant to these strategies, in part because they could be seen to reinforce differences. The school will be viewed as a socialising force with the potential to support and even initiate change in gendered behaviour.

The debate about boys' learning hinges on the different theoretical positions taken so it is necessary to clearly understand the views they represent. In the following sections I will critically examine the personal and political strands. I will briefly describe the dominant perspectives within each before critiquing them as a general theoretical strand.

Personal Strand Perspective

Within the personal strand it is accepted that males and females behave differently and the reasons behind these differences tend not to be challenged. Behavioural differences have produced different expectations and there is an acceptance that, historically, this has disadvantaged women (Baker, 2006b; Pollack, 1998; Sommers, 2000). However, in recent times arguments have been advanced suggesting that within the education system boys are now disadvantaged (Baker, 2006b; Biddulph, 1997; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Noble, 2000; Pollack, 1998). In recent times policies and programmes have emerged to redress boys' underachievement, e.g. single sex classes, role model and mentoring programmes, 'boy friendly' subject matter, and a later school starting age for boys. Evidence that these programmes are making a difference has yet to emerge. Similar strategies/approaches/programmes have been used in the school under investigation so it is likely that they will come under review in the interviews with participants, particularly the teaching staff and the boys within the programmes.

Clatterbaugh's conservative, men's rights and spiritual perspectives fit into the personal strand. The conservative perspective values traditional roles where the 'natural order' positions men as protectors and providers for the family. The conservatives' position on boys' underachievement acknowledges the good job schools have done in tackling girls' underperformance in those areas of the curriculum where they were failing (Skelton, 2001). However, they argue the changes introduced to bring this about to have proved detrimental to boys because there has been a move away from practices that have worked for them. The conservative answer is that schools counter this by introducing, or in many cases reintroducing, programmes which focus exclusively on boys e.g. boy specific language programmes, increased physical activity for boys, streaming, competitive tests, and strict discipline

models. Again, evidence that these approaches are making a difference has yet to emerge and will be an area of focus should they become apparent in the school I am studying.

The men's rights perspective has been "most evident in the policies towards tackling boys' underachievement adopted by schools" (Skelton, 2001, p.48). Proponents also acknowledge that schools have done a good job for girls but believe that boys have been left behind. However, rather than addressing the problem in isolation they believe it should be addressed within a gender equity framework. Programmes should promote equal gender relationships between girls and boys. Although the men's rights position appears to share the gender equity viewpoint with feminists, there is a critical difference in their respective analyses of current gender roles. Therefore, their perceptions of boys' underachievement are diametrically opposed. Skelton (2001) states that, "Whilst feminists see schools as masculinizing agencies, the men's rights perspective is that schools are failing boys because they are both feminized and feminizing" (p.48). Pollack typifies this view when he makes this assertion about American schools:

Our schools, in general, are not sufficiently hospitable environments for boys and are not doing what they could to address boys' unique social, academic, and emotional needs. Today's typical coeducational schools have teachers and administrators who, though they don't intend it, are often not particularly empathetic to boys; they use curricula, classroom materials, and teaching methods that do not respond to how boys learn; and many of these schools are hardly places most of our boys long to spend time. Put simply, I believe most of our schools are failing our boys.

(Pollack, 1998, p.231)

It should be noted that Pollack's assertion is an example of how conclusions are drawn from the use of national assessment statistics. His statement seems to regard boys as one large group where the individuals have the same set of 'social, academic and emotional needs' and seems to ignore the diversity that exists in many boys'

experiences of masculinity (Connell, 1989; Frank et al., 2003; Jackson, 1998). Yet many boys in the United States and in New Zealand are not failing. Drawing such broad conclusions from data showing a group of children apparently underachieving can be misleading because other important factors like race, cultural background, and socio-economic status tend to be ignored (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Skelton, 2001).

Strategies put forward by the men's right to counter the perceived crisis of feminised schools 'failing' boys involve identifying the particular ways boys learn and changing teaching pedagogies to better accommodate them. As in the conservative approach, curriculum materials, school organisation and programming are interrogated with a focus on boys' interests. What is not evident in the suggested approaches is the degree to which they are supported by evidential research. In fact, it should be noted that Alton-Lee (2006) has highlighted international research that suggests there is no significant impact when teachers use learning styles approaches. Furthermore, she refers to New Zealand Education case study research showing that Maori and Pacific Island learners have been disadvantaged by the limited expectations put on them because of assumptions made about preferred learning styles. A learning styles approach to boys' education could face the same pitfalls.

Children operate within existing assumptions of masculinity and femininity which may affect their learning. Whilst feminists have articulated the restrictive and oppressive influence of traditional gender stereotypes on girls, men's rights theorists believe that masculine stereotypes have also been harmful to men. Men, they argue, have been put in a straightjacket that many don't fit. According to Skelton's (2001) synopsis of the men's rights view, traditional stereotypes present restrictive versions of masculinity and "push boys towards aggressive, competitive behaviours in interpersonal relationships, while simultaneously promoting laissez-faire approaches to school and academic work" (p.48). The 'boy code' or 'anti-swot culture' are inhibiting forces emerging from this (Connell, 1989; Lillico, 2000; Noble, 2000; Pollack, 1998). Therefore, the favoured approach is the promotion of a broader range of acceptable masculinities that allow boys to be secure and comfortable with themselves as males without feeling the need to conform to these restrictive stereotypes. Role modelling of these masculinities is seen as a tool to help achieve this whilst other strategies to address boys' underachievement include mentoring

programmes, implementing 'boy friendly' pedagogical practices, target seating, single sex classes, and praise and reward systems. What are not clearly articulated in the promotion of alternative masculinities are the forms these alternatives should take and the evidence showing that their promotion will make a difference to educational outcomes.

The spiritual perspective encompasses the mythopoetic men's movement where there is "an emphasis on 'elder honouring', 'reclaiming' fathers, and 'unleashing the wild man within'" (*Wikipedia*, n.d). Because it is not a politically active movement it has not been particularly evident in tackling the issue of boys' underachievement. However, 'spiritual' arguments can be found within conservative and men's rights positions. A belief exists that there is an innate 'spiritual' inner nature of maleness that needs nurturing but which schools tend to restrict or suppress, thus causing, amongst some boys, a degree of disaffection with schooling. The subsequent assertion follows that this disaffection is the root cause of underachievement. An underlying assumption appears to be that all boys share an innate universal 'inner maleness'. This assumption is challenged by those promoting the acceptance of a range of masculinities (Connell, 1994; Ferguson, 2004; Mac an Ghail, 1999). Solutions to the spiritual arguments tend to be interventions or programmes which acknowledge behavioural differences and seek to reconnect boys to a positive sense of 'maleness' which will more successfully engage them in the educational process. Biddulph (1997) promotes mentoring as a vehicle to help initiate boys into manhood because boys need to identify with men in order to learn how to be a male. Whilst role modelling and mentoring programmes reflect beliefs stemming from the spiritual perspective, these solutions are criticised for their potential to reinforce the problem behaviours that political theorists see to be the cause of the gender equity problem.

A feature of the approaches within the personal strand is that theorists clearly define where they see the 'problem' with boys lying. They then provide specific strategies to remedy these perceived problems. The books and seminars of populist writers (Biddulph, 1997; Farrell, 2001; Grant, Grant, Cowan, & Cowan, 2001; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Pollack, 1998) at times take the form of 'how to' manuals. Within the field of educational research, the personal strand also provides a range of strategies to help schools deal with boys' underachievement (Baker, 2006b; Bleach, 2000; Lillico,

2000; Noble, 2000). Consequently, educators who are concerned about the under-achievement of boys in their schools might be drawn to personal strand approaches. They could feel empowered by the specific, practicable interventions that suggest a measurable difference at a local level could be made. Furthermore, supporting arguments suggesting that strategies aimed at lifting boys' performance will also be of benefit to girls (Biddulph, 1997; Noble et al., 2001) give these strategies added appeal.

However, solutions from the personal strand do not go unchallenged. What follows is a summation of alternative arguments challenging not only the wisdom of using these strategies, but also the theoretical position underlying the assumptions on which they are based.

Rather than accepting gendered behaviour as an inevitable norm to which schools must adapt, the political strand challenges the privileged role which dominant forms of masculinity are perceived to have and criticises personal strand theories for failing to do this (Connell, 1994; Epstein et al., 1998; Frank et al., 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino & Berrill, 2003). Mahony (1998) suggests that schools have a role to play in transforming society. He questions the motivation and rationale behind much of the discussion around boys' underachievement and argues that:

...it is not that the education of boys is unimportant but that the assumptions and purposes underpinning the current obsession with their academic performance are misconceived. As a consequence, key questions concerning the role of schools in the social construction of masculinities are omitted...

(Mahony, 1998, p.37)

Another recurrent criticism with 'personal' theories is that they tend to take dominant perceptions of masculinity and treat them as the norm for all boys (Connell, 1994; Epstein et al., 1998; Frank et al., 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Jackson, 1998). They fail to recognise and explore the roles that culture and social class play in the construction of a range of masculinities and consequently there is an "almost universal tendency to speak of 'boys' as an homogeneous, undifferentiated mass"

(Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p.224). Jackson (1998) attacks these approaches as gender absolutism, suggesting that they ignore a range and variety of shifting and contradictory forms of masculinity. He maintains that within western societies a patriarchal system operates which should be challenged, and that gender absolutism “closes down the possibilities of theorizing and practicing alternative masculinities that are opposed to patriarchy” (p.84).

Solutions to boys’ underachievement that encourage schools to adapt to and accommodate gendered behaviour are seen by ‘political’ theorists to be treating the symptoms rather than the cause of the problem. In fact, Epstein et al. (2001) suggest that not only do these solutions fail to challenge dominant versions of masculinity but that some tend to embed problems associated with that masculinity. Furthermore, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) challenge the acceptance by ‘personal’ theories of the competitive and aggressive elements of masculinity claiming that “the exaltation of dominant masculinity heightens the fear of failure and hostile rejection of alternatives, increasing misogynistic, homophobic and self-destructive behaviours” (p.51). Therefore, solutions like reintroducing competitive test structures, promoting aggressive physical activity, and introducing ‘boy friendly’ subject matter based on these attributes are seen to be counter productive because they reinforce the very behaviours and characteristics that are seen to be the problem (Epstein et al., 1998). Role modelling and mentoring programmes can potentially have the same effect when based on versions of masculinity that are perceived to be the root cause of social issues like boys’ perceived underachievement. Masculinised behaviour is perceived to be the problem, not the solution.

Solutions targeting the perceived unique needs of boys are criticised by ‘political’ theorists for doing more than run the risk of reinforcing problematic gendered behaviours. Skelton (2001) points out that because they are based on a ‘competing victims’ discourse they run the risk of marginalising not only girls, but also boys that do not fit the stereotype that the dominant form of masculinity presents. Similar efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to make schools more ‘girl friendly’ were deemed to be necessary because girls were seen to be victims of a schooling system that favoured boys. Therefore, the core belief underlying this criticism is the rejection of personal strand notions suggesting boys have become the new victims within the education

system. Males are seen to still be in a privileged position in society, therefore the redistribution of resources away from girls in order to give them to boys is seen as unfair (Epstein et al., 1998). Hey, Leonard, Daniels, & Smith (1998) go so far as to suggest that because boys receive the majority of special needs resources within schools that simplistic arguments for more resources to be spent on all boys should be resisted. In light of the fact that there was concern within the school under study at the predominance of boys in special needs programmes like reading recovery, the allocation of resources between boys and girls will be a point worthy of investigation.

Although there exists within the political strand a degree of acceptance that positive gains might well be made by adopting some of the strategies suggested by ‘personal’ theorists (Skelton, 2001), the authentic answer to treating the root cause of issues like boys’ underachievement is perceived to lie in addressing broader social issues of power relationships. Perspectives within the political strand address these issues.

Political Strand Perspective

The perspectives within the political strand view gendered behaviour largely as a social construction that can be subject to challenge and modification. Answers to questions around boys’ achievement are sought through an examination of the broad social interactions and power relationships taking place in society. Clatterbaugh’s pro-feminist, socialist and group specific perspectives fall into the political strand. It is fair to say that in the debate around boys’ educational achievement feminist views provide by far the loudest voice from the political strand. Therefore, the socialist and group specific perspectives will be dealt with briefly here, although elements attributable to them will appear in the discussion around the pro-feminist position.

Within the socialist perspective masculinity is seen as a social reality that is grounded in economically determined class structures. Under patriarchal capitalism masculinity is determined by who does what work and is not the same from class to class, or from race to race. Clatterbaugh (1990) suggests that “Those who espouse both the socialist and the feminist perspectives are pursuing strategies for ending men’s control over women’s labour” (p.11). Traditionally schools have been tools to maintain the status quo in gender power relations through the provision of a gendered curriculum. However, since the gains made by the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s

male domination has been challenged and girls have started to do better in areas traditionally dominated by boys. Therefore, the emergence in the 1990s of concerns about boys' underachievement has been viewed with suspicion and is seen as an attempt to maintain the male dominated power relationships of a patriarchal society. Within the context of my research, a socialist view might examine whether the skills and knowledge which lead to positions of power in society are promoted equitably with boys and girls.

Theoretical standpoints within the personal perspective have been criticised for presumptions of a universal, or homogenous, masculinity. The group specific perspective addresses this criticism by pointing to “new explanations of masculinity, to different evaluations of it, and to alternative agendas for change” (Clatterbaugh, 1990, p.12). It covers the writings of minority masculine groupings like gay and black activists. Their goal has been to reduce homophobia and racism, and to encourage the acceptance of alternative versions of masculinity. Concerns about boys' underachievement are regarded as narrow and as providing a vehicle for protecting the privilege of the dominant group. The possibility might exist in the school under study that the presentation of a homogenised version of masculinity could marginalise some boys. It will therefore be important to be alert to any data that confirms or rejects this notion.

Within the pro-feminist perspective masculinity is seen as being the performance of a learnt set of gender relations that are socially and culturally constructed and that schools are a part of the gender construction process (Connell, 1994; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). It is “created through male privilege and its corresponding oppression of women” (Clatterbaugh, 1990, p.10). Conventional notions of masculinity like aggressiveness, toughness and competitiveness are repudiated. Therefore, masculinity is viewed as a social problem which can only be solved through changing society's perceptions of what it is and should be. As with the socialist perspective, pro-feminists view with suspicion concerns about boys' underachievement because they are seen as an attempt to maintain male privilege and domination.

'Feminist' is a term used by people with wide ranging, and at times quite conflicting, views to describe their stance on gender relations. The prevalence of feminist theory

within the political strand necessitates, therefore, an explanation as to what is meant by 'feminist' within this context. Sommers (1994) describes two types of feminism. 'Equity feminism', she suggests, is the traditional, classically liberal movement initiated more than 150 years ago that sought equality and equal rights for women. She states that "it had a specific agenda demanding for women the same rights before the law that men enjoyed" (p.22). Equity feminists do not challenge underlying power relationships and would be able to adopt a perspective on boys' achievement that sits within the personal strand (e.g. Lashlie, 2005; Sommers, 1994). 'Gender feminism', on the other hand, describes a more recent women's movement viewing society as a patriarchy where the male gender dominates power and keeps women in a submissive position. All of society's institutions, schools included, are believed to perpetuate male dominance. Gender feminist theories, as described in the pro-feminist perspective above, sit firmly in the political strand (Connell, 1994; Epstein et al., 1998; Ferguson, 2004; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Within the context of this research, unless otherwise stated, the terms 'feminist' and 'feminism' will assume the 'gender feminist' meaning.

Political theories perceive masculinity to be a major problem in gender relationship issues (M. Cohen, 1998; Ferguson, 2004; Mahony, 1998; Martino & Berrill, 2003). Patriarchy is often identified as the villain and refers to the process of promoting and sustaining as normal practice the social structures which are seen to favour all men. However, patriarchy tends to not only treat men as a homogenous group but also to treat male power as monolithic (Law et al., 1999). Hegemony provides a useful alternative to the idea of patriarchy. It recognises different forms of masculinity but "allows for accounts of gender that highlight the way that one form of masculinity rather than others becomes culturally dominant" (Ferguson, 2004, p.56). Hegemonic masculinity becomes culturally dominant to the point where it not only "legitimizes men's dominance over women" (Kraak, 1999, p.154), but where it can also be repressive and damaging to many men and boys (Keddie, 2006). Therefore, when masculinity is perceived within the political strand to be the problem it is the hegemonic version of masculinity prevalent within western society that is coming under fire. In the school under study it will be important to investigate the forms of masculinity that operate and ascertain whether there are assumptions made about what masculinity 'should' look like. In doing so, a hegemonic masculinity within the

school culture might emerge and the effect this could have on all learners might be worth evaluating.

Understanding masculinity in the school could be assisted by appreciating what the dominant forms of masculinity within New Zealand look like. Ferguson (2004) suggests that sport operates as a mechanism for gender replication. He talks of the dominance of rugby in hegemonic masculinity in New Zealand and suggests that it is seen as a macho, confrontational sport. Law et al. (1999) also discuss sport as a key practice in the New Zealand masculine tradition and suggest that ingenuity, drink and soldiering have also played a role. They refer to the mythology of the “Kiwi Bloke” whose key characteristics include robust physique, heterosexuality and fatherhood, whilst key aspects of personality are “repression of feelings, stoicism, laconic utterance, distrust of education and inexpressiveness” (Jensen, K. cited Law et al., 1999, p.21). They refer to examples of these masculine images in New Zealand media (books, movies, television and advertising) and suggest that they present “a contradictory blend of heroes who were simple men at heart, and simple men at heart traumatized by the need to be heroes” (p.21). If these characteristics are indeed indicative of a hegemonic masculinity within New Zealand they might well influence gender construction and the experiences of boys within the school.

Given that political theorists see hegemonic masculinity as holding a traditional position of power and dominance over women it is easy to understand that the perspective they bring to the debate about boys’ underachievement is somewhat different to personal strand theorists. That boys’ underachievement has become such a publicly debated issue is due to the publicity given to the work of theorists from the personal strand. They have reacted to statistical data showing differences in attainment levels between boys and girls and have come up with solutions to the perceived problem. Political theorists’ have a somewhat different view of the ‘gender gap’. Hay (1998) points to the contradictory nature of the research on the achievement of boys and girls and there has been a reticence amongst political theorists to acknowledge that boys’ achievement is a problem, or at least that underachievement at school is something new. Skelton (2001) and Cohen (1998) point to historical research showing that in certain subject areas and at certain stages of the schooling process, boys have always underachieved compared to girls. They

also suggest that this has not disadvantaged boys in the end because historically males have gone on to occupy positions of power in society. Therefore, whilst differences in the ways boys and girls experience schooling might be accepted there is scepticism and suspicion as to why boys' underachievement has become such an issue.

According to Cohen (1998), "The question that needs to be asked, then, is not 'Why are boys now underachieving?', but rather that of why boys' underachievement has now become an object of concern" (p. 30).

The answer to this question might be found in the nature of the educational landscape schools have found themselves in since the 1980s. The international trends of the 1970 and 1980s away from justice and inequality, towards school effectiveness, standards and performance has influenced opinions within schools about what should be taught and what really matters and, as such, has made boys' 'failure' more visible (Jackson, 1998; Reynolds, 1994). The emphasis on the use of data to show improvements in learning favours a focus on a narrow range of learning areas where achievement data is relatively easy to obtain. Mahony (1998) argues that it has led to narrow definitions of academic achievement. He states that "The blinkered preoccupation with achievement, defined narrowly as subject knowledge, literacy and numeracy has been the subject of some criticism both within the United Kingdom and elsewhere" (p.44). Consequently this new emphasis has led schools away from social justice and inequality (Jackson, 1998). It has made boys' failure more visible and masked the power inequalities between boys and girls.

The questioning of the meaning of school achievement and the desire to see social justice back on the school agenda reveal a key point of difference in the platform of the political strand – the perceived purpose of schooling. In gender relationship issues, masculinity is viewed by political theorists as the problem and schools are seen to be complicit in maintaining the status quo of hegemonic masculinity within a capitalist social structure. Connell (1989) argues that schools are masculinity-making devices and that rather than merely reflecting forms of masculinity, they play a role in constructing them. He states that, "They are agents in the matter, constructing particular forms of gender and negotiating relations between them" (p.292). Within the political strand there is a political agenda. Rather than merely serving the economic interests of patriarchal capitalism by producing workers for the workforce,

this strand is likely to advocate that schools should become vehicles that help bring about social change. This agenda is for the development of equitable gender relations in society as a whole. The role of schooling in promoting this is seen as a legitimate educational outcome. Therefore, in the school under study a political strand investigation might favour an examination of the nature of the relationships between boys and girls within the school. Questions might be asked regarding the expectations held for each gender and the ways resources are allocated to them.

Political theorists take a 'macro' view on gender issues. There is a reluctance to take boys' underachievement statistics at face value and devise strategies to solve a perceived problem. In fact, political strand theorising about 'boys' underachievement' tends to manifest itself as a critique of the way the 'problem' has been highlighted and addressed by personal strand theorists. Answers will be found through challenges to the narrow understandings of academic achievement demanded by a patriarchal capitalist system, and through addressing of the way masculinity is constructed within schools. Rather than providing the specific, prescriptive strategies characteristic of the personal strand approaches, political strand solutions to gender inequity in schooling tend towards broad statements around a desired restructuring of gender relations. For example, Jackson (1998) talks of the need to develop a new vision of masculinity whilst other theorists promote the need for 'gender education' (Connell, 1989; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1999). Rowan et al. (2002) talk of the need for "educationally based programmes that work to contest narrow and limiting understandings of what it is to be a boy..." (p.5). Keddie (2006) also highlights the need for teachers to draw on a sound research based framework of gender knowledge.

Hence, political approaches steer away from prescriptive, boy specific approaches and offer little in the way of practical advice to schools (Skelton, 2001). Epstein et al. (1998) go so far as to point out that whilst some feminist writers do suggest specific interventions to improve learning for boys and girls, they believe this temptation should be resisted. They suggest that

...the issues are multi-faceted, the research complex, and it would be premature to suggest firm directions for others to follow, not least

because the complexity and diversity of what is presented here indicates that much of the response needs to be site specific, and based on a thorough, sensitive collection and analysis of local data.

(Epstein et al., 1998, p.14)

My research is site-specific and the analysis of local data might lead to conclusions relevant to the school in question. It may also provide a basis for research in other schools into the relationship between gender and educational outcomes.

Skelton (2001), who also presents a feminist viewpoint, offers a different perspective on the provision of practical advice. She includes her own work in a criticism of the fact that research on masculinities has rarely offered this to schools and teachers. She states that:

While the literature on ‘masculinities and schooling’ has the hallmark of rigorously conducted research which has provided rich insights into the school lives of boys, it has let down teachers and schools by failing to offer any practical advice for school policies or classroom strategies.

(Skelton, 2001, p.5)

Skelton compares this to the ‘boys’ underachievement’ literature which she points out is awash with practical ideas and recommendations for schools. However, she shares the previously discussed reservations about boy specific approaches and suggests a move away from projects for boys to a discussion on gender equity programmes. This is not to say, she is quick to point out, that boys and girls should be treated as the same. Rather, it is the implementation of initiatives that “encourage children to think about their own position – to get them to question some of the more taken-for-granted aspects of what they see, hear, read, think, say and act out” (Skelton, 2001, p.173). It will be relevant to my study, therefore, to investigate within the school under study what the taken-for-granted aspects of gender relations are and whether they are challenged or reinforced through the programmes that are implemented.

A feminist investigation of boys' learning within a school should examine masculinity and the ways power relationships between the genders are addressed. Schools are part of a broader social process, so an examination of masculinity construction will extend beyond the school gates (Connell, 1989; Martino, 1999; Nayak, 2003). Nayak (2003) points out that gender identities cannot be comprehended within the microcosm of the school institution alone. He states that, "An in-depth and multi-textured analysis of masculinities is now better served by also accounting for young men's multiple relationships to the family, locality, peers and changing labour market in global times" (p.148). Therefore, it is highly likely that an investigation of the impact of a school's culture on the learning of its boys will incorporate an examination of masculinity within the school, including the community and society in which it is situated. This study is no exception.

The chief protagonists in criticisms of the 'political' approaches come from the 'personal' camp. Sommers (1994) attacks the 'gender feminist' movement and challenges the view that western society is patriarchal or that male hegemony perpetuates male dominance. In contrast to Cohen's (1998) findings putting an historical perspective on boys' underachievement, Sommers (2000) interprets recent achievement statistics as showing that increasing numbers of boys are in fact being left behind increasing numbers of girls. This, she suggests, presents clear evidence that a patriarchy in which males are in control must not exist. She rejects behaviouralism and decries the fact that "normal youthful male exuberance is becoming unacceptable in more and more schools" (p.94). In Sommer's view, "Being a boy is not a condition or defect in need of a cure" (p.93), and approaches that seek to monitor and police boys' stereotypical masculine behaviour are neither needed, nor desirable.

Within New Zealand there has been criticism of the perceived failure to acknowledge the recent emergence of the gender gap. Baker (2006a) highlights a range of national New Zealand assessment statistics that, he suggests, illustrate a significant gender gap in New Zealand (the concerns about using data in this way have been discussed). A smaller gap favouring girls in many secondary subjects was evident in the 1980s. For the years 1990 until 1992 he suggests that direct gender comparisons are not possible because NZQA has no record of subject passes by gender. When these were again

available in 1993 the gap in favour of girls had grown. Baker attributes this increased gap to pedagogical changes in subject matter and teaching that favour girls. He goes on to state that “New Zealand’s institutional response to the gap has been one of denial, delay and trivialisation”(Baker, 2006a). Baker posits himself as an essentialist and points the finger for this ‘apathetic response’ at the Ministry of Education which, he suggests, is dominated by behaviourist thinking. Whilst he applauds the many gender-neutral initiatives that will benefit all, but maybe boys more than girls, he believes that this does not go far enough. He claims that “The Ministry is too behaviourist to show interest in gender-specific responses to boys’ education” (Baker, 2006b).

Much of the political strand response to boys’ underachievement has been reaction and criticism of the personal strand and it is fair to say that in terms of offering an analytical criticism the personal strand has not been so forthcoming in returning the favour. The absence within the political strand of a range of viable intervention strategies might explain this in part. Whilst ideas and theories abound there is little in terms of concrete strategies which might be seen as a threat to the personal strand. Therefore, the main response has been to point the finger in terms of a failure to acknowledge the perceived problem and then to provide viable solutions.

Where to Next?

The examination of the theoretical perspectives around boys’ learning has highlighted the broad and complex nature of the current debate. However, my research is small scale and focuses on the efforts one school has made in addressing the perceived underachievement of its boys. Therefore, I need to focus on the aspects of the issue that can be addressed at the local, school level. School culture is an aspect of schooling that might influence the experiences of both individuals and groups of children. Because it might be influential in the ways boys and girls experience schooling and learning it is a worthy area of focus in my research.

School Culture

Definitions of school culture commonly refer to the patterns of meaning that guide behaviour, group norms and the general climate that makes each school unique. Key elements are language, values, beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies. However, whilst 'school culture' is a popular and frequently used term, Prosser (1999) suggests that it is "enigmatic and much abused" (p.1) and that it would be dangerous to assume implicit agreement amongst research participants regarding its parameters of meaning and application. Therefore, an overview of the literature on school culture will be helpful.

Culture is used to describe actions and behaviours of groups of people that come together for a purpose, rather than of individuals. Furthermore, Maehr & Fyans (1990) suggest that for culture to grow, the individuals within a group must function interdependently over a period of time. They go on to state that:

When such social interactions exist, the group will arrive at ways of organizing itself, regularizing the behaviour of its members, coordinating their functions, minimizing conflicts, etc. In sum, groups tend to work out ways of getting along among themselves. They arrive at certain shared understandings regarding how, when, and where activities are to occur. Above all, they specify the meaning, the value, and the purpose of these activities. In particular, thoughts and perceptions about what is worth striving for are a critical feature of any culture.

(Maehr & Fyans, 1990, p.5)

Groups exist and develop their own culture at different levels of society. A large social group could be a society or nation but beneath this umbrella smaller groups and organizations exist. Group members have a common purpose and will develop ways of understanding and interacting with one another. They will have an organizational structure and will therefore develop their own organizational culture. Peterson emphatically states that, "every organization has a culture," (2002, p.10). Schools are an example of organisations that develop individual organisational cultures.

Because schools are organizations founded on the inter-relationships of the individuals within them, they develop and sustain cultural practices – ‘how we do thing around here’ – which will influence the ways individuals view their world. This culture helps stakeholders to make sense of their organizational world by creating shared understandings and meanings (Peterson, 2002; Stoll, 1998; Stolp, 1996; Tze-kin Mak, 1995). Culture is able to define reality by acting as a “screen or lens through which the world is viewed” (Stoll, 1998, p.9). Peterson (2002) links it to individual thought and action when he states that, “a school culture influences the ways people think, feel, and act” (p.10). Given Peterson’s contention, it is possible that school culture, that is, the ‘way things get done around here’, will have an impact on boys’ learning. It is a potential element to focus on in this research.

But school culture can be viewed from different angles and through different lenses. Prosser (1999) has identified four views of culture which he claims are frequently used but rarely stated. Wider culture refers to the vast array of socio-cultural systems within society and emphasises the relationship between the cultural practices within a nation and the cultures within its schools. Generic culture, when applied to schools, refers to the cultural practices that reflect the similarities between different types of schools; for example, private, secondary and primary schools. Wider and generic cultures are external influences on individual schools which, in turn, develop their unique responses to them. Perceived culture represents the internal and external views that, for better or worse, are formed of a school. These perceptions are important because they form an external connectedness which can influence the attitudes and understandings people bring to the school. Individual schools can work on shaping and cultivating their perceived culture. However, Prosser’s fourth view, unique culture, is most relevant to my research because it identifies the culture of individual schools.

Unique culture comes about because schools possess a degree of freedom of choice and can interpret and reinterpret the wider and generic cultures that influence them (Prosser, 1999). Stoll (1998) identifies typologies of different school cultures and suggests that each school develops its own social milieu. It has a unique and changing combination of people involved who, in their own way, come to understand

their school's rules, customs, rituals and practices. Therefore, from each particular school setting a unique culture emerges, but, as different people come and go, that culture is subject to change. It is this unique culture that leaders of individual schools can work to shape and cultivate and could be a particularly useful field of focus for an improvement of boys' experience of school.

Not only can school culture can be viewed from different angles and through different lenses but within a school it must be recognised that different sub-cultures exist. Owens discusses multiple cultures within an organisation and states that "...we must be aware that subunits of the organisation have cultures of their own which possess distinctive attributes" (Owens, 1991, p.176). Wherever people are brought together within the organisation, an impetus to develop a subculture within that specific setting will develop. The settings could be the staff room, the playground, the administration area, individual classrooms, and departments within the school. Furthermore, Stoll (1998) points out that school culture is influenced by the students and their social class background and that this student culture will influence the school culture. Because the cultural background of the students could be quite different to the cultural background of the staff, varying, and possibly conflicting, subcultures could arise. Within the context of boys' education this could manifest itself through the existence, from the playground to the staff room, of different perceptions of masculinity and the ways boys should behave. Ultimately the prevalent school culture will be a culmination of many subcultures. An investigation into the way school culture influences boys' educational experiences should involve an examination of possible subcultures and recognise the perceptions, views and ideals that different stakeholders contribute to the formation of the school culture.

School culture is instrumental in transmitting values and meanings to members of the school community. But what does it actually look like? In a study of school culture and its relationship to boys' learning, what aspects of school life need to be investigated? Literature suggests that culture manifests itself through the norms, values, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies of schools (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Peterson, 2002; Stoll, 1998; Stolp, 1996). These establish the dominant attitudes and ways of interacting. Importantly, they convey messages defining successful teaching and

learning, and giving value to the importance of different learning outcomes. Stoll suggests culture can be

...seen in the ways people relate to and work together; the management of school's structures, systems and physical environment; and the extent to which there is a learning focus for both pupils and adults, including the nature of that focus.

(Stoll, 1998, p.10)

The nature of the learning focus relates to the points made earlier about the purpose of schooling. In my study it will be useful to establish what is valued in the school under study in terms of learning outcomes and then link this to the perceptions held of boys' underachievement. Whilst the culture of the school might influence what is valued in terms of learning outcomes, the question could be asked as to whether culture has an influence on the ability of students to actually learn.

The literature suggests that student learning is linked to school culture. Peterson makes this link when he states that "Being able to understand and shape the culture is key to a school's success in promoting staff and student learning" (Peterson, 2002, p.10). Whilst some theorists refer to school performance or improvement in linking culture to student learning (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Stoll, 1999; Tze-kin Mak, 1995), others are more direct (Stolp, 1996; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). For example, in giving school culture higher value than learning programmes in the quest to improve student learning, Wagner & Masden-Copas state that:

Culture is the brace for the bridge from previous to future achievement. If the braces are firm and strong, the chances of improving are high. Getting the culture right should always precede 'programs' in efforts to raise student achievement.

(Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002, p.42)

However, whilst Wagner & Masden-Copas make a good point it is worth noting that sometimes a learning programme might initiate change in the cultural practices of the school. My presence as a researcher in the school may also precipitate change

through participants articulating ideas, and comparing them, even informally, with others on site. By agreeing to participate in my research, the school under study displayed a culture where critical reflection is welcomed. It is possible that this culture of critical reflection will brace the bridge from previous to future achievement in the area of boys' learning through some of the processes I've outlined.

The influence of school culture over student learning is an area that might well be questioned and student motivation provides one possible answer that could be important to my research. Stolp claims that researchers have compiled impressive evidence on school culture and states that "healthy and sound school cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation" (1996, p.1). Maehr & Fyans (1990) draw links from school culture to student motivation and, from there, to student achievement. Because claims are made that boys lack motivation at school (Biddulph, 1997; Bleach, 2000; Noble, 2000; Pollack, 1998) the influence of school culture on the motivation of boys will be an area worthy of attention in my research.

Value judgements are made about different school cultures. Peterson and Deal (1998) refer to cultures that are strong, positive and student-focused, and compare them with 'toxic cultures' where schools have become unproductive. Stoll refers to school culture being either a 'black hole' or 'fertile garden' (1999). In each case a strong culture demonstrates a focus on student learning. My research seeks to identify the strong, positive and student-focused elements of primary school culture that can facilitate boys' learning. Developing strong school cultures is important in addressing boys' learning and achievement issues because any innovation or reform which leaves school culture unchanged will not make a sustainable difference. Peterson and Deal state that without supportive cultures, "reforms will falter, staff morale and commitment will wither, and student learning will slip" (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p.28). Stoll (1999) also suggests that improving a school requires more than just initiatives and that "It requires an understanding of and respect for the different meanings and interpretations people bring to educational initiatives" (p.47). Therefore, a study of the relationship between boys' experiences of school, their learning, and school culture should account for the specific meanings and interpretations boys, and other stakeholders, bring to school. It should make informed judgements concerning cultures that may be positive or 'toxic' for them. Central to

this will be an examination in my research of the various perceptions of masculinity that exist within the school and an assessment of how these might influence learning.

What, then, does a strong culture look like? The literature suggests that schools with strong, positive cultures have unity, collegiality and a strong sense of purpose or vision (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Stoll, 1998; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). Rituals and traditions will celebrate student accomplishment, teacher innovation and parental commitment (Peterson & Deal, 1998; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). Success, joy and humour will abound (Peterson & Deal, 1998; Stoll, 1998). Central to all of these characteristics is a focus on student learning (Parr & Fitzgerald, 2001; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Stoll, 1998). A focus on boys' primary school education should, therefore, examine these features of strong school cultures and question how they influence boys' experiences of school. My research might identify elements of school culture that could facilitate better educational outcomes for boys.

Research Question

Within the literature on boys' education a divergence of opinion emerges as to how best to tackle the educational needs of boys. Some approaches favour specific programmes targeted at boys whilst others favour addressing the issues around masculinity construction that are perceived to be barriers to learning. My study focuses on the experiences of boys at one coeducational primary school and examines how, in light of the arguments from the personal and the political strands, their experiences influence their learning. I want to learn what they like about school and what it is they don't like. I want to learn what is motivating to them and what is not. I will focus on school culture and seek to identify the elements that can make school a positive experience for boys. I want to understand how various elements of school culture are perceived by the different actors involved. I want to identify the external influences that impact on school culture. I want to learn what I, as a school leader, need to understand and think about when considering the experiences boys have in a school that I lead. To this end my research question will be:

What aspects of school culture can positively impact on the learning experiences of boys at a coeducational primary school?

This investigation will examine certain approaches that have been tried by the school under study and apply knowledge of the theoretical perspectives in drawing conclusions and making recommendations about them.

Three questioning themes have been identified.

1. *Perceptions of masculinity.* What perceptions of masculinity are evident and how might they impact on learning? Is hegemonic masculinity evident and, if so, what does it look like? Is it being reinforced or challenged?
2. *Beliefs about boys' and girls' learning.* Do personal strand (change the schools) or political strand (change the boys) views dominate, and what are the ramifications for boys' learning?
3. *Perceived culture of the school.* How is the culture of the school perceived, especially in terms of gender relationships? Are these evident in the interactions between boys and girls, teachers and boys, parents and boys? Are there differences between the genders in the expectations held of the children?

A broad understanding of boys' learning issues will be utilised in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the school's approaches. There will be an appreciation that the purpose of the school's efforts to effect change lie within the constraints of the political and social structure they find themselves. However, the purpose and desired outcomes of strategies will be interrogated and their effectiveness evaluated within the context of the broader social issue of gender relations.

Conclusion

This research will focus on how school culture and its understandings of masculinity impacts on boys learning. In terms of developing an understanding of school culture the literature has presented us with a clear set of understandings, both implicit and explicit, about 'the way things are done around here'. An investigation of the culture of the school under study will look at the attitudes the stakeholders bring to the environment and the ways they interact to produce a set of collective understandings. It will identify the rituals and traditions which help transmit the culture. However there are difficulties in making value judgements about how culture is influencing

boys' learning because of contrasting, and at times conflicting, perspectives that are brought to the discussion.

The 'personal' strand perspectives accept as inevitable that boys and girls behaviour is different and there is a belief that schools should cater for these differences. They accept that boys' achievement is an area of concern and suggest recovery strategies to address this. These strategies might seek to address boys' interests and their perceived learning needs and styles. They are aimed at "enabling boys to affirm themselves as males and to define themselves positively in relation to education and schooling" (Skelton, 2001, p.54). On the other hand 'political' strand perspectives regard gendered behaviour as a product of the socialisation process and believe it should be subject to challenge and change. Schools have a role to play in changing behaviour and establishing equitable power relationships between the genders. Rather than promoting boy specific approaches they promote the exploration and understanding of power relationships.

My research is about identifying elements within a school that can be positive for boys' learning. School culture has been identified as a significant contributor to learning and as such will be a central focus in this research. Perceptions around how masculinity is and 'should' be are a significant influence on the school culture. Because school specific strategies from the political strand are less evident, the school under study has inevitably been drawn towards strategies from the personal strand. However, to adequately assess the impact of these strategies on the bigger picture of gender relations, understandings are needed about their broader and deeper influences. Therefore, personal strand and political strand theories, despite the conflicts they throw up, can both make a contribution to this investigation.

3. Methodology and Method

Methodology

I see research as a quest for knowledge that can be used to improve human endeavour. However, because research itself is a human endeavour, it brings into play the idiosyncrasies of the human condition. We do not all see the world in the same way but hold to a range of beliefs and values. Therefore, we bring to the quest for knowledge differing perspectives and may ask different questions regarding social phenomena, including what goes on in schools. I believe that it is quite conceivable for two people researching the same phenomena (such as, assumptions about boys' learning in primary schools) to bring to light different knowledge and understandings.

Research also contributes to many areas of knowledge within which a range of perspectives might be valued. Research processes therefore offer a diversity of approaches to the quest for knowledge. As a way of making sense of what I am pursuing here, the metaphor of baskets (or Kete) is applied to the pursuit of knowledge about boys' learning in a primary school context. Good baskets are tightly woven using different strands of flax to prevent seepage. This tight weave however, still allows light and air to penetrate the contents of the kete. As a single strand cannot make a leak proof basket, no one perspective of knowledge or approach to research can find and contain the scope of knowledge on boys' education. The strands are inter-dependent if the basket is to be filled.

The purpose of this section is to discuss how different perspectives and approaches might influence research into the boys' learning basket of knowledge. I will introduce two overarching research paradigms. I will discuss how these paradigms must be interdependent and then I will then describe the perspective I bring to my research and explain how it might contribute to the basket of knowledge.

Normative Paradigm

This research is founded on concepts of knowledge being tangible. Key assumptions in this paradigm include the idea that events and human behaviours have causes and that these causal links represent knowledge that can be discovered. This knowledge is perceived to take the form of universal laws which give meaning and a degree of

predictability to the outcomes of human behaviour. For this knowledge to be reliable, it must be verified by observation. Therefore, the research goal is to identify principles that can be applied broadly to prove a universal truth. These grand narratives can be useful when creating a picture of things such as national pictures of driving behaviour, but not necessarily useful when examining learning behaviours related to gender.

Normative research draws on methods from the traditional natural sciences. Schwandt (1990) suggests that it has an experimental character and is principally concerned “with procedures for the development and testing of causal hypothesis” (p.264). Information gained is quantitative. Observable experiences are measured and compared so that generalisations can be made, thus leading to the development and identification of laws regarding cause and effect. Beliefs concerning the validity and reliability of the research are rooted in replicability, a perceived ability to both transfer new knowledge from the sample group to a wider social context, and for others to use the same methods and get the same results – a bit difficult in educational research, where research participants are unlikely to be the same, in the same context, and in the same circumstances. This includes my research topics, where I am examining the assumptions and beliefs of boys, parents and teachers within one primary school, about boys and their learning. Preferred methods often involve data gathering techniques like surveys, questionnaires, non-participant observations and tests that can be administered with large sample populations.

I believe that good normative research could be useful to show a trend or validate an hypothesised premise regarding boys’ education, thus giving validity to what might previously have been merely a ‘perceived’ problem. It may use samplings of wide and representative cross sections of the population to gain a very broad, ‘outsider looking in’, overview of what is happening. Researchers can, from techniques, make comparisons between girls and boys and this new knowledge might validate beliefs around students’ schooling experiences and relative achievement levels. The broad ‘big picture’ perspective obtained through this research, lends itself to use by governmental policy makers to justify channelling funds into targeted educational programmes to reduce disparities in achievement.

A caution with normative research is that, as with all approaches, it is susceptible to influence from the researcher's preconceived ideas. A normative approach to boys' education is likely therefore, to impose a researcher's understandings of what achievement actually means and how it can be measured. Attempts to explain what the data produces will be dependent on testing the possibilities a researcher chooses to bring to the process. Also, because normative research tends to be broad, this can limit its usefulness when depth and insight into the reasons why phenomena exist or people act the way they do are required. It is likely therefore, to have a limited ability to explain how and why people react to interventions and approaches to projects such as those examining boys' learning.

Researchers from both the personal and political strands have relied on normative methods to make their respective points about boys' achievement. Personal strand theorists (Baker, 2006a; Pollack, 1998; Sommers, 2000) appear to use the data to highlight perceived concerns around boys' under-achievement. On the other hand, political strand theorists (M. Cohen, 1998; Epstein et al., 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Skelton, 2001) refer to alternative research using similar methods, highlighting some complexities such research may have overlooked.

My research does not set out to prove universal facts around boys' learning. Rather, it seeks to gain understandings around the ways boys in one setting experience school, and the possible implications of these experiences. In light of this, the normative paradigm appears not to be best suited to my research.

Interpretive Paradigm

Schwandt (1990) states that, "social and political goals, aims, morals, and values" are not the concern of normative theory (p. 264). The interpretive paradigm seeks to address these neglected areas of social concern. It is founded on understandings that knowledge, instead of being about universal laws, is an individual construct whereby people derive meaning from the world around them. The role of the social scientist is to interpret these meanings. This research looks at experiences from the point of view of the individual (teachers, parents) and of groups (i.e. primary school-aged boys), and therefore recognises subjective experience. It looks for deeper meaning whilst trying to capture interpretations people make of their world. Price (1992) refers to

elucidating meanings by “constructing new understandings from existing meanings... and by analysing the inter-subjective processes through which meaning is generated” (p.66). The methods used are said to be qualitative because, rather than seeking to measure experiences, they seek to explain them. Preferred methods often involve interviews, case studies, participant observations, and accounts. Information can be presented as a narrative representing an account of the experiences of the participants.

Interpretive methods have not been readily accepted by normative theorists because it is difficult to apply the traditional standards of scientific validity and reliability. The contention is that since contexts, situations and events cannot be replicated, generalisations cannot be made. Furthermore, the theoretical perspective which places high value on the individual interpretations has also been challenged (Rex, 1974, cited L. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2001; *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Social Science Research Methods*, 2004). However, if a researcher conducts an in depth investigation from an insider’s view rather than confining outcomes to his/her own predetermined parameters, new subtleties and complexities can be uncovered. Lazarsfeld (1969, cited Burns, 1990) points out that interpretive research can “pull up unexpected and striking things for us to gaze on” (p.11). This ‘gaze’ refers to our ability to examine and look at something until it is understood. The intention of interpretive research is to seek understanding of the way people generate meaning rather than to make grand generalisations and produce new universal ‘truths’. It is fair to say, however, that as a wide body of interpretive research about boys’ educational issues emerges, analysis of this collective body could lead to generalisations being made which in turn could influence strategic policy directions.

The interpretive paradigm appears, therefore, to be well suited to my small scale research and is the methodological basis I choose. Rather than establishing universal laws, I want to explain boys’ experiences within the educational context of a particular school. I want to look at the issues through the perspectives of the individuals involved. To do so, I need to recognize their subjective experiences and capture the interpretations they make of these experiences. This will therefore be a qualitative research project. The school in question will become a case study, and this method will be examined next.

Case Study Description

A case study examines a specific situation and seeks to explain ‘what it’s like’. Bell (1987) describes case study as an umbrella term for a family of research methods focusing on an instance (p.6). She goes on to say that the instance can be an innovation or stage of development and that the study aims to “identify the common and unique features of an organization and shows how they influence the way it functions” (p.7). The focus is on individuals and the ways they understand their situations. Cohen et al. (2001), in citing the work of Adleman, Kemmis and Jenkins, refer to the study of “real people in real situations” (p.181) and the fact that this depth of study might enable readers to “understand how ideas and abstract principles can fit together” (p.181). In my research the ‘instance’ under study is one school and the ways different individuals have been influenced by innovations on boys’ learning.

Because case studies are situated in the interpretive paradigm, they focus predominantly on depth of understanding from a micro-political view rather than breadth from a macro-political view. The data is usually from a small, specific instance so it is inappropriate for generalizations to be made. On the other hand, Adleman et al. (cited L. Cohen et al., 2001) suggest that case studies can “penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis” (p.181). The aim is to gain a qualitative understanding of the instance, rather than to quantify facts and laws. That case study is a method well suited to in-depth, micro-political research does not, however, preclude it from examining or influencing macro-political forces. Cohen et al. (2001) suggest that theoretical statements can be made when supported by evidence (p.182), and that it can “provide human scale data on macro-political decision making, fusing theory and practice” p.183). Therefore, the results of my research might contribute to a body of evidence regarding existing theories on boys’ education, and could conceivably provide useful evidence in the development of new theories.

Case Study Methods

A variety of ethnographic methods are frequently used to accumulate information about an ‘instance’. Burns (1990) points out that, “ethnographers focus upon how different people define an event through their actions, perceptions, interpretations, and beliefs” (p.228). He goes on to say that “ethnographic fieldwork is not a

homogeneous method, but involves a variety of techniques of data collection” (p.229). These techniques can include surveys, questionnaires, narrative accounts, interviews and observations.

I choose to use interviews as my primary method of data gathering because I see it as the most practical way to learn about peoples’ attitudes and perceptions. Whilst measuring observable behaviours and achievement levels might require statistical data collection, especially to confirm or critique observations made by participants, this is not the primary purpose of the research. I want to find out about attitudes and perceptions. It might be possible to do this over a prolonged period of time using observations, but I think this would be impractical for me, as I have both limited time and limited opportunities to undertake the research. Because some participants will be children and parents, I believe that written responses to questionnaires and surveys could also be problematic, especially since such methods may be not only off-putting to some, but they are unlikely to address the limitations of, in particular, the boys’ developing reading and writing skills.

There are, however, many different approaches to interviewing. They range from ‘non-directive’, where the interviewee sets the agenda and is free to talk, to directive, where the only differences from a questionnaire might be the method of recording, the face-to-face nature of the encounter, and the ability of the researcher to use ‘probe’ questions to elicit more information. Jones (2004) discusses the ‘depth interview’ as a method that can give significance to individual actions and from which understandings can be gained as to why people act as they do. She suggests that flexibility is desirable in ‘depth interviewing’ so that people can tell in their own way and “in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meanings” (p.258). This is likely to be much more difficult if the enquiry has a rigid structure. Thus, Jones states that “interviews in which interviewers have prepared a long list of questions which they are determined to ask, come what may,... are not depth interviews” (2004, p.258). However, she also points out that there is no such thing as a totally unstructured interview because researchers are continually making choices about which data they will pick up and explore. By making these choices, they are imposing some structure. Researchers make such selections in non-directive interviews but the process can be ambiguous because the interviewee is left guessing

as to what the important information may be. Therefore, in non-directive interviews the interviewee, rather than feeling unconstrained, can feel constrained by the need to guess what the researchers interests and intentions are (Jones, 2004).

I see semi-structured interviews as being the best way I can learn about the attitudes, thinking and perceptions of teachers, parents and children. Semi-structured interviews can be informal in style. Although a list of questions guide the interview, it is possible that additional, timely questions may emerge from the context of the discussion. The participants have a degree of control and this flexibility allows them to tell their story. On the other hand, I will be able to steer the conversation towards my areas of interest. This is important because boys' education presents a broad field of enquiry and I will need to keep the focus on aspects of the school's culture that have influenced the experiences of boy pupils.

For the children involved, it might be preferable for the interviews to take the form of a group discussion. It could be too daunting and intimidating for the boys to have to respond to questions one-on-one with me. Although I no longer work in the school, I am known to most of the boys involved; they will associate me with the management of the school. This has the potential to inhibit their responses as they might seek to give answers they think I want to hear, in order to please me. In a group interview, the participants could become an audience for each other, which Kitzinger (2004) suggests encourages a greater variety of communication than is often evident with more traditional methods of data collection. Kitzinger distinguishes 'focus groups' from the 'group interview' whereby the focus group is characterised by its "explicit use of group interaction" (Morgan, 1988, cited Kitzinger, 2004). There is some kind of collective activity or task (for example a group of boys might be asked to develop an aspect of the school curriculum to make it exciting for boys) and the use of the subsequent interaction becomes part of the research data. In my research, however, the individual perceptions of the boys are important so coming up with 'group answers' through a collective project approach might not be desirable. With skillful guidance by the interviewer, the interaction that a discussion necessitates should prompt individual thinking and encourage a range of responses.

As with all research methods, the data collection process needs to be systematic and rigorous because data becomes the evidence which supports the theoretical statements that might emerge. Semi-structured interviews can present a challenge in this regard because the open-ended nature of the interview might produce wide ranging field notes from which it is difficult to generate useful data. Cohen et al. (2001) write of beginning with a wide field of focus before progressively narrowing the field and establishing key points of foci for subsequent study and data collection (p.189). Data can be produced by methods like recording the frequency of particular behaviours, words, phrases, events, etc. It can be attributed to different 'domains' and relationships and linkages between the domains can be established. The intention is then to "move from description to explanation and theory generation" (L. Cohen et al., 2001, p.148).

My research will be a subjective experience requiring me to listen to, understand and interpret the actions, perceptions and attitudes of various participants. Therefore, my role in the school is an important consideration. Ball (2003) discusses the role of the researcher and suggests that through being a participant the researcher will become "embedded in the perspectives of those who inhabit the socio-cultural world that is to be described and analyzed" (p.72). A detached researcher might be more aloof from the participants and make objective observations following a fairly structured format. However, I have worked in the school and have established relationships with the participants. I have been embedded in the school's socio-cultural world and this could strengthen my research. I must also be aware, however, that this could also make me less aware of some of the factors at play.

Cohen et al. (2001) suggest that "the unstructured, ethnographic account of teachers' work is the most typical method of observation in the natural surroundings of the school..." (p.187). They go on to say that because of the time spent and the likelihood of developing intimate relationships with participants, there is an enhancement of the educational investigator's ability to explain "the means by which an orderly social world is established and maintained in terms of its shared meanings" (p.187). In the early stages of the research, I moved to a position in a different school. This has not changed my intimate knowledge of the school and relationships with the participants, which allow me to make insights which might otherwise be missed.

Therefore a greater depth of understanding should emerge. Further to this, the fact that I became a non-participant researcher immediately prior to conducting the interviews might, to some extent, have begun to give me the objectivity of an outsider.

Ethical Considerations

This leads to a consideration of the ethical implications surrounding my embeddedness in the culture of the school. As with all social science research where humans are examined, informed consent must be gained. This establishes the consent of participants who not only consent to participate, but do so knowing there may be some possible future implications. Knowing that they can withdraw up to a certain point in the research is also important for them. . For example, the principal and Board of Trustees need to understand that the findings might not be what they would necessarily like them to be. In other words, it is possible that a research finding is that the outcomes of certain innovations have been counter-productive to their stated aims. A clear explanation must be made to all participants, therefore, of the possible implications of such a finding.

Other potentially challenging ethical considerations are around maintaining anonymity and the ownership and release of data. Anonymity is important so that participants are free to be open and honest without fear that their responses will cause offense or harm to others. Maintaining anonymity within the New Zealand educational world is difficult because it is relatively small and educators' networks are wide. The important consideration will be in maintaining the anonymity of individual participants, itself a challenge in a medium sized primary school, even if maintaining the anonymity of the school may be difficult.

Reporting the findings to the school is an important consideration which will be dealt with after submission of this thesis and in consultation with the school. It may, for instance, take the form of a seminar which could be presented to the various interest groups.

Answers to questions of reliability and validity in ethnographic educational case studies do not lie in replicability and generalizability. Rather, they lie in the case study's plausibility and ability to explain (Peck, 2003). My research will explain

how school culture influences the educational experiences of boys in a specific school. Whilst the results might not be generalizable, Bassey (cited Bell, 1987) suggests that teachers working in similar situations should be able to relate decision making to that which is described in a case study. This will give my research external validity. Internal validity will be achieved through triangulation, a common approach to verifying ideas, issues and perceptions. I will be interviewing three distinct groups of people; teachers, parents and children. These groups bring different perspectives to the discussion. Where perceptions of a situation align across a range of participants, a strong case can be made for the validity of the point. Research with ecological validity is valued and accepted by those involved and it fulfills the purposes for which it was designed.

For my research to achieve ecological validity the school would need to embrace it and use the results as a guide to the way forward. Participants will need to be kept involved and given a sense of ownership in the work. This might mean consultation on the questions to be asked. It will require respondent validation to ensure that I correctly interpret comments that are made, and this is why returning transcripts to participants for verification is an important part of the research process.

Method

Interview was the primary method of data collection in my research and was supported by an examination of artifacts. The understanding and interpretation of the data these produced was also informed by the intimate association I had had with the school. The following is a description of the methods used to collect the data. The method section concludes with an examination of relevant ethical considerations.

Interview

To get an in-depth view of the range of perceptions and understandings about boys' experiences within the school, I interviewed three categories of people; teachers, parents and students (boys). In each category I selected participants for interview based on a desire to get a cross section of informed views.

Three participating teachers were selected based on the following criteria.

- Gender, male and female teachers were involved.
- Teachers of pupils aged 7-11.
- Leadership – the principal and one teacher from the senior management. They have provided leadership in boys’ learning within the school and brought detailed knowledge of what had been implemented. The other teacher did not have a leadership role in implementing changes and therefore brought a different perspective to his assessment of these changes.
- All participants were teachers who had been at the school since before the project began.

Three sets of parents participated in an interview. Two sets of parents were interviewed as a pair whilst one parent (a mother) was interviewed alone.

Participating parents were not the parents of participating children because of the potential influence informal conversations at home could bring. Selection using the following rationale and criteria were used:

- One set of parents had had a long association with the school through more than one son having attended. They were able to provide a depth of historical knowledge about the school and also a perspective from their different sons being at the school both before and after the targeted interventions for boys began.
- One set of parents had a son who had only been at the school for one year. They provided contrasting insights from alternative school cultures.
- Two of the sets of parents also had daughters attending the school. They were able to provide insights around the different ways their sons and daughters experienced the culture of the school.

A group of five boys participated in a group discussion. The following considerations were applied in selecting the boys:

- Two boys had recent experience of other primary schools to give a perspective of alternative school cultures.
- Two boys had been at this school for four years or more to provide a depth of historical knowledge.

- They had sufficient social and oral communication skills to enable effective participation in a discussion.
- Boys who were able to provide the group with a range of experiences in terms of conforming to rules and desired behaviours.
- Boys who provided the group with a range of experiences in terms of learning achievement levels.
- Boys who were willing participants.

The key procedure in which the teachers and parents were involved was a semi-structured interview. I provided a set of lead questions (Appendix 1) based on three key themes identified in my review of the literature (refer to Research Questions, p.41). I encouraged the participants to talk about what was important to them. I would sometimes ask for elaboration. Supplementary questions were asked as the need arose. At the end of the interview I asked them if there was anything more they would like to contribute.

The interview was audio-taped and transcribed. Once the parent and teacher interviews were completed, they were sent the transcript for comment and amendment. I invited them to make additions and deletions to ensure that the transcript said what they wanted it to say. Participants (including children and their parents) had the right to withdraw up to two weeks after receiving a copy of the transcript. This was clearly stated in the informed consent form (Appendices 2, 3, 4). No participants withdrew.

The children participated in a semi-structured group discussion. Again, lead questions were provided but the opportunity was there for the boys to drive the discussion. The discussion was audio-taped and transcribed.

Ethical Issues

Formal procedures were thought through and have been described. The interviews of teachers and students took place at the school in a quiet and private space with no distractions. The teacher interviews took place outside of school hours. The student discussion took place during the school day at a time that was convenient for the

teachers of the students. Interviews with the parents were at times and places mutually agreed to.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including the school Board of Trustees (Appendix 4). In the case of the children involved, this consent was obtained from both the children and their parents. Initial contact with children and parent participants was made through mail and was followed up with a phone call. With the teachers, the research was explained at a staff meeting and volunteers were called for. In all cases, the respective question schedule was made available before informed consent was obtained.

The data gathered through the project was confidential to the researcher, individual participants and the project supervisors. Personal and school pseudonyms have been used. Although I have concealed the identities of the participants as much as possible the fact that this is small scale research taking place in one school means that comments made might still become attributable to individual participants. To minimise this risk I kept the names of the participants confidential and ensured that the interviews were not observed or overheard by other people. At any time participants may choose to reveal to others the fact that they participated. I explained to them that this could result in comments in the final thesis being attributed to them. They were therefore able to make an informed choice about revealing their participation. I asked them not to share the contents of the interview with others.

A potential for harm to participants centred on revelations they made about themselves or others, especially if it related to something negative about particular people or situations. On such occasions I decided whether the inclusion of this material was detrimental to either individuals or the school and referred such concerns to my supervisor before making any decisions. The transcripts provided participants with the opportunity to delete sensitive material or information they revealed but that they later regretted.

Participants had the right to decline participation or withdraw from the research. They were told about arrangements in both the initial consent forms and the form accompanying the transcripts (Appendix 6). These written forms provided potential

participants with the time and opportunity to think through the implications for them before making a commitment. It was explained to the participants that the time to withdraw was limited to a date two weeks after receiving the transcript for comment and amendment.

A potential conflict of interest existed because the study focuses on the school at which, until the early stages of this research, I was deputy principal. As a researcher I have remained as objective and impartial as possible, and reported openly and honestly the findings of the study. However, my former affiliation with the school could have predisposed me towards findings that reveal the school and its programmes in a favourable light. Because of this I have maintained regular contact with my supervisor. I have asked her to challenge me, to probe deeply, and to justify my findings.

Artefacts

School records also provide useful data for this study. These records include things like meeting minutes, implementation plans for new interventions, and school wide assessment and behaviour data – current and historical.

Data Analysis

The data collected represented the views, insights and perceptions of individuals from three distinct groups. The questions were framed differently for each group to accommodate the variance in their ages, educational backgrounds, and relationships with the school. Each group used different jargon to express their points of view. Therefore, gathering numerical data based on specific question answers or the frequency of specific words or terms used was not appropriate. Analysing the data was always going to be about interpreting the interviews and looking for threads of thought and themes in the answers given.

To do this I took the transcripts for each interview group (parents, teachers and boys) and broke the questions into three categories revealing participant perceptions about masculinity, learning, and school culture. By cutting and pasting I created new documents under these category headings. Then one group at a time I analysed responses to each category and made a summary document showing the themes that

were evident. In my summary and in the reporting I used the term “all” when an idea was mentioned or representative of all participants in a group; “most” when an idea was mentioned or representative of 2 out of 3 (parents or teachers) or 3-5 out of 6 (boys); and “some” when an idea was mentioned or representative of 1 out of 3 (parents or teachers) or 1-2 out of 6 (boys).

I then took the summary documents for each category to compare ideas and perspectives presented from the groups interviewed. Common themes emerged from this and will be discussed in the next chapter. Sometimes omissions from the transcripts of some groups proved interesting and have also been commented on.

Some artefacts were also examined. I collected achievement and behaviour data and was able to ask the school for specific data if the need arose. I also examined meeting minutes and seminar notes used in presentations about the work the school has done. A summary of the literature review which the school completed was available to me. Artifacts were used to verify suggestions made by participants and to verify conclusions I was drawing from their comments. I was also able to review some assessment data. Therefore, the artefacts provided supporting data for the research but were not the primary source of information.

4. Findings

Teachers, parents and boys were the three categories of participants interviewed and their questions were based on three question themes. These themes were; perceptions of masculinity, perceptions of learning, and perceptions of school culture. The interview questions were intended to address these areas but were framed differently for each category of interviewee to accommodate the varying backgrounds and perspectives they brought to the discussion.

Before discussing the findings from the interviews and the interrogation of artifacts, it is pertinent to review the three question themes that directed the analysis and to give an overview of the perspectives each group of participants brought to the interviews. Following this the results of a more detailed analysis of the question themes will be given.

Question themes

In looking at the *perceptions of masculinity* I was searching for the assumptions different groups made about how boys and men should behave and for clues as to what influence this might have on educational outcomes. This was important because schools do not operate in isolation from the world around them, and so their perceptions are relevant to the shaping and development of their internal cultures. They also provide insight into which strand of thinking (personal or political) dominates the decisions made in the school.

Perceptions of learning are predominantly influenced by either personal or political strand thinking and will determine the nature of a school's response to the issue of boys' learning. In this section I was searching for indications as to whether the participants perceived there to be a difference between the ways boys and girls learn and, if so, what they considered appropriate responses might be. Perceptions of masculinity and of learning impact on the participants' *perceptions of school culture*. In other words, what elements of school culture did they perceive to be positive for boys' learning, and why they held these views?

Interview groups

The perspectives the boys brought to the research were based around what happens with them in the here and now. Whilst there was some reflection to earlier stages in their schooling, most of their discussion related to recent experiences. With prompting they were willing to project into the future, but most of what they looked forward to centred on gaining the freedom to what they wanted to do now, but were considered too young for. For example, they were looking forward to being able to drive cars and go to age-restricted movies. They showed some sense of the growing responsibility that might fall on them when they spoke of needing to work and provide for families, but other than that, their minds were firmly fixed on fun. They were open and enjoyed sharing about their likes and dislikes. They were also able to shed light on what they saw as meaningful learning. Their impressions about teacher behaviour provided insights as to how teacher actions and comments are interpreted by boys. In short, the interview with the boys provided pertinent information about how they currently interpret aspects of school culture. However, their limited life experiences meant that they offered less in terms of thoughtful opinion as to the deeper implications of their school experiences and as to possible directions these experiences might lead them.

The parents were more forward looking than the boys and were very focused on their children's (sons and daughters) happiness, both in the present and the future. The points of interest related to where parents thought happiness and contentment were found. They felt that happiness could probably result from their children becoming successful contributors to society. In that regard, the parents' goals for their children were being shaped by the society in which they live. Future employment was a major focus as was their sons' ability to communicate and get on well with others. Education was valued and the parents wanted their sons to reach their potential. They were aware of the debate around boys' school achievement and had quite clear ideas about certain differences between boys and girls. Sometimes this was the result of comparison between their sons and daughters, whilst at other times popular literature and other media coverage influenced their views.

The teacher interviews were very focused and concise. Again they wanted the children to be happy, both in the present and the future. They saw educational success (defined as children reaching their potential in both academic and social interaction skills) as being a key part of future success and happiness. Whilst broader social issues were touched on, they focused their interview comments on the school and its potential role in helping students become well adjusted citizens who will contribute positively to society. They identified the problems boys are perceived to have and strategies to deal with these problems were discussed. Although some assumptions held by New Zealand society [e.g. the macho sporting man (Law, Campbell, & Schick, 1999)] were challenged, the predominant focus of the teachers and the school appeared to be towards adapting the school environment to boys so that they could 'do better'.

Keeping in mind these broad perspectives each group brought to the interviews more detailed results of the interviews will now be elaborated on in each question category. I will discuss the results of each group's responses and then draw together the common themes.

Perceptions of Masculinity

Boys

The discussion with the boys about masculinity was fed by two questions. One asked who they looked up to, and the other asked them to discuss the person they would like to be when they grow up. With the first question a female may have been chosen and further questioning may have been needed to draw a response that recognized admirable traits in a male. The second question assumed that they had images in their minds as to what is expected of men and that they wished to conform to these images. Only one boy interviewed did not have a father living at home (the impact of this fact on reliability was discussed in Chapter 4) and whilst he was quiet during most of the interview he was particularly quiet during this section and seemed a little bemused by the questions. He admired his sister but when asked why, stated that is was because she sometimes gets hurt by other boys and he likes to help her. He had nothing to offer about the kind of person he wanted to be when he grew up.

The other boys were much more forthcoming. Most of them specifically mentioned their dads as a person they admire and look up to. One also mentioned a friend and another mentioned his teacher (a male). There was a clear perception with the boys that these men in their lives seemed to understand and accept them. Their reactions to fighting are a case in point. More than one explained that their dads and the male teacher deal with these situations in what they see as a fair way. 'Fair' means that they're not shocked when fights happen but are willing to talk to both sides and "sort it out". A sense comes through the boys' talk that fights will be inevitable and dads understand this. Fairness is important to them. One linked fighting to masculine behaviour when he suggested that he would never fight with a woman.

Being "muscle and strong" was seen by the boys to be an admirable feature in a man. Physical prowess was very evident in the boys' descriptions of manhood. Success at rugby was important to one, whilst being a fast runner was important to another. Riding motorbikes and driving cars were seen as masculine behaviours to be admired. The boys valued activities that involved getting dirty and liked it when adults accepted and allowed this. Stereotypical images of gendered behaviour were evident in what most of the boys had to say. They believed that girls were scared by violent images and prefer the soft and gentle things in life. One boy's statement sums this view up:

Boy A - Girls don't like rough sports, rugby and that, because sometimes they might break their nails and because boys - they're rough, they don't care if they get dirty... and they're built better to compete for sports.

This statement is interesting because my own knowledge of the children in the school suggests that it contains girls who not only like rough sports, but are also very good at them. The presence in the boys' world of these contrasting images of masculinity and femininity suggests that their views are formed by more than just observation of the children around them. It is reasonable to suggest that images of gendered behaviour from the media and from home are also very influential on the boys' construction of masculinity e.g. television advertising showing stereotypical gender images.

Although not all boys like the same sort of things the existence of a dominant, hegemonic impression of masculinity was evident in the boys' talk. One boy who was selected for the study because at school he did not appear to fit the stereotypical images of the rough and tumble sporty boy surprised me with some of his responses. For example, he talked about his father being anxious to take him hunting in the bush when he was older. When asked whether he was looking forward to this he looked incredulous and answered, "Yes, who wouldn't look forward to that?" This highlighted to me the fact that I was bringing my own assumptions to the research and that these assumptions were also influenced by images of hegemonic masculinity!

The boys also saw friendship as important to them. They talked of the importance of having friends that can be trusted. They also revealed a side of themselves that wanted to care for others. One wanted to look after animals and expressed admiration for Steve Irwin. They all seemed to value being able to care for their families and it was evident that being able to build houses and do other practical things like this for loved ones was something some of them aspired to. This showed that they had images of themselves becoming providers for their families. The boy who was looking forward to going hunting also valued art. He mentioned that he looked up to a friend who was good at art and that he hoped to get tips from this friend.

In summary it seemed evident that the boys' images of masculinity fit the rough and tumble, outdoors and sporty images associated with the "Kiwi Bloke" (refer p.30). They like physical activity and associate this with masculinity. Aggression and fighting, whilst not being enjoyed, are seen as inevitable in the male domain. Caring and providing for others is also valued. There is a real sense that the influences that shape these boys' images of masculinity come from the people that are close to them. In the case of most of these boys, this person was their father. It was also evident that ideas coming to the boys through the media were also influential in their construction of masculinity.

Parents

The discussion with the parents about masculinity was also fed by two questions. The first referred to their hopes and aspirations for their sons and the second asked for their interpretation of what the community perception of masculinity might be. The

parents were focused on their families and the influences shaping the lives of their sons. In general, they made few references to bigger social issues around gender construction. They only referred to them when prompted or when they could make direct links to their own situation.

All parents wanted their sons to be happy and content in the future. Having a good job was, in their view, important to this. They wanted their sons to be skilled workers or bosses. None had expectations of leadership or high earnings. Rather, they just wanted their boys to find jobs they liked and could succeed in. Education was seen as a key to this. One set of parents focused on their children having the opportunities that they themselves had missed out on. Parents wanted their boys to be good communicators able to speak their minds. One parent emphasized the need for them to be good listeners. Whilst all parents wanted their sons to be confident, some took this further and spoke of their need to be 'assertive'. One father spoke of the need for sons to have the confidence to "not take a backward step" and to "be able to stand up for themselves". When asked whether this is valued in the community he answered:

Father C - Yea that's pretty universal, a lot of fathers expect their sons to stand up for themselves. I would like them to walk away from it if they can - and if they can't - stand up for themselves there. I don't care who gets a hiding. That's my point of view.

This indicated a need for a level of physical prowess.

It was interesting to note parental attitudes to sport in the light of Ferguson's (2004) view of its significance in gender construction in New Zealand society. For a variety of reasons, all parents saw sport as a worthwhile endeavour for their children to participate in. Some liked the discipline and character-building it offers. Competition was believed to be healthy for children, along with the physiological development that sport fosters. All parents believed sport would help develop social interaction skills and build confidence. The sense of belonging to a team and the disciplines involved with drills and training were also mentioned as being beneficial. Whilst two of the families had children heavily involved and successful in sport, they did not appear to have high sporting aspirations for their sons, although for one family this had not

always been the case. This family initially aspired to professional sporting careers for their sons, but these aspirations had been modified as the boys grew and changed their individual attitudes towards competitive sport.

All of the parents believed that to be a man in their community meant being strong, tough, aggressive, domineering and not shedding tears. These perceptions are common to the hegemonic masculinity view. Physical prowess was thus a dominant theme. One parent linked strength to sporting success and another linked it to the ability to “stand up for yourself”, to fight or dominate physically. Most parents linked leadership with community perceptions of masculinity. One noted that in comparison with what she had experienced in Australia, New Zealand men (particularly in the Maori community) seem to be “more important”. She saw an expectation in the local community that strong men should provide direction and leadership.

Parents believed that boys get their perceptions of masculinity from the people they are close to and from the media. When they are present in boys’ lives, dads and male teachers are seen to have a significant role to play in the formation of what it means to be male. Sports (players and coaches) were also believed to be implicated in teaching boys about masculinity. Parents felt, however, that its role in forming opinions about being male has diminished in recent years as fewer children seem to be involved with sports. Instead, they believed that music has become more influential in the process as has television and other electronic entertainment like video games.

In summary, parents believe that it is the males (fathers, teachers, coaches) close to boys that influence their understanding about what it means to be male. Media are also implicated in this. The dominant images boys see are those of independent and assertive men who provide strength and leadership. Parents also want their boys to be happy, contributing to society and their families through good employment and a caring attitude. The parents seem to acknowledge that at least some characteristics of the ‘macho man’ will be useful.

Teachers

The discussion with teachers about masculinity centred on questions about the hopes and aspirations they have for the boys and their impressions regarding the dominant

perceptions of masculinity within the school. Teachers appeared to have a more macro view and made the occasional link to research literature, thus illustrating that they have been sensitized to the issues through their own reading and the school's professional development.

Teachers also wanted the boys to grow up happy and to be 'good citizens'. Being a good citizen was as important for both girls and boys. It was defined by things like making community contributions, following the rules, and exhibiting values (e.g. kindness, generosity, caring). The terms 'kindness' and 'caring' were recurring terms used by all teachers. One teacher stated that, "I would like them (boys) to be men who are responsible for themselves and others, to be caring, and to express how they feel" (Teacher B).

Teachers placed high value on education. Whilst they saw it as very important that boys grow up to be literate and numerate, they saw the learning of values as equally important. It was evident that teachers believed that the school fulfilled an important role in educating children to become 'good citizens'. They wanted boys to have goals and a vision for their future, involving them in seeing past any limitations in their environment. These teachers felt that some parents didn't help their children to develop a vision and goals, which is why they felt that schools had a role to play in this.

The teachers tended to believe that the community's perceptions of masculinity were based around 'macho' images that teach boys to be rough and tough. They believed that these perceptions were too focused on sporting success at the expense of the arts. The principal summed up this view when he said that:

Teacher C - Rugby and certain sports are held in high esteem – what we are trying to do is encourage all boys to get involved in something, and it doesn't necessarily have to be sport. The Arts and Culture are just as important. The Peter Jacksons of our world are just as important role models as Tana Umanga, and we have to promote that it's cool to be good at art. I think probably there is still a perception in NZ society that if you are a wonderful rugby player you're a good boy

and you're a good son. What we have got to promote and applaud and aspire to is that if your son is not the fastest runner in the school but he can get up on stage and sing and dance, well then, he has wonderful artistic skills and that's even more important than being the fastest runner in the school. Then again that's up to the schools to lead the way. It's educating our parents that being successful and achieving is across a whole wide range of things not just sport.

Teachers believe that traditional stereotypes of masculinity (i.e. the macho sporting man) are reinforced through the media and are a barrier to learning. They therefore believe these stereotypes should be challenged. Yet, despite this, they still see sport itself as being an important and positive activity for children to participate in. They also believe that schools can enhance sport's positive influence by helping to shape in children's minds what success in sport actually means.

Although teachers view images of the macho sporting man as being influential in the lives of boys, they also referred to other contrasting images. There was talk of many families where gentleness, caring, honesty and trustworthiness are valued. Teachers acknowledged the contrasting images of masculinity that exist and believe that all parents want the best for their children. They commented that many boys are not shown positive examples of masculinity and are heavily influenced by media images showing macho men behaving aggressively to achieve their aims. Consequently, teachers felt that many boys have difficulty dealing with their emotions and feelings. One noted that many boys have difficulty recognising and verbalising how they feel and that this caused them frustration, which sometimes resulted in their lashing out physically.

Common Themes

The stereotypical sporting macho male is alive and well in the minds of the participants of this study. The study school's boys are believed to be influenced by media images of rough and tough, physically able men. Sport is valued and success in sport is respected, although there is acceptance (by the teachers in particular) that other areas like the arts are equally valuable. However, whilst the 'macho man' image is recognized as being influential, it is not universally valued by the

participants in the study. All participants recognized and accepted the existence of different versions of masculinity. Parents and teachers emphasized values of caring. Teachers showed a preference for versions of masculinity where gentleness and self expression through means other than domination (especially physically) are evident.

Perceptions of Learning

Teachers

All of the teachers perceived boys to predominantly prefer learning styles (e.g. kinesthetic over auditory) different from girls. They based this perception on their teaching experience and on reading they had done regarding brain differences. One teacher stated of boys that:

Teacher C - They are different from girls in that the brain theory clearly confirms that left and right are different and bigger in some areas, and then in other areas bigger in the girls. As teachers we have got to take on board that boys are different from girls. We can't treat them all as one general group and expect them all to come out the same at the other end.

Consequently these teachers believed that brain differences should be accounted for in teaching styles, a belief that leads to a 'learning styles' approach whereby children's preferred style of learning is identified and teaching is directed at that style.

All teachers believed that boys should be given shorter, clear and orderly instructions than girls. They felt that boys are less likely than girls to discuss instructions and ask for clarification. They felt that girls were better listeners, enjoy open-ended tasks more than boys, and were more adaptable than boys. Boys, they believe, cannot sit for as long as girls and therefore need more frequent changes in activity through the day. They thought that boys were more visual and kinesthetic learners than girls, liking practical and physical activities. "Hands-on" is a term that was mentioned about activities deemed good for many boys.

The teachers believe children learn better if they enjoy what they are doing; in other words, they learn better if the learning task is “fun”. Whilst they believe that fun can be different for individual children they also believe that, generally speaking, fun for boys tends to be different than fun for girls. Boys’ perceived preference for kinesthetic learning has been mentioned, whilst teachers think that girls are more language orientated. They also thought that subject matter was significant and that teachers should account for boys’ interests if a sense of relevance and enjoyment in their learning is to be maintained. Competition was also mentioned as a way of adding interest and excitement to boys’ learning. One teacher discussed the influence of male teachers on boys’ learning stating that they “tended to do more male oriented things and activities that are more oriented towards boys”. When asked he indicated that by ‘male oriented things and activities’ he meant topics that boys tends to enjoy (adventure and physical sciences were mentioned) and activities that involve construction rather than written presentations.

Parents

There was a clear perception amongst some parents that disproportionate numbers of boys find achievement and learning at school more difficult than girls. One stated that “90% of boys are slower than girls and 1-10% would be smarter”. This belief arose through the experience of this parent’s children and other children he knows, not through the media or any research evidence. Parents also believe that boys learn differently from girls. All referred to boys’ preference for kinesthetic learning by discussing ‘hands-on’ activities, believing that boys learn best when their hands were busy. ‘Active’ rather than ‘passive’ learning was mentioned. Some parents believed that boys can’t concentrate as well as girls and that they need “short, sharp lessons”. They thought that girls were more patient. Boys don’t like writing, according to parents, and this might be attributable to girls’ more developed fine motor skills at an earlier age. Parents believe that boys like science, maths and computers, all subjects that are perceived to ‘challenge the mind’, involve less handwriting, and involve the manipulation of equipment.

One parent also suggested that competition is a motivating factor in boys’ learning. This parent is the mother of three boys and discussed her sons’ preference for maths because the maths programme at the school had an element of competition about it.

The mother's bemusement at her sons' liking for competition is interesting (as is the link she makes between competition and sport).

Mother - ...That could be why the three of them all like maths, because it was competitive. They felt if they could beat the other one's time in maths. That's weird! Quite a few children who are good at sport are good at maths. I think it's because of the competitiveness in it.

Interviewer - Because the kind of stuff you do in maths? You can compare scores and learning tables – stuff like that?

Mother - Yes, they're competing against themselves with time. I remember my oldest would sit at the table timing himself, just like I would time him in a running race, just because he wanted to beat his time at multiplication – it seems strange that the three of them have been the same. They would be saying right, ready, go and they would be trying to do the speed test all the time. It's all about beating their times.

Interviewer (to father) - Do you think it's weird?

Father - No

Mother - I would have gone and sat down and read Enid Blyton – that was fun to me.

Although this mother found it “weird” that competition at motivating factor in her sons' learning she acknowledged that it had helped them learn their basic mathematics facts. It is interesting that she linked competition to ‘fun’ for her sons and that she also made the link between competition and sport.

Boys

The boys had very clear ideas about differences between boys' and girls' learning. Firstly, they perceived that girls do better in English (writing, spelling, reading and speeches were specifically mentioned). They observed that the bottom spelling and reading groups were dominated by boys, and teachers most often read out girls' writing as examples of good work. They also believed that girls enjoy English more than boys. They spoke of the fact that girls seem to be more motivated to write

whereas boys would prefer to draw. On the other hand, most felt that mathematics was equally enjoyed by boys and girls.

The boys valued and enjoyed learning factual information about topics they were interested in. For example, here are responses when the boys were asked how teachers help them learn and what makes a good teacher.

Boy 1 - When they show us how to write and read stories and tell us about the facts of the past and stuff.

Interviewer - So when you say they tell you about the facts of the past – tell me a little bit more about what you mean.

Boy 1 - Like the Romans – my teacher taught us about the Romans and the Egyptians.

Interviewer - When you say your teacher taught you that – how did he teach you?

Boy 1 - He told us about what sort of happened and the timeline of the Egyptians and Romans.

Interviewer - So am I right in thinking you like it when your teacher talks to you about things and explains things to you and tells you stories about things?

Boy 1 - Yes. It's cool when he tells us stuff.

Boy 2 - I like it when Miss **** keeps on telling us about stuff like when she's been to Egypt and stuff and she describes how the mummies look and stuff and the next thing you know you're in the library looking them up.

Interviewer - So you're a little bit like (Boy 1), you enjoy your teachers telling you about their experiences talking to you and giving you information and that makes you interested.

Boy 2 - Yes.

The boys' stated liking for learning facts is interesting, although from the comments quoted above it is not clear whether it was the facts they were tuned into or whether they were responding to the experiences and interests of their teachers. One boy did comment, however, that he enjoyed a study on ancient animals and that he was 'doing

the Sabre Tooth Tiger'. When asked what he was actually 'doing' the conversation went as follows:

Boy - You write down the facts about a Sabre Tooth Tiger like it was a predator to mammoths and could only take mammoths down in a pack.

Interviewer - Where do you find your facts?

Boy - In a book, it's called 'Ancient Mammals'.

Interviewer - Who's like *** and enjoys researching facts from books?

(Affirmative response from four boys)

It is also difficult to know whether it is the learning of facts that arouses interest in topics or whether the boys find it interesting to locate information about topics they are already interested in. However, they mentioned fact finding as an activity they liked and subject matter like the Sabre Toothed Tiger, ancient Egyptian and the Romans were mentioned.

In light of the parent and teacher perceptions about boys preference for kinesthetic learning and not being well suited to auditory learning it is also interesting to note that these boys enjoy listening and appear to think it is an effective method of learning for them, although they also associate this effectiveness with topics they are interested in. Comments also showed that they like it when teachers relate their own personal experiences. They like being shown how things are done – so that they can see what is expected of them. They mentioned competition and noted that it is fun and can help them learn. They also thought sport, or going for runs to burn off energy, helped with their learning because they got to burn off energy.

In contrast to parents' and teachers' beliefs about the need for lessons to be short and sharp, the boys sometimes find it frustrating if they have to stop working while they are in full flow. They spoke of the difficulty they had in getting ideas and motivation to write. Sometimes they get an idea and are motivated but then have to stop! This they find frustrating and annoying.

Common Themes

All three groups believed that boys and girls generally learn differently. It was commonly perceived that 'boy friendly' topics such as adventure and the sciences (physical and natural particularly) would likely arouse boys' interest in learning. Boys tend not to like English, particularly writing, as much as girls and struggle more in this area. All three groups favoured 'hands on' activities for boys, although drawing is the only such activity mentioned by the boys themselves. They also thought that boys' learning benefited from regular physical activity. Two groups, teachers and boys, alluded to a preference for more structured learning styles (factual learning and closed tasks).

There were also some interesting points of difference. Whilst parents and teachers saw benefit in boys having frequent changes and short, sharp lessons, the boys sometimes found this approach frustrating when they were 'on a roll' with an interesting activity. The boys also contradicted teacher beliefs about boys not liking auditory learning. Whilst the boys themselves agreed that physical activity helps their learning, they did not say anything to suggest that kinesthetic learning was a preference. Their discussion placed more value on topic choice.

Perceptions of School Culture

Parents

Parents wanted teachers to be positive towards their children. This, they thought, was important to a good school culture. They wanted teachers to understand the differences between boys and girls and to account for these differences in their teaching. However, understanding and appreciating boys is seen to go deeper than this. They want teachers to understand the individual needs of their sons and to deal with them accordingly. For example, one parent related this story about her son who, although he was progressing well at school now, had had difficulty in his early years. She explained that a doctor had diagnosed ADD and suggested that this was the probable cause of his failure to learn well. This made the mother apprehensive and she did not begin the prescribed medication. She explained that:

Mother B - He struck a really wonderful teacher that he got on absolutely fabulously with and she suggested to me one day, and I thought it was so wise, that “When I see him fidgeting I’m just going to send him out for a run”. With her positive approach to him, and learning to deal with his activeness, which boys do tend to have, he just seemed to come ahead, just seemed to fly.

Parents like a school culture where teaching staff develop and apply knowledge of how boys learn (kinesthetic, physical activity, short lessons, competition, etc). They also like a culture where the teachers are interested enough to spend time getting to know individual boys.

A focus on quality teaching and learning in the core subjects of English and Mathematics and an emphasis on sport and physical activity were seen as important facets of a positive school culture for boys. Parents place high value on teaching and learning in English and mathematics because they believe that this links to employment opportunities. They placed a high value on the perceived socializing benefits of their children participating in sport. Parents believe that sports teach them about teamwork, cooperation, and how to accept and follow rules. They believed that sport would not only help keep children away from anti-social activities and pastimes, but that it was a healthy endeavour which was good for their physiological development.

Parents thought that effective pastoral care, particularly behaviour management, was important to a positive school culture for boys. They see disruptive behaviour and bullying as detrimental to all children’s learning in a school. Zero tolerance for bullying was specifically mentioned by one set of parents who also expressed concern about behaviour in the local community. They wanted the school to be anti- violence, using pro-active preventative measures. Parents also liked a school to have structured and supervised lunchtime activities. Furthermore, effective classroom programmes require good behaviour management. Therefore, parents believe an effective behaviour management plan must be in operation in a school culture that is positive for boys learning.

The parents believed that a positive school culture values and encourages parental involvement. All parents believe their encouragement benefits their children's learning. They value showing an interest in what children do, believing that this makes a positive difference. Involvement means attending sports, productions and other school functions. It also involves talking to teachers about their children's progress and discussing problems as they arise. One mother was available to come into school during teaching times and was willing to contribute to the corporate life of the school in this way. Supporting homework was seen by all to be important.

Sports events (parents would take time off work for these) or other performances brought fathers into the school. They also attended formal interviews when these could be held outside their working hours. The mothers also attended sports events and other performances and were more likely than the fathers to make additional visits to the school, often to pick children up or to drop items off. Therefore they were more likely to participate in casual conversation with the teachers and other staff. All of the interviewed mothers enjoyed going into school but both fathers found it difficult, at least initially, saying that this related to their own negative experiences of school. Both had been in trouble at school. One looked back with regret at the missed opportunities through not getting on well at school.

Parents' educational experiences therefore influenced their involvement in their children's schooling. One mother spoke of having to learn that she could make a difference. She lacked confidence and when one son began getting extra help and bringing this homework home, she found that she was also on a learning curve regarding aspects of her son's education, in this case, spelling. This initially shook her confidence to some degree but through persistence, she found that she could support her boys' learning. Others talked of getting involved in areas they felt confident in. One dad became heavily involved in his sons' sports, for instance, while another father spent time on the BOT. He did this 'for the kids' but did not particularly enjoy it.

Two sets of parents believed that their sons enjoyed them visiting the school. One of these mothers talked of her son's confidence when she and his grandparents watched him perform in a play. It gave him a sense that what he was doing was valued.

Parents mentioned some specific innovations the school introduced under the boys' project. The 'Blokes Camp' was viewed favourably by all parents. They spoke of how much their sons enjoyed this. One suggested that it gave her son confidence, partly because he enjoyed being able to take his grandfather and was in a male environment. Others spoke of it being a positive experience but did not elaborate. One set of parents had a son in the boys' only class, which he enjoyed. These parents recognized that it had helped boost both his confidence and his achievement. They also acknowledged that there were negative aspects to having a class of only boys, such as: picking up some bad habits (no specifics given) from others. Having girls present might, they thought temper these. This suggests that girls in a class are seen to provide balance and be influential in modifying boys' behaviour. It is also interesting to note that they attribute a lot of their son's success in the class to good teaching. This couple placed extremely high value on the influence of 'good teachers' on school culture.

For parents, a positive school culture has a focus on recruiting and retaining quality teachers, who not only understand boys and appreciate working with them, but also take the time to treat them as individuals. They also like the focus on the core curriculum and on sport. Pastoral care is emphasized and noted the positive and effective behaviour management plan was in operation. Parents are welcomed into the school and are encouraged to take an active role in their children's education. In the school under study the innovations of the "Blokes Camp" and the "Boys' Class" were viewed positively, although the Boys' Class also drew some reservations. The parents appreciated that there was a focus on boys' learning and that innovations such as these were being considered and tried.

Boys

Boys were asked what they did and didn't enjoy at school and what they thought of some of the introduced key strategies the school. Some of the things that emerged have already been mentioned in other sections and will only be dealt with briefly here.

Sport and physical activity was a significant contributor to a positive school environment for these boys, even the ones who were selected for the study because

they did not appear to fit the typical 'sporty boy' stereotype. They enjoy 'rough and tumble' activities and getting dirty and believe that in an environment that is positive for them this is allowed to happen. The school has education outside the classroom activities that were spoken of positively by the boys.

Pastoral care is a topic this group of boys also raised. They said that they didn't like fighting and bullying and that they didn't like getting 'growlings'. They seemed to be looking for an environment where they could indulge in 'rough and tumble' activities but be safe from some of the excesses that might arise from these activities. Fair resolution of conflict is important to them. They believed that 'fair' means that both sides of a conflict are heard. If tempers are lost they appreciate being given 'calming down' time. They do not like it when whole classes are made to pay for the misdemeanors of a few children.

The boys enjoy their parents taking an active interest in their schooling. Supporting sports events was a reason given for parents coming to school and they talked of encouragement and parents being there to cheer them on. They also appreciated it when parents came in to sort out difficulties the boys might have at school. One told how he appreciated it when his mother had come into school recently and helped resolve a situation he had been involved in. Parents also brought items to school that had been left at home. For these boys, it was the mothers who were more likely to be that parent. They were clear that this was because their mothers were more likely to be available because of their fathers' work commitments.

The boys believe that their parents help them with their learning. Helping with homework is one way but they also mentioned the encouragement parents give them. One told of how his father has helped introduced him to books that that he found interesting and were a motivation to reading (non-fiction books were specifically mentioned). Another talked of how his dad helps him learn to deal with his feelings; particularly in situations of conflict (fighting was again mentioned). In this boy's eyes he was learning about manhood from his dad, and he regarded this as important learning.

Having positive relationships with teachers was important to these boys. They like it when teachers show an interest in their lives outside of school as well as their learning and progress in school. We discussed the idea that male teachers are thought by some to be good for boys learning. They perceived male teachers to understand them well and be into 'male' topics and activities that they are likely to enjoy. When questioned about the fact that the boys' class is taught by a female teacher (whom they regard highly) it became apparent that what really matters to them is someone teaching them who can understand their needs and interests.

Two of the boys interviewed had been in the boys' class. They enjoyed this experience and were motivated by the activities the teacher in this class gave them. One indicated that the activities he did in the boys' class were fun but that the activities he does in his regular class now are 'just work'. For these boys the absence of comparisons between their work and girls work was seen as a big plus. It was mentioned that the boys were all the same and didn't feel shamed out in front of the girls by their messy writing. However, one rued the fact that girls were not available to help him spell words! It was also mentioned that learning to interact with girls was important. I asked them whether they thought the good things about the boys' class were attributable to it being a boys' only class or to the skill of the teacher. They indicated that the teacher was cool but by having only boys in the class she was able to focus even more on creating a positive environment for them. The boys who had not been in the boys' class noticed that this class seemed to do fun things, but one also noticed that the room seemed to be messy.

All of the boys had been on the 'Blokes Camp' and found this to be a positive experience. They enjoyed the physical challenges. They acknowledged that some boys were daunted by the challenges but believed it was good that these boys overcame their fears. A big plus was mixing and playing with the dads and granddads. They enjoyed being with men. Observing how men interact with each other was alluded to (this was the second time in the interview that the boys raised the notion of learning about manhood from men). One noted that they did not get into mischief because the dads kept them busy. The boys stated that good learning came out of the 'Blokes Camp' experience. They mentioned learning about bush safety and making bivouacs. They also mentioned growing in self confidence and learning to

interact with people they didn't really know. This is seen by the boys to be important learning because it is equipping them for things they believe they will be doing when they're older. It is seen as potential life-saving knowledge. They think the camp helped with reading and writing, although not because of the literacy focus on the camp. Rather, they believed that achieving well at school was an incentive to try to get on another trip. Although this is an erroneous perception (each boy only goes on one of these camps) it shows how the experience excited them and gave them something to look forward to.

Given the importance the school was known to place on positive role modeling, this proved to be a notable absence from the boys' observations about life and learning at school. They had very little to offer when questioned about 'role model' visitors coming into the school. They remember students from the boys' college coming to the school and they saw this as a positive experience, although they were unsure why. There was little recollection of other guests who were viewed by the school as positive role models.

The boys saw a positive school environment as one that was safe for them yet provided excitement and challenges. Sport, physical and 'outdoor' experiences were well accepted ways of providing this excitement and challenge. They also wanted an environment where they felt accepted, despite their imperfections. There was a sense that sometimes the school environment can expose and highlight these imperfections (comparisons with girls 'neater' work) so environments like the boys' class were seen as safe and appealing places for them. Feeling encouragement and support from parents and teachers is important and motivating to them. Although efforts to bring role models into the school appeared to make little impression with the boys their conversation implied that they observe men and believe that they learn about manhood from them.

Teachers

The teachers interviewed believed boys and girls act and learn differently and that a positive school culture should accommodate these differences. They supported the school's attempts to improve the learning environment for boys through the boys'

project. Teacher beliefs about the differences between boys and girls learning have already been discussed.

The interviews alluded to a perception amongst teachers generally that boys are more difficult than girls to teach. One teacher stated that:

Teacher B - I think boys are perceived as more difficult to work with because they aren't so interested in the written stuff of education. I think girls are more interested in the written side of education where boys prefer more physical things to do, so I think they are more difficult to work with and teach.

This teacher went on to talk about the ways teachers tend to interact differently with boys and girls. He believed that girls adapt better to tasks involving sitting down and working quietly whilst boys' need "more lively things to do". His observation over a lengthy career was that many teachers prefer the 'sit down and work quietly' tasks and it is predominantly boys who are disciplined for failing to comply with this expectation. The language used by this teacher indicated his strength of feeling on the matter. He talked of boys being "squashed and put down in class". He went on to say that:

Teacher B - I noticed at a previous school I taught at any boys that stood out in any way were really squashed immediately, whereas the girls that sat in the room very quietly – they were the ones that were valued and praised.

Pastoral care, behaviour management in particular, dominated the responses to how teachers interact with boys and all of the teachers interviewed indicated that boys present more of a challenge in this area. Another teacher suggested that often boys and girls do tend to be treated differently by teachers, and indicated that this might be because of the types of things they have done wrong. She said that:

Teacher A - Lots of the boys have actually done something that's physical or its verbal – swearing and things. The girls don't tend to be

physical and it's a lot more subtle – the things they do. So the types of things boys do wrong, safety issues lots of time, brings a different response.

These behaviours associated with boys are seen to be obvious, more likely to be observed or reported, and to demand an immediate response from teachers. Therefore, boys are more likely to be disciplined at school and an expectation develops with some teachers that they need a 'firm line' to be taken with them. However, the teachers interviewed believe that responses to discipline issues should, in fact, address children's behaviour rather than their gender. The principal suggested that some teachers' behaviour management strategies might still need development and that an expert teacher will have a range of strategies to use and will look at children and situations individually when selecting a strategy to apply.

One response from the only female teacher interviewed provided an interesting perspective as to why boys are viewed by many teachers as being more difficult to teach. In response to the question about whether teachers interact differently with boys and girls she stated:

Teacher A - Yes. It's actually got something to do with the teacher's personality. Whether they actually like boys – some people don't. Some people definitely have an affinity to girls because that's the way schools have run and they are a girl and that's the way they like teaching. They actually find it difficult to get into the head space of a boy. For me, I've grown up with boys. I've got boys (sons) and I actually enjoy lots of the things they like doing. I actually find it quite easy.

Whilst this response suggests a belief that schools and teaching methods are feminised it also raises an interesting question in the discussion around a perceived need for more male teachers to address boys' educational performance. The other teachers had expressed that belief that schools need a balanced representation of male teachers. Opinions were expressed that male teachers could be role positive models, that they better understand boys' issues at school, and that they tend to select topics and

activities that are more 'boy friendly'. However, Teacher A's statement suggests that it is the teacher's attitude and understanding of boys that is a significant factor in engaging them. Because this teacher is a female it is fair to ask whether teacher attitude is a more important consideration than teacher gender.

Dealing with disruptive behaviours has been a professional development focus for the staff of the school and there is a sense amongst the teachers interviewed that positive progress has been made in learning better ways to deal with behaviour issues. For example, "angry" behaviour is a problem that is predominantly associated with boys in the school and avoiding angry responses to angry behaviour has been a focus with the staff professional development. Where possible angry children are given time to calm down. When they are ready they are given the opportunity to talk about what happened and are listened to (the need for teachers and parents to listen to both sides was talked about by the boys). Where practicable the discussion with the child is done one-on-one, not in front of the class. A drop in the number of detentions given (186 in 2003, 152 in 2004, 88 in 2005, and 77 in 2006) support the view amongst these teachers that there has been a change in the ways behaviour issues are dealt with in the school.

Boys' playground behaviour has been perceived as a problem in the school. Boredom and aimless wandering by some children seemed to inevitably lead to disruptions, typically bullying and violence. All of the teachers interviewed believe that the deliberate effort to engage children (boys especially) in constructive play has produced positive results for the school. Boys seem to enjoy structured games that are supervised by an adult who enforces the rules. One teacher noted the different way boys seem to play and their liking for rules. She stated that:

Teacher A - They like it being fair for everyone. In a playground game boys like to have a set of rules. They all know what the rules are and they won't change the rules for somebody that breaks them, so fairness is a very important. Whereas girls will change the rules if somebody doesn't fit in, if they can't hit the goals or something they will let them go and stand closer. Boys wouldn't do that.

They would make sure – you can't shoot the goals from a certain point – well tough get the skills and you will be the same as us.

The principal also noted that within the school there is a significant group of children who need the structure of an adult in the playground guiding the games. He suggested that when the adult is not present the playground behaviour deteriorates quickly. The provision of lots of equipment has also helped create a positive environment. There was talk of girls and boys being creative with equipment and creating their own fun. The withdrawal during class time of a few children (predominantly boys) to learn the social skills needed to play successfully with other children is seen as a positive step, although some of these children present ongoing challenges.

The detention data previously quoted is indicative of the changing way challenging behaviour has been dealt with in the school. Closer analysis of this data suggests that the initiatives designed to positively engage children whose behaviour was consistently creating difficulties (identified as predominantly boys) might well be having a positive influence. For example, as far as detentions are concerned there has been a decrease in recidivism. 26% of the notices issued each term in 2003 were issued to children who had already had a notice issued for that term. In 2006 this dropped to 9%. Although boys still dominate the detention data there has been a drop from 76% being boys in 2003, to 68% in 2006. In terms of actual numbers this is a drop from 142 boys in 2003 to 52 boys in 2006, a number made more significant by the fact that the roll has grown by 40 in those years.

The role of sport in shaping images of masculinity has already been mentioned in an earlier section. Although teachers have concerns about the macho images sport can portray through the media they do see value in the role sport and physical activity can play in a school. The value is perceived to be in the physical development of children and in allowing them (especially boys) to burn off energy. Teachers believe sport can also teach social interaction skills. Therefore, sport and physical activity are seen by teachers to be important aspects of a positive school culture for boys and girls.

The school has introduced various innovations to try to improve the learning environment for boys. Most of these programmes are not exclusive to boys but target

problems that are dominated by boys. However, two innovations, blokes' camp and the boys' class, have a high profile within the school and are exclusive to boys. The blokes' camp has been embedded into the culture of the school and is viewed positively by the teachers interviewed. They perceive it to be motivational for boys. They look forward to their turn to attend, and thus a sense of excitement and anticipation is created. The camp is seen by the teachers as a way to get men involved with the school. One teacher noted an example of a dad who was persuaded to go on camp. His previous interactions with the school had been minimal but he enjoyed the camp experience and soon after was down at the school repairing a damaged shade cloth. It appeared that the camp was able to break barriers between this father and the school through meeting him in an environment where he felt comfortable. Another goal of the blokes' camp experience is to facilitate literacy development. Having men role model literacy to boys by reading to them and sharing how reading has been helpful in life is viewed positively by the teachers. A story emerged of a dad who shared with the boys his own reading limitations but then determinedly confronted these difficulties to read to them. The camp is also seen as a vehicle to facilitate mentoring and role modeling but the anticipated benefits of this have, by their nature, been difficult to identify and measure.

The boys' class is an intervention introduced to the middle school (7, 8 and 9 year olds) because this was an age level where some of the perceived problems around boys in schools seemed to start. The point was made by the teachers that it is not a 'behaviour' class and that, after consultation with parents, boys were selected who it was believed would benefit from a learning environment often associated with boys (refer 'Perceptions of Learning' section above). This intervention is also perceived by the teachers to have had a positive impact on the school. There was talk of boys returning to co-educational classes after a year in the boys' class and having "turned themselves around". They are perceived to have grown in confidence and be more prepared to "have a go". There is a belief that many boys who have been through this class have achieved higher than they might otherwise have done.

Teachers place high value on parent involvement in their children's schooling. They all believed that when parents show an interest in their education then children will give it higher value and importance. For boys it was felt that the father's involvement

can be particularly useful because it provides a role model showing that learning is important and a 'masculine' thing to do. Any positive role model is good but it is felt that the male role model with the most potential influence is a boy's dad, granddad or other significant male in their lives. Therefore, activities that engage parents, particularly fathers, are valued.

One aspect of school culture that the other interview groups did not have access to is the staffroom where attitudes towards gender and learning might emerge. Since the boys' project began most of the teachers interviewed noted a change in 'teacher talk' about boys. Where-as this talk used to be dominated by either their sporting achievements or their problem behaviours now there is more talk about how they learn and what motivates them to learn. There is less of the 'shock and horror' reaction to some boys' disinterested attitude and disruptive behaviour. Discussions about them have become more positive with a greater focus on what has been successful in engaging boys with school and learning. The boys' project, through the various interventions and through staff meeting discussions, is thought to have focused teachers' attention on how children are reacting to the school's environment and teaching programme. The formal and informal sharing of experiences by the boys' class teacher has been a catalyst for numerous discussions.

Common Themes

All of the groups interviewed placed high value on positive relationships. For parents this meant a trust in 'good teachers' who understood their sons and treated them as individuals. The boys talked of 'fairness' and of teachers who understood them and knew what they enjoyed doing. Teachers also talked of understanding what's going on in boys' heads and learning to appreciate where they are at. Linked to the forming of positive relationships are the areas of teacher knowledge and pastoral care. Teaching that understood and accounted for the ways boys are perceived to learn was valued by all groups as was effective pastoral care whereby inappropriate behaviours are dealt with calmly and positively, and where relationships are restored. All groups also regarded the relationship between the school and the home as important. Parental involvement in the school was seen to have a positive impact on educational outcomes.

Boy-specific interventions (the blokes' camp and the boys' class) were viewed positively by all groups as they were seen to be meeting boy-specific needs. Playground equipment and structured activity, not exclusive to boys but targeting boys' interests, was also viewed positively by all groups because boys were kept engaged in the playground and were less likely to get into trouble. Sport was seen by all groups to have a positive role to play. Parents and teachers also spoke of the need for social skills to be taught. Sport was one avenue to do this.

5. Discussion

In the literature review attention was drawn to the different theoretical perspectives contributing to the discussion on boys' learning and to the role school culture can play in the learning process. From the literature review the research question for this study was formed. It is: *What aspects of school culture can positively impact on the learning experiences of boys at a coeducational primary school?* By answering this question I hope to identify aspects of school culture that school leaders can think about when considering the experiences of boys in their schools. The school under study has already focused on the issue. Another purpose of the study is to produce recommendations that might guide them as they plan their future direction.

This discussion chapter will be presented in five parts.

1. A critique will relate the findings to the literature. It will position the school's approach to boys' education into a relevant theoretical strand. The strengths and weakness of this underlying strand will be discussed in terms of how they relate to the school's situation.
2. I will discuss specific interventions and outcomes within the school under study and link them to literature.
3. The limitations of the study will be discussed.
4. I will make recommendations in two areas. The first will relate to the field of study on boys' education. The second will be specific recommendations to the school under study which I hope will be helpful to their future planning.
5. A final conclusion will be drawn.

Critique

Dominant Strand

A dominant theoretical perspective about gender and learning was evident in the school's efforts to address the achievement of its boys. If the school is to be able to critically reflect on what is happening with boys' and girls' learning it needs to be cognisant of the theory behind its own thinking. Furthermore, cognisance of opposing theories will illuminate the questions it needs to ask of itself if deep critical reflection is to take place.

I have already discussed that within the political strand there is a reluctance to acknowledge boys' learning as a problem and that although there is acknowledgement that boys' schooling experiences are different from girls there is resistance to boy specific programmes which seek to address these differences. Therefore, the fact that the school chose to make boys' learning a focus and to work on changing the culture of the school to make it a more boy friendly environment is a strong indicator that personal strand perspectives on gender issues are prevalent. These perspectives were evident across all of the groups interviewed. Also evident were statements and ideas that could be attributed to different approaches within the strand; namely the conservative, men's rights and spiritual approaches.

The boys interviewed displayed attitudes and ideas that aligned well with Clatterbaugh's (1990) conservative approach. They had a traditional view of men being "muscly and strong" and they spoke of their desire to take care of families. One boy's comment about never hitting a girl might indicate a perception of men being protectors of women. They had ideas that boys like to be active and to get dirty, whilst girls liked the softer and more refined things of life. This implies a perception of 'natural order' that is consistent with the conservative approach. Conservative solutions to the boys' issue include increased physical activity and competition, which are things the boys clearly looked upon with favour, as did the teachers and parents.

When parents and teachers discussed community perceptions of masculinity they made points about physical prowess, strength and leadership, thus implying that ideas about 'natural order' from the conservative viewpoint also exist within the community. However, the interesting point is that no teachers or parents openly subscribed to such views themselves, although there were hints of their existence from the father who spoke of not wanting his sons to take a backward step – 'no matter what'. They saw these views existing 'out there' and being promulgated through the media. These perceptions suggest that children learn conservative values about gender from wider society but that these values do not necessarily represent what some parents want for their children. The adults in this research seemed to favour a society where there are equal opportunities for boys and girls.

Attitudes from the adults in this research are more aligned to the men's rights position. Amongst the teachers in particular the view is held that schools are not particularly friendly places for boys. By inference, therefore, the suggestion is made that schools are feminised. This aligns with Pollack's contention (1998) that schools have become inhospitable places for boys and that they are failing them. As discussed in Chapter 2, the men's rights position sees boys' education as being in crisis and promotes the identification of the particular ways boys learn so that teaching pedagogies can be changed to better accommodate them. As in the conservative approach, curriculum materials, school organisation and programming are interrogated with a focus on boys' interests. The 'Boys' Project' in the school under study has been a deliberate attempt to make school a more hospitable place for boys and is thus aligned to men's rights ideals. This is further exemplified with some of the specific approaches the school has taken. An example is the desire to move away from traditional masculine stereotypes which have been perceived to be harmful to boys' learning. Therefore, the over-use of sporting role models within the school has been avoided and the subsequent promotion of the arts is in line with the men's rights position that traditional versions of masculinity are restrictive and unhelpful to boys' learning. The 'boys only' class is another example. It exemplifies the men's rights belief that 'boy-friendly' pedagogical practices can be found which will improve boys' learning.

Elements of Clatterbaugh's (1990) spiritual perspective are also evident in the school's approach, particularly in the 'Blokes Camp' experience. This experience seems to assume that all boys share an innate universal 'inner maleness' (refer p. 26) that will be reconnected with through being with a group of men whilst enjoying physically challenging experiences in the outdoors. This seems to reinforce Jensen's mythological 'kiwi bloke' (cited, Law, Campbell, & Schick, 1999) that was mentioned in Chapter 2 (p.30). Mentoring programmes with older boys also appear to assume a 'connectedness' that males will naturally share. There is, therefore, a perception that some children are deprived of male connectedness and that the school has a role to play in meeting this need. Furthermore, these programmes also suggest that male connectedness is otherwise absent from schooling, thus linking with men's rights beliefs that schools have become feminised. There could be an implicit attribution of blame attached to the belief about the feminisation of education - that

somehow, women and girls are responsible for boys' underachievement. This assumption is outside the scope of this research to test, but it is duly noted.

The positions that personal strand theory assumes have been outlined in Chapter 2, as have the major criticisms that are leveled at this approach. At this juncture it is pertinent to link some of the key criticisms to what the findings tell us about the school's personal strand approach to boys' underachievement.

Political theorists have challenged data used to suggest there is a widespread boys' underachievement problem, or 'gender gap' as it is sometimes referred to (p. 15-16). This begs the question as to whether the school's pursuit of an improved school culture for boys' learning can be justified as an area of focus. Data used nationally and internationally to suggest that a widespread problem exists is justifiably probed and questioned. However, in New Zealand it is incumbent of schools to independently examine their assessment data and to identify trends and areas of concern. The school under study used their nationally normed data to confirm a perception that a disproportionate number of boys were underachieving. It is beyond the scope of this research to critically examine nationally normed tests and therefore I do not intend to challenge the school's data. Furthermore, the political strand suggestion that boys' underachievement relative to girls has long been evident at certain levels of schooling (Skelton, 2001, and Cohen, 1998) will also not be pursued here because, whether it is a recent phenomena or not, schools are obligated to address the needs of individuals and groups they have identified as underachieving. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, it is accepted that, within the national framework set, boys became an area of focus for the school. That there are challenges to the way achievement is measured and interpreted on a national and international scale is, however, duly noted.

The perception exists within the political strand that masculinity, and particularly hegemonic masculinity, is a problem in gender relations (p.31) and personal strand approaches are criticized for failing to challenge dominant masculinity. There is also criticism of the perceived tendency within the personal strand to homogenize masculinity and treat boys' issues with a 'one size fits all' approach (p. 30). My findings indicate that the school could be sending mixed messages regarding

perceptions of masculinity. On the one hand the school seeks to avoid the over-use of sporting role models and in so doing shows an awareness of the dominant, yet not universal, images of masculinity within New Zealand mentioned on page 30. On the other hand, there seems also to be an assumption that certain aspects of masculinity are universal, for example the love of adventure and the outdoor experience. What is not evident in the school's approach is a critical examination of what masculinity looks like in the community and how aspects of this might be getting in the way of some of the children's learning. Neither has there been an examination within the school of gender relations and their subsequent impact on learning. Political theorists would be critical of this omission. By not being aware of how masculinities might impact on learning there is the risk that interventions could unwittingly reinforce attitudes and beliefs that are counterproductive to some children's learning. Awareness of the gender relations within the school could reveal useful information about power relationships and subsequent attitudes to learning.

Political theorists are skeptical about prescriptive, boy-specific approaches to boys' educational issues. It must be pointed out here that much of what the school did under the auspices of the boys' project was not in fact gender specific but, rather, sought to address specific learning and behaviour issues that seemed to be dominated by boys. Therefore, in these instances resourcing went into addressing the need, not the gender of the child and in most cases it happened that boys dominated the group of children with the need. It could be argued that boys in the school consequently received a disproportionate amount of resourcing. Hey et al. (1998) argue that disproportionate resourcing like this is argument against further resources being directed towards boys through boy-specific programmes. Two high profile interventions within the school were boy-specific. These were the boys' class and Blokes Camp and they will be discussed in more detail shortly. Suffice to say at this juncture these programmes require little in terms of financial resources as the camp is paid for by parents and the boys' class receives no special funding.

Political strand theory takes a macro approach to boys' educational issues where answers are found through exploring and challenging the dominant constructions of masculinity and gender power relations within society; schools included. Changing power relations and constructions of masculinity is a social process that will require

attitudinal changes in more than just the schools. Such changes might not be universally welcome. It must be remembered that schools serve their communities so care must be taken in any endeavour to change attitudes. Schools could be perceived as the tail that wags the dog. Other questions need to be answered. For example, who gets to decide which gender constructions are appropriate or acceptable? What happens if communities appear content with the gender constructions they currently have? Perhaps the role schools can play in the institution of new constructions of gender is to explore these constructions in the school setting and in so doing begin to open minds to new possibilities. Questioning and challenging social relations might become part of the school culture and any resulting shift in attitudes could then have an impact on the wider culture. Instituting such change, however, is a process that will take time.

In the meantime schools have a responsibility to report to the Ministry of Education and to their school communities on current achievement trends and progress. For school leaders any long-term processes to address attainment issues will probably lack appeal because their accountability for what happens in the short and medium term. I contend, therefore, that whilst functioning within current socially and politically prescribed parameters it is reasonable for a school to pursue shorter-term goals in the area of improving achievement standards for any group that has been identified as underachieving, boys included. Baker (2006b) pointed out that educators probably use a blend of approaches to the gender issue. Perhaps personal strand strategies are the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff but if you've fallen off the cliff – you need an ambulance! In terms of school culture the careful use of intervention strategies (personal strand approach) blended with a longer-term focus on exploring gender construction and power relationships (political strand approach) might be a way forward for a school to address boys' achievement issues.

School-Specific Interventions

In its attempt to make school culture more conducive to boys' learning the school under study applied resources to a number of strategies. Some of these strategies took the form of learning interventions whilst others sought to deal with pastoral care issues. In all, the hope was to create a culture in the school that would engage more

boys in the learning programme and consequently produce better outcomes. With this in mind different participants in this research were interviewed to gain an understanding of how the culture of the school is perceived. In this section I will take the dominant themes that emerged from the interviews and discuss them in light of the literature.

‘Boy Friendly’ Pedagogies

The findings show all three groups interviewed believed that boys and girls learn differently. For example, the perception exists that English is preferred more by girls and that boys like ‘hands-on’ activities to do. Some participants also discussed ‘boy friendly’ topics whilst parents and teachers mentioned the need to shorten instructions and have frequent changes of activity to compensate for boys’ shorter concentration spans. Physical activity and competition were discussed as tools to help engage boys in the learning process. There is a perception that good pedagogies for teaching boys are different from good pedagogies for teaching girls. Therefore, one aspect of a positive school culture for boys might be teacher awareness and implementation of pedagogical practices that are conducive to boys’ learning. Such awareness will cause teachers to plan a variety of types of work and learning opportunities for the range of students they teach. This is not a new concept to learning theory.

Specific references to pedagogical practice arose in the research and are worthy of further discussion. The reference to competition and boys’ learning is a case in point. Noble (2001) and Sommers (2000) promote competition for boys’ learning. One parent also discussed competition and made the link between competition and sport. She saw competition as a motivating force in her two sons’ learning; both were also very involved in sport. Perhaps there is a link between sport and the power of competition to motivate students? If this is the case then one wonders whether girls who are involved with sports will be equally motivated by competition. If they are, then attitudes to sport rather than gender might provide the link between competition and motivation. This link is an area worthy of further study.

Another pedagogical practice that arose in the interviews was shortening lesson times so that boys did not become bored. The underlying belief is that because boys have a limited concentration span they need frequent changes in the programme if their

interest is to be maintained. Noble (2000) supports this view and suggests that boys are better suited to short-term tasks. However, the boys themselves clearly stated that they found it annoying if they were motivated by a task but were told by the teacher to stop because it was time to move onto something else. I also got the impression from their conversations that some of them found it difficult to become motivated with tasks like writing. This suggests that off task behaviour might be more to do with motivation than the ability to concentrate. Personal strand theory tends to focus on what different things motivate boys and girls. It would be interesting to know whether or not girls and boys react as expected to situations or types of learning they do not find stimulating. In a society dominated by hegemonic masculinity could it be that girls are conditioned to expect that the world will not change to suit them, whilst most boys are conditioned to expect that it should? If so, then perhaps girls learn to 'get on' with tasks they don't necessarily enjoy whilst boys will only get on with tasks if they are 'fun'. 'Fun' was a word that featured in the boys' conversations and teachers believed that boys learn better if they enjoy what they do. If girls are dealing well with activities they do not really like the impression could be given that they are actually having fun. On the other hand, if boys create disturbance when they are not having fun, and teachers subsequently account for their preferences in programme planning, then boys could be inadvertently dictating what gets taught. It would be valuable to have a better understanding of what boys and girls really do consider to be fun and how this impacts on teaching and learning. This could be an interesting area for future research.

Related to the concept of fun is the notion that boys like to study different topics to girls. The selection of 'boy friendly' topics was mentioned by some of the participants from each group in the interviews. For example, there was a perception that boys like topics linked to adventure. The boys themselves said they liked gathering 'facts' about the Egyptians, the Romans, and the Sabre Toothed Tiger. This relates to student motivation because the learner is more likely to stay focused and work on a topic that is interesting to them. Within the school, teachers are encouraged to know and understand their children and adapt programmes of learning to match their interests. Further investigation could delve deeper into the issue of topics that boys and girls at the school are interested in and how this might influence teaching programmes.

Personal strand theory supports the view that boy friendly pedagogies exist and should be adopted by schools.(Biddulph, 1997; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Noble, 2000; Pollack, 1998; Sommers, 2000). This focus alludes to a 'learning styles' approach to teaching whereby it is believed that children react differently to different pedagogical practices and that they should be taught using the style (pedagogical approach) that best suits them. The belief exists that boys favour particular styles of learning and these should be accounted for in teaching programmes. Numerous other strategies and practices to improve boys' learning are recommended by theorists. Some of these might prove to be equally effective for boys and girls because they are examples of good practice. Further research might well show that some work particularly well for boys or girls. However, leaving gender aside, it must be noted that the use of learning styles approaches does not go unchallenged. Reference has already been made in Chapter 2 (p. 23) to Alton-Lee's (2006) warning that international research suggests there is no significant impact when teachers use learning styles approaches. She also pointed to New Zealand research suggesting that learning styles approaches have failed Maori and Pacific Island children because of assumptions made about preferred learning styles limiting the expectations placed on them. The question needs to be asked as to whether a child should be taught in a 'preferred style' or whether it is better for their overall ability to learn if they are exposed to a range of learning styles. At what point is the learner taken out of his/her comfort zone? This could be a useful discussion for the school to enter into.

Sport and Physical Activity

Sport and physical activity were valued by all participants in the study and were seen to be an essential element of a positive school culture for boys. The belief amongst the participants is that boys have much energy that needs to be expended. Sport is seen as an effective way to do this. It is viewed as being good for physiological development and the development of social skills. Whilst the boys themselves valued sporting heroes the teacher and parents seemed to steer away from this. Their focus was more on physical activity and the socialization process sport provides. However, some theorists from the political strand link sport to gender construction. Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) link competition to aggression and suggest that this is not helpful to learning. Ferguson (2004) suggests that sport is complicit in the construction of

masculinity and, in speaking from a feminist perspective, believes this to be problematic. He states that “the institution of sport is a complex, contradictory site full of tension and ambiguity” but then offers hope by going on to suggest that, “because of this there is the potential, in part, ... to resist and/or disrupt the discourses encountered and thereby challenge the dominant hegemonic masculinity” (Ferguson, 2004, p.25). These alternative views suggest that sport is a part of the socialization process, perhaps in more ways than many people are aware of. Therefore, a close interrogation of the implicit values and meanings children take from various sporting activities could be a useful part of a school culture that is positive for boys’ and girls’ learning.

Boys’ Class

In the school under study the boys’ class was introduced to the middle school in an effort to address an apparent disengagement process that boys seemed to go through at that age. Selection for the class is done in consultation with parents. Boys were selected who exhibit the stereotypical behaviours associated with boys at school (for example, being physically active, apparently not interested in school work – particularly literacy, and lacking confidence in their ability to achieve academically). Whilst some boys have stayed in the class for two years, most spend only one year there. The aim is to build their confidence and to give them social skills that will help them do better in the co-educational school system. The teacher employs the pedagogical practices that she believes will work best for the boys in her class. She teaches them social skills and they discuss how to deal with the emotions that are evident in boys of that age. Detention data from within the school indicates that the boys from this class achieve lower rates of detentions than boys from coeducational classes. This occurs both while they are in the class and in the following years they are at the school. Achievement data also indicates that the boys from the boys’ class improve their achievement levels in literacy. However, substantive data comparing the relative achievement levels of boys from the boys’ class and boys from coeducational classes could not be found.

The interviews with the boys and parents indicated support for the boys’ class concept. Positive reactions emerged from the boys who had been in the class. They felt that the teacher was ‘cool’ and gave them interesting activities to do. They

mentioned the extra physical activity that happened in that room and the fact that their work was no longer in the shadows of the girls. The parents whose sons had been in the class were also positive, although reservations were noted. The presence of girls in a class was perceived to be a moderating influence on boys' behaviour, thus implying that a boys only class could be negatively impacted by certain excesses in boys' behaviour. Whilst no one interviewed suggested that single-sex classes were preferable for all children at all levels of schooling there was a feeling that, for some boys, this was a good option at that time in their schooling.

Whilst theories abound as to how single-sex classes might be beneficial or harmful to children the body of research indicates that there is no conclusive evidence that they directly influence primary school student achievement either way. However, some interesting points are made. Martino, Mills, & Lingard (2005) concluded in their Australian research that an important factor in the outcomes for students in single-sex classes is the teachers' knowledge and their assumptions about gender. They found that teachers in boys' classes had a tendency to modify the curriculum and their pedagogical practices to suit stereotypical constructions about boys' perceived orientations to learning. Therefore, if the teacher prepares a programme according to these preconceived ideas about how boys' learn, it is likely that the boys in that class will develop a level of comfort with the pedagogical basis of that programme. The teacher's stereotypical beliefs about boys' learning could become self-fulfilling.

Jackson (2002) focuses on masculinity in her research on the effectiveness of single-sex classes in Britain. She raises the possibility that if the curriculum does not challenge the problematic macho male cultures inherent in schools then boys' classes may actually exacerbate the problems they cause. Warrington & Younger (2003) draw similar conclusions by suggesting that boys' classes can reinforce hegemonic forms of masculinity. However, they go on to say that where gender reform strategies are in place to challenge stereotypical gendered roles then single-sex classes can provide a positive experience for boys and girls. What is clearly evident in this literature is that the effectiveness of a boys' class will very much depend upon the effectiveness of the teacher in addressing gender issues and in providing an appropriate learning programme for the boys in the class. This dependence makes it unstable as a universal solution.

The data suggests that the boys' class at the school under study has made a positive impact on the educational experiences of the boys in it. Teaching this class has enabled the teacher to focus on certain gender issues, for example, helping the boys confront their emotions and to deal with anger and aggression. What the interviews also revealed is that the teacher of the boys' class is held in high regard. She is an experienced and capable teacher. Therefore, what is less clear is how much of the success of the class is directly attributable to her teaching skills and her awareness of the issues boys face. Could these gains also have been achieved if she taught a coeducational class? What is being done to try and achieve similar results in the other classes? These are questions the school could address.

Male Teachers and Role Models

Two of the teachers interviewed expressed the belief that it is an advantage to have a good representation of male teachers in the school. Parents expressed a belief that the men who are close to their sons (fathers, teachers, coaches) are influential in their lives. The boys suggested that male teachers seemed to understand them and deal fairly with issues like fighting. They suggested that male teachers choose 'male topics'. The boys also spoke of learning about being a man from the men they spend time with. There is a clear perception amongst all groups interviewed that the males in boys' lives are influential. Therefore, some see providing male role models as a way to influence boys towards becoming 'good men'. Male teachers are seen not only as role models but also as being able to bring an advantageous perspective to teaching the curriculum.

These beliefs are supported by many personal strand theorists (Biddulph, 1997; Noble, 2000; Pollack, 1998; Sommers, 2000). However, political strand theorists are skeptical. Skelton (2003) links the call for male teachers and role models to the perceived feminization of primary schooling and suggests that "The idea a shift in the gender balance would tackle the 'feminised' nature of primary schooling is naïve" (p.207). Cushman (2005) highlights two areas of disquiet in the debate about the under-representation of male teachers in primary schools. The first is the suggestion that decreasing numbers of male teachers may be why more boys are underachieving at school (Education Review Office, 1999). She points to research that suggests

underachievement is associated with a more complex interplay of socioeconomic and ethnicity factors. The second is children's assumed need for role models and the lack of definition for what the characteristics of a role model actually are. The point is made that role models could just as easily reinforce aspects of hegemonic masculinity that might not be helpful to children's learning.

That political strand theory questions the call for more male teachers should not be interpreted as a suggestion that male teachers in primary schools are unwelcome. Skelton (2003) states that "The importance of a teaching force which is representative of both sexes (as well as representative of a range of ethnicities, social class and so on) is obviously a goal worth aiming for" (p.207). What is questioned, however, is any assumption that the presence of male teachers will in itself trigger an improvement in outcomes for boys. A close examination is needed as to what, if anything, male teachers would do differently to females. Furthermore, thought needs to be given as to what it is that boys are expected to learn from male teacher, or any role model for that matter.

The boys' interview responses provide an interesting insight to this question. They related incidents of dealing with men and made generalisations about men understanding them better. However, they also expressed an appreciation for a female teacher and indicated that she connected well with them. This teacher had spoken of understanding and liking boys. It is wrong to assume that all male teachers understand boys, like teaching them, and can build strong relationships with them. Rather than teacher gender being the crucial trait, it is the actions and attitudes of the teacher that is really important. Therefore, a school with a culture that is positive for boys will have teachers and role models that can build positive and supportive relationships with boys. These teachers may be men and women.

Parent Involvement

The school has a deliberate policy to involve fathers in the education of their children. It believes that too many fathers do not show interest in their children's schooling and that boys take the message from this that education is not important. All groups interviewed valued parental involvement with the school.

There is much support for the idea that parental involvement in schooling is beneficial to learning. Teachers and parents believe that students learn best when they are working closely together (Arthur, 1996). This belief is exemplified in the attempts many schools make to involve parents. Mapp (1997) points out that “Studies conducted over the last 30 years have identified a relationship between parent involvement and increased student achievement, enhanced self esteem, improved behaviour, and better school attendance” (p1). Indeed, a considerable body of evidence exists to suggest that parental involvement in the education of children enhances their performance and academic outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mapp, 1997; Warren & Young, 2002).

Shedlin (2004) looks closely at the role of the father and states that “Children do better in school when their fathers are involved there, regardless of whether their fathers live with them” (p.29). Windquist Nord, Brimhall, & West (1998) support this finding. They investigated the individual role that children’s parents play in schooling and found that the best result for all children occurs when both parents are highly involved and that, at certain stages, fathers’ involvement was particularly important, irrespective of whether he is resident or non-resident. They go on to point out that “it is not contact per se, that is associated with student outcomes, but rather active participation in their children’s lives through involvement in their schools that makes a difference in school outcomes” (p.35). The interesting aspect of this research is that the links are made between father involvement and achievement of boys and girls. In fact Flouri’s (2006) study suggested that mothers’ and fathers’ interest in their children’s education were significant predictors of attainment, especially in daughters.

Given that parental involvement has positive implications for student achievement, it is safe to say that encouraging the involvement of all parents will be a feature of a positive school culture for boys.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of my research need to be discussed in order to put the findings and recommendations into context. The characteristics and criticisms of the interpretive paradigm and case study as a method have been discussed in Chapter 3 and will not be repeated here. Suffice to say that this is small-scale research that is not intended to reveal universal laws that can be applied to a multitude of situations. Perhaps, though, it might become another piece of evidence that can be used in larger scale research.

This research was limited in terms of the time and resources that could be applied to it. Because I am a part time student it has not been possible for me to spend unlimited amounts of time at the school. This was not an issue at the beginning of the study but, as previously explained, during the early stages of the research I moved to a position at another school and this limited my access to participants and artefacts.

Consequently, my contact time around the interviews had to run to a schedule that was more easily interrupted by external factors and made it more difficult to check and re-check statements. Therefore, there was a greater need for me to interpret comments and this opened the door for my own perspectives to influencing the findings.

A number of interviews took place but there were three distinct groups of interviewees. I could only interview three sets of people in the teacher and parent groups. This made it difficult to get a true cross section of the school community. In the teacher group I interviewed the principal and the teacher of the boys' class, which did give me representatives from both genders. However, both of these teachers are closely involved in the boys' project. Only one other teacher was interviewed so it needs to be understood that comments from teachers might be coloured by their closeness to the project. With the parents it was a matter of finding people who felt comfortable and secure enough to honestly share their thoughts with me. Therefore, the parents interviewed were more likely to be articulate and actively involved in the school. These characteristics are not representative of all parents in the school. Even if I had been able to secure interviews with people less involved and less confident, they might well have felt pressured to say what they thought I wanted to hear. It should also be noted that the group of parents interviewed were unrepresentative

because they did not span the full range of family combinations represented in the school. The other had recently married but had been a single parent for a number of years. This proportion of two parent families does not reflect the school community and must be acknowledged when discussing the findings.

The most difficult group to coordinate an interview for was the boys. I discussed a possible list of boys with the teachers. This list was based on the criteria explained in Chapter 3 (p. 54). I believe that the boys approached presented a fair cross-section of the boys in the school. The boys' parents were approached through a letter and a follow-up phone call. One parent explained that her son did not want to participate but the rest were happy to be involved. The letter had a consent form for them to sign and return. Unfortunately, these were slow to come in. I gave one more follow-up phone call and this produced some results, but eventually I had to approach new people. It seemed that there was a willingness to participate but for some parents signing a form and returning it in an addressed envelope proved to be a barrier. I proceeded with the group interview when I eventually had five consent forms but the boys who eventually participated were not as I had hoped. However, four of the five boys lived in homes with both parents present. One lived with his mother and sister. The boys presented a range of attitudes towards schoolwork. However, whilst some of the boys underachieve in that they are considered to be able to do better, only one could be said to represent the group of boys whose achievement causes significant concern. The nature of the interview process required boys to be confident and articulate and this precluded interviewing some boys. Yet these boys' experiences of school might be different to the boys eventually interviewed. This gap might be an area that future research could address.

My changing position in the school is a point worth mentioning. In some ways this strengthens the study but, as previously explained in comments about participant observers Chapter 3 (p.51), the position of the observer will always present some limitations. As a participant observer it was possible that I might have been too immersed in what was going on to be able to make truly detached judgements about what was happening. Also, participants know me and might say what they think I want to hear. My closeness to the participants also could make it challenging for me to articulate findings that might not be welcomed in the school. These pressures

cannot be entirely overcome, but having an awareness of them is an important step as is continued communication with my supervisor who is detached from the school. By leaving the school during the course of the research some of these pressures were lessened. I then became a non-participant observer but my previous position in the school countered some of the limitations this offers. For example, I have been embedded in the culture of the school so have a close knowledge of the relationships at play and the operating systems. Therefore, I think my changing role has probably strengthened my position as a researcher, but the limitations of a participant observer must still be taken into consideration.

Recommendations

In the field of study on boys' education I recommend that:

1. Research could investigate respective areas of interest for boys and girls and how these might impact on teaching and learning in New Zealand classrooms.

Assumptions have been made that boys enjoy different topics and learning activities to girls. The research revealed that boys are focused on 'fun' and that programmes that engage boys' interests are valued. The potential for boys' interests to dominate teaching programmes was discussed. Gaining a clearer understanding about the respective interests of boys and girls and their impact on teaching programmes in our schools will provide useful information to the discussion around power relationships between the genders and the notion of the 'feminisation' of schooling.

2. Research could investigate the relationship between sport participation, competitive attitudes, aggression and attitudes to school.

The participants in this study promoted sport and physical activity as being a positive influence on school culture. My research explored the possible existence of links between sport and the use of competition as a motivation for learning. Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) have linked competition to aggression and suggest that this is not helpful to learning. Understanding the implicit values and meanings children take from various sporting activities and their possible promotion of competitive and aggressive attitudes could provide an interesting insight towards understanding

attitudes to schooling. This might also shed light on the role sport might play in gender construction.

3. Future research into boys learning should focus on how the quality of the relationship between student and teacher impacts on learning.

My research suggests that the level of trust, understanding and acceptance that exists between boys and their teachers is probably more important than role models, the gender of the teacher or even the pedagogical practices teachers employ.

Understanding the influence this relationship might have on learning could help avoid generalizations that lead to false assumptions about what really matters for boys.

In the field of methodology I recommend that future research:

4. Include longitudinal quantitative data which could provide a statistical analysis of achievement and complement qualitative data regarding beliefs about gender and learning.

Time constraints were a limitation of this research. As a result there is a lack of good statistical data around achievement. My research focuses on the attitudes and beliefs of the participants at one given point in time. A longitudinal study would collect data over a period of time, thus allowing changes in attitudes and beliefs to become part of the study. By including quantitative data in the research (for example a questionnaire) it would be possible to involve a larger sample of people and more accurately determine and analyse the dominant positions taken.

In the school under study I recommend a focus on:

5. Raising awareness of gender construction and how ideas about masculinity and femininity might influence learning. Furthermore, examine how programmes within the school might be passing these ideas on to children.

Interventions promoted by the personal strand tend to accept and operate within existing constructions of masculinity. If aspects of this masculinity are unhelpful to learning these interventions tend to be viewed as the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. By examining gender construction and the influence that perceptions of masculinity and femininity might have on learning, the school could then work towards changing attitudes that might be causing the problem. Changes could be made to ensure that the remedy does not become part of the problem. For example,

developing a clear understanding of the aspects of masculinity that role models and mentors should promote could prevent a reinforcement of the problematic aspects of hegemonic masculinity.

6. Explore a range of data that can be tracked over time to indicate how different groups, boys and girls included, are experiencing school.

The transient nature of the school's population makes it difficult to compare achievement data over a period of time. The reliability of some data to be used for comparative purposes is also open to question. However, a longitudinal study which tracks a sample group of children (I recommend boys and girls) over the years they spend at the school could produce valuable information about not only boys' and girls' learning but about the learning of other groups in the school also. Whilst this will include achievement data it will be helpful to include other forms of data. The data collected from recommendation 6 (provided by teachers, parents and children) is a case in point. By using a large sample group at the beginning there should be sufficient children from the group left in the school later on in the study. This data could provide valuable information about the difference the school is making in these children's lives.

7. Examine the role that gender plays in the pedagogical practices that are developed and promoted within the school and critically assess the impact of gender specific practices on learning.

Concepts of learning and teaching 'styles' featured in the interviews and a belief emerged that each gender prefers different styles. However, Alton-Lee (2006) suggests that assumptions about preferred pedagogical practices can be harmful to learning. The point was also made that at some stage learners might need to be taken out of their comfort zone and learn through a range of styles or practices. Therefore, it will be useful for the school to develop a clear understanding of the role that various pedagogical practices should play in the teaching and learning.

8. Regularly canvas students, parents and teachers for their opinions about and insights into aspects of the school's culture; particularly areas linked to the boys' project.

The interviews in this research provided a forum for different voices to be heard on boys' learning. The very act of asking the questions ensured that the participants gave consideration to the ideas being covered. Furthermore, the boys gave opinions that sometimes confirmed but at other times contradicted assumptions held about them. Regular questioning and gathering of data from all stakeholders will test beliefs and assumptions that are being acted upon. This could be part of a critical reflection process that becomes embedded into the culture of the school.

Conclusion

My research uses one school as a setting to ask the question, "What aspects of school culture can positively impact on the learning experiences of boys at a coeducational primary school?" In conducting this research I have learnt that whilst boys' education is a popular topic, and personal strand theorists have produced a wide range of strategies to address a perceived problem. However, it is a complex issue where prescribed solutions cannot be universally applied. Therefore, conclusions drawn here will not reveal interventions and programmes that purport to provide "the answer" to questions around school culture and boys' learning. Rather, I will explain what I believe to be worthy considerations for school leaders who are asking this question of their own school setting.

In Chapter 2 it was stated that school culture is instrumental in transmitting values and meanings to members of the school community. Stoll (1998) linked the extent to which there is a learning focus for both pupils and adults to positive school culture. A positive school culture for boys will, therefore, have a learning focus. Teacher talk will be about learning and a sense of value in learning will be transmitted to all students, boys included. Students will then be motivated to learn. The link between motivation and learning (Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002; Maehr & Fyans, 1990) has been made in Chapter 2.

Whilst learning centred cultures benefit all students I conclude that it is reasonable for a school to focus attention on groups causing concern, boys included. Finding ways to convey to boys a sense of value in learning and to motivate them towards learning might be part of this discussion. Teacher talk might also focus on curriculum

delivery. But a focus on learning is not in itself adequate to explain a positive school culture for boys. Without understanding gender construction and the impact that particular constructions of masculinity may have on learning, it is possible that well-intentioned interventions could exacerbate rather than remedy the problem they are trying to remedy. Care must be taken to ensure that the intended messages for boys about learning are the messages they actually receive. For example, trained and carefully prepared mentors and role models will be helpful if they influence boys by transmitting to them a sense of value in learning. However, an untrained or ill-prepared mentor or role model might inadvertently reinforce aspects of hegemonic masculinity that produce unhelpful attitudes to boys' learning. Therefore, a positive culture for boys' learning will be learning centred and will also be gender aware. By this I mean that gender issues will be a part of the 'teacher talk' and professional development and will inform decisions around curriculum design and delivery.

Good relationships form a key element in a school culture that is positive for boys' learning. There is an assumption that men are better equipped to form positive relationships with boys and there have been calls for more male teachers in schools. However, although it may be desirable for the teachers in a school to be representative of the gender and cultural mix in the community it serves, the significance of an individual teachers' gender in producing good outcomes for boys is unclear. What is clear in my research is the importance of good relationships between boys and their teachers, irrespective of the teacher gender. If the teacher understands and likes boys he/she will be able to build trust and respect. Unfortunately this does not always happen and boys' disruptive behaviour can be the cause of a breakdown in relationships. Therefore, a pastoral care policy that gives teachers the skills to manage disruptive behaviour is more likely to allow positive relationships to be formed and will benefit learning for boys - and girls.

Another significant relationship is the one between parents and the school. Children will achieve better if the parents are actively involved in their children's learning. Although traditionally it is mothers who are more likely to be involved, the best results occur when both parents are involved. Therefore, finding ways to engage parents in the learning is important and a key aspect of this is bringing fathers onboard. Schools will need to find their own ways of doing this and it might involve

breaking down negative attitudes that were established when the fathers went to school. However it is achieved, a school culture that is welcoming to parents will be positive for boys' learning.

The fact that I have avoided recommending specific interventions to improve school culture for boys does not mean that they are universally rejected. The school under study tried many things and the evidence suggests that they have made a positive difference for boys. Achievement data for the last two years suggests that overall achievement levels have improved and the gender gap responsible for initiating the boys' project is no longer evident. Whilst it is difficult to link this improvement to specific strategies it is reasonable to conclude that the collective focus they brought has made a difference. However, the success of individual strategies depends on how they were implemented and the attitudes and beliefs that were conveyed through them. I contend that the attitudes and beliefs that are lived out through the programmes a school offers is what makes a real and lasting change to school culture and boys' learning.

This has been small-scale research but even within the confines of one school I feel that I have only scratched the surface of a fascinating issue. The more I learn the more I realise I don't know. For me more questions have been posed than have been answered. The debate around boys' learning will continue and research will attempt to answer many more questions. However, I think that the understandings I have gained about the complexity of the issue have led me to focus on my core teaching philosophy. Teaching and learning is about building relationships and developing an understanding of others, and ourselves that then allows us to focus on learning.

Participants

Participant	Date of Interview
Parent A	15-3-06
Parents B	25-3-06
Parents C	5-5-06
Teacher A	7-6-06
Teacher B	23-7-06
Teacher C	20-10-06
5 Boys	17-11-06

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Appendices

1. Question Schedule
2. Teachers' Informed Consent
3. Student Informed Consent
4. Parent Informed Consent
5. Letter to Board of Trustees
6. Release of Transcript For Use

Numbered questions are lead questions. The bullet pointed questions are prompts that may or may not be asked to facilitate discussion.

5a. Teachers' Questions

1. What are your thoughts on how boys learn? Is it different for girls?
2. What have you noticed that's been done in the school to facilitate boys' learning?
 - What is done to accommodate different learners?
 - Are learning programmes planned with particular learning needs for boys and girls in mind?
 - What programmes have been put in place?
3. What do you think about these? Do any of the things you mentioned stand out as being particularly effective or ineffective?
4. Do you notice staff discussing boys as a group in the school?
 - What things are talked about?
 - How do teachers seem to regard boys as students in the school?
5. Is the way teachers interact with boys different than with girls?
 - How do you notice boys being spoken to or reprimanded?
 - Do you notice anything about the conversations teachers might have with boys?
6. What do you see happening in the playground with boys?
 - Do boys and girls play differently?
 - Does conflict manifest itself differently with boys? Is it resolved differently by teachers?
7. Are the ways parents of boys interact with the school different to the ways they interact with girls?
 - Do parents come to the school for different reasons for boys?
 - Does the gender of the child influence which parent might come to the school?
 - Do you think parent involvement with the school has an impact on boys and girls learning? How?
8. What hopes and aspirations do you have for the boys of the school? Are these the same as for the girls?
9. What hopes and aspirations do you think the parents and the community have for the boys? Are these the same as for the girls?
10. What does it seem to mean to be a man in this community and how does this impact on the boys at the school?
11. What else would you like to share?

5b. Parents' Questions

1. Tell me about the hopes and aspirations you have for your son.
 - What do you think is important for him to learn?
 - How will he need to be able to relate to people?
2. What does it mean to be a man in this community?
 - What are the images of manhood that boys grow up with?
 - Where do they get these images from?

- How do you think these images impact on their learning at school?
3. What does your son like and dislike about school?
 - What gives him a sense of pride, achievement or fulfillment?
 - What can undermine his sense of pride, achievement or fulfillment?
 - How does he feel about *****? (Mention interventions that the teachers have discussed)
 4. Describe the things that happen at school that you think create a good learning environment for your son.
 5. What are the ways parents can influence their son's learning?
 6. Apart from picking your children up or dropping them off, for what reasons might you go to the school?
 7. Do you like going to the school? Why or why not?
 8. What else would you like to see schools do to enhance the learning of boys?
 - What effect might these things have on girl's learning?
 9. How, if at all, do you think boys' learning needs differ from those of girls?
 10. What else would you like to share?

5c. Children's Discussion Prompts

1. Tell me about the things you like at school.
 - Are these the same for all or most boys? How can you tell?
2. Tell me about the things you don't like.
 - Are these the same for all or most boys? How can you tell?
3. How do teachers help you learn?
 - What makes a teacher a really good teacher? How can you tell?
 - How do teachers look after boys/girls?
4. How do teachers get in the way of learning?
 - What makes a teacher a bad teacher? How can you tell?
5. At school do girls and boys like the same things? Why do you think this is so?
6. Tell me what you think about *****. (Mention interventions that the teachers have discussed)
7. What else do you think the school could do to help you learn better?
8. If you were to arrive at school one day and a miracle had happened what would you like that miracle to be?
9. Other than to pick you up or drop you off what are the reasons parents come to the school?
10. If something is of concern about a son's learning, which parent is most likely to contact or visit the school? Can you think of why this is so?
11. Who do you look up to? Tell me why.
12. Describe the person you think you might be when you are grown up.
 - Where might you live?
 - What kind of job might you do?
 - What might your friends be like?
 - What might you enjoy doing?

Teachers' Informed Consent

Appendix 2

I _____ consent to becoming a participant in the Masters research being conducted by Robert Hyndman on the influence of a primary school's culture and practices on boys' learning.

The work will become a Master's thesis supervised by staff at the University of Waikato and in its final form will be available for reading by a wider audience. I understand that whilst Robert has been an employee of this school his loyalty in this work is to the integrity of the research and he cannot predict what the findings will be. Some findings may be affirming, while some may not. I understand that Robert is trying to help the school develop effective ways of improving learning for boys, so I will be prepared to examine the findings and thesis with this goal in mind.

I understand that the research will involve one interview with me that will be recorded, transcribed, kept securely, and returned to me for comments and amendment. The transcription of the interview will be done by a person who will sign a privacy form precluding discussion of the interviews with anyone other than Robert Hyndman.

I consent to discussing openly my observations and experiences around the experiences of primary aged boys at Gate Pa School. I understand that all published quotes will avoid disclosing the name of the school and the names of teachers, students and parents by using generic terms or pseudonyms. However, I also understand that in small scale research such as this it may be inevitable that quotations and rephrasing might be attributable to me. I understand that I will have the opportunity to review the transcript and make amendments and/or deletions, with this in mind.

I consent to my views or direct quotes being part of a Master's thesis and subsequent conference papers and articles.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time until two weeks after receiving the transcript of the interview. Should I have any concerns, I can contact the research supervisors, Dr. Noeline Wright and Dr. Jan Robertson, at the University of Waikato.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Full name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ email: _____

The pseudonym I wish to be known by is _____. If I do not suggest one here, I permit Robert Hyndman to choose a false name to be used instead of my real one.

Researcher

Robert Hyndman

Student Informed Consent

Appendix 3

I _____ consent my son _____ becoming a participant in the masters research being conducted by Robert Hyndman on the influence of a primary school’s culture and practices on boys’ learning.

I understand the kinds of questions that will be asked, and am happy for him to participate on that understanding.

I understand that the research will involve my son in a group discussion that will be recorded then transcribed and kept securely. The transcription of the interview will be done by a person who will sign a privacy form precluding discussion of the interviews with anyone other than Robert Hyndman. A follow up discussion with the same group will probably take place after the transcription has been completed in order to clarify the information and amend transcript.

I understand that all stories and direct quotes will avoid disclosing the name of the school and the names of teachers, students and parents by using generic terms or pseudonyms.

I consent to my son’s story or stories and direct quotes being part of a Master’s thesis and subsequent conference papers and articles.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my son from the research at any time until two weeks after the follow up interview. Should I have any concerns, I am able to contact the research supervisors, Dr. Noeline Wright and Dr. Jan Robertson, at the University of Waikato.

Parents

Signed: _____(Parent) Date: _____

Full name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ email: _____

The pseudonym I wish my son to be known by is _____. If I do not suggest one here, I permit Robert Hyndman to choose a false name to be used instead of his real one.

Student

I have discussed with my parents and I agree to participate in the research project being carried out by Robert Hyndman.

Signed: _____(Student Participant)

Robert Hyndman

Parent Informed Consent

Appendix 4

I _____ consent to becoming a participant in the masters research being conducted by Robert Hyndman on the influence of a primary school's culture and practices on boys' learning.

I understand that the research will involve one interview that will be recorded, transcribed, kept securely, and returned to me for comments and amendment. The transcription of the interview will be done by a person who will sign a privacy form precluding discussion of the interviews with anyone other than Robert Hyndman.

I consent to discussing openly my observations and experiences around the experiences of my son(s) at Gate Pa School. I understand that all stories and direct quotes will avoid disclosing the name of the school and the names of parents, students and teachers by using generic terms or pseudonyms.

I consent to my story or stories or direct quotes being part of a Master's thesis and subsequent conference papers and articles.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time until two weeks after receiving the transcript of the interview. Should I have any concerns, I can contact the research supervisors, Dr. Noeline Wright and Dr. Jan Robertson, at the University of Waikato.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Full name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ email: _____

The pseudonym I wish to be known by is _____. If I do not suggest one here, I permit Robert Hyndman to choose a false name to be used instead of my real one.

Researcher

Robert Hyndman

Date

Dear Chairperson

During the next few months I wish to conduct research into how this primary school's culture and practices can influence boys' learning. The research will involve interviewing students, teachers and parents of children. Six boys will take part in a group discussion. Four teachers and three sets of parents will be interviewed individually.

The aim of the research is to examine what is going on for boys in a New Zealand primary school setting and to suggest ways of making a positive difference. Our school has investigated this issue and has tried a number of innovations. Therefore, it is an ideal subject for the research. I will examine practices existing in the school before the focus on boys' education began. I will describe and evaluate interventions that have been implemented. The views and perceptions of teachers, parents and students will be sought. Finally, recommendations that might influence future decision making will be made. It is for this reason that I seek your permission to conduct this research and present a synthesis of findings for you once the work is completed.

The work could benefit the school by giving detailed feedback of the impact of various innovations and strategies. It will become a Master's thesis supervised by the University of Waikato and therefore will be available for reading by a wider audience. Although I am an employee of the school my loyalty in this work is to the integrity of the research and I cannot predict what the findings will be. Some findings may be affirming, while some may not.

In order to protect privacy and to reduce potential harm, the information gathered will be presented in such a way that the school, staff, students and parents will not be identifiable. Although I will use the services of a transcriber to create transcripts from the recorded interviews, this raw data will be confidential. I will not be at liberty to disclose such material to anyone. However, from time to time generic information may be available to the school as the work progresses.

I would like to attend a Board meeting to explain my research in more detail and to answer any questions that might arise. At the meeting I will ask the Board to give approval to my conducting the research at this school.

Regards

Robert Hyndman

Release of transcript for use

Appendix 6

Name of participant _____

Pseudonym _____

I have received the transcription of the interview and have read it. The following ticked situation applies:

_____ The transcript is acceptable as raw data provided that the conditions agreed to on the original consent form are met. I have made no alterations.

_____ I have corrected the text of the transcript. Once these alterations are made the text is acceptable as raw data provided that the conditions agreed to on the original consent form are met.

_____ I want to withdraw from the project. Please destroy any data you have collected from me.

Signed _____

Date _____

Robert Hyndman