



## Leading the way

**DEBORAH HARTMAN** argues that a strength-based approach to gender in education, long-term planning and funding, and tapping into the resources of real men and women from the community, are what is required to bring about necessary changes for boys and girls.

For the past 15 years, the Family Action Centre has been involved in boys' education advocating for policy change, partnering with schools in professional development and action research projects, developing high quality resources for schools and disseminating good research and practice knowledge through our *Working with Boys, Building Fine Men* conferences and our *Boys in Schools* bulletins. So it was with great interest, that I opened the recently released and long awaited NSW Department of Education and Training *Boys' and Girls' Education Strategy* policy and support documents.

This policy, which replaces the 1996 Gender Equity Strategy, is in many ways a rather radical departure from previous thinking about gender in schools. For over a decade at least, parents and teachers have been concerned about educational and social outcomes for boys. And there are continuing concerns about limitations to girls' social, educational and employment choices, which have been the subject of educational policy since the 1970s. One of the reasons why this new NSW strategy has been so long in coming is that all governments and policy makers have had great difficulty fitting the needs of boys neatly into gender equity policies that were largely designed for girls. At the federal level, despite a government inquiry in 2000 and two

major national programs to address boys' educational needs, we are no closer to a new national boys' and girls' education policy.

The difficulty lies, I believe, in the almost exclusive focus in gender education on social theories that are analyses of power relations in society and on frameworks that highlight structural disadvantages of particular groups in society. Structural inequity and disadvantage are of course very important issues and serious attention needs to be paid to them by all institutions in society, including school systems. Yet, drawing attention to inequity, as social theories do, is only the first step in change.

We all have some interest in positive gender relations in our lives. The question is how we might mobilise this interest. The key, I believe, is in our gender identities. Gender identity is one of the most fundamental aspects of who we are as a person, and a secure gender identity supports every individual to be a resilient secure person. One of our tasks as educators is to support and challenge all boys and girls in the formation of a secure gender identity so that they can become resilient and effective learners. If ever there was a need for effective parent, community and school partnerships, it is in the development of positive gender identities for both boys and girls, which are inclusive of the diverse cultural, social

and economic experiences students bring to school. A boys' and girls' education strategy has the potential to assist us in this task. This NSW policy has opted for a broad approach that encourages schools to plan for the needs of their own students in their particular contexts. This approach recognises that gender issues permeate every aspect of school life. The three focus areas of the policy are: teaching and learning; social support; and home, school and community partnerships. This enables schools to develop programs and systems that take account of gendered needs, preferences, limitations and challenges in a holistic way. Schools are able to simultaneously tackle identity, learning and relationship issues, interweaving different strategies to encompass all these aspects.

It seems to me that in the past, we've had a fairly narrow focus on the deficits and limitations of gender identities and on stereotyped images of what it means to be male or female, even when we have been explicitly trying to counter these stereotypes. Yet, in reality, real men and boys or women and girls in our schools and communities offer an



enormous depth and breadth of ways to be male or female, and they exhibit an incredible range of strengths within their gendered identities. This is a great resource for our schools, that some utilise very well. These schools have adopted approaches, characterised by Dennis Saleeby, from a social work perspective as 'strength-based'. A strength-based approach to gender in schools would include adopting pedagogical approaches or programs that explicitly recognise and build on existing capacities of individuals, families and communities. It would focus on creating a positive orientation to the future for all boys and girls through recognition of each student's ability to make decisions and to change. And it would also recognise that transformation or regeneration only occurs within personal, friendly, respectful, supportive and collaborative relationships.

I've recently been re-examining the 200-odd submissions to the 2000 federal government inquiry into the education of boys. I was struck by the overwhelming number of submissions from parents and teachers that suggested appropriate male role models for boys were crucial to boys developing the emotional intelligence and regulation they needed to be successful learners and to assist them to see literacy, learning, and schooling as relevant and important to their male identities and interests.

The involvement of appropriate men who can model the values and skills needed for effective learning and relationships is a strategy that has been adopted recently by many schools that have been successful in turning around poor academic and social outcomes for their boys. At St Patrick's Catholic Primary School, Asquith, NSW, a couple of high profile rugby league players from the Manly Sea Eagles have been involved in the literacy program, as part of a comprehensive boys' education strategy that engaged teachers and boys in examining their own male identities and learning styles and challenged boys to excel in both academic and social aspects of school life.

At Hunter Sports High, at Gateshead, NSW, they begin their boys' and girls' strategies each year with separate boys' and girls' year 7 orientation camps, to assist the new students to examine their gendered notions of success and to make plans to meet their own goals. The camps have activities designed to build relationships between the teachers and students and develop a culture of successful learning for both boys and girls. They also involve male and female community members.

We know that teachers make a difference and that quality teaching is a key to success for all students. However, there are indications that some boys are not responding or achieving as well as they could, even with teachers who have been identified as using excellent

pedagogy. At Wirreanda Public School in Medowie, NSW, they have a focus on boys' education through Quality Teaching. Here they are using exciting teaching approaches that capture the boys' interests and improve their outcomes, through specific, explicit teaching of skills, goal setting and real-life tasks. What all these schools have in common is a strength-based approach to gender and a systematic, long-term plan to address gender issues.

This is the potential that implementing the new NSW policy has to offer all schools. Will this policy live up to this potential? While the documents are all encompassing, they are very broad, with few concrete examples or suggestions for schools on specific actions or programs. There is not a great emphasis on evidence-gathering or using school-based data to develop baselines or track progress over time. Without this, schools may be very busy, but will not ultimately know if their activities have made a difference to the lives of their students.

And the big one—there is no hint of how schools will be resourced to develop their school-based plans for whole-school change or to monitor and report on their progress. My fear is that without real resourcing and reporting requirements, this policy could get lost in the myriad of other tasks schools need to undertake. There is a need for explicit reporting mechanisms. There is an urgent need for a specific funding source





that interested schools could apply to, in order to do the school-based research and planning into the school and community partnerships necessary to bring about changes for all boys and girls. This policy represents a great opportunity to put gender back on the agenda in ways that could improve outcomes for both boys and girls. I hope it is not lost because of lack of a real commitment to monitor and resource it. 

#### Web references

For further information about resources and consultancies in gender issues in education and for more success stories in boys' education go to [www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/), with links to Boys in Schools, Conferences, Publications and Research.

The NSW DET Boys' and Girls' Education Strategy documents can be downloaded at: [www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsgender/learning/yrk12focusareas/gendered/yr2008/strategy.pdf/](http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsgender/learning/yrk12focusareas/gendered/yr2008/strategy.pdf/)

<http://education.qld.gov.au/students/advocacy/equity/gender-sch/>

[www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/ed/efsb/index.htm/](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/ed/efsb/index.htm/)

[www.boyslearning.com.au/](http://www.boyslearning.com.au/)

[www.socialjusticesolutions.com.au/hottopic.php/](http://www.socialjusticesolutions.com.au/hottopic.php/)

[www.successforboys.edu.au/boys/](http://www.successforboys.edu.au/boys/)



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# A recipe for

**CAROLYN MOREY** and **ANNA MACKENZIE** present ideas for applying positive psychology to an educational setting with a focus on health promotion, prevention and early intervention.

**P**ositive psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning.

Optimism, a predictor of happiness, is considered by health professionals as a factor that can contribute to the positive mental health of young people. More recently there have been discussions about how the practice of positive psychology can be applied in an education setting. American psychologist Dr Martin Seligman, who launched the field of study of positive psychology in 1998, believes there is an opportunity to promote the tools of positive psychology, including optimistic thinking and leveraging core strengths, within the classroom, which will help result in happier and healthier students, who will tend to achieve more highly in all they do.

## What makes a young person, or anyone, 'happy'?

Research from the positive psychology field has shown us that there are a number of common traits amongst happy people. What seems to distinguish happy people is that they have a different attitude—a different way of thinking about things and doing things. Happy people interpret the world in a different way and much of this is a result of optimistic thinking.

The basis of optimism lies in the way you think about causes. Everyone has habits of thinking

about causes, and explaining why good or bad things happen. This is referred to as explanatory style in the positive psychology field. Explanatory style develops in childhood, and is made up of three important dimensions: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalisation.

**Permanence**—People who are optimistic thinkers will view situations as being temporary ones and pessimistic thinkers will believe that the outcome will always be the same.

**For example:** I always fail my exams. (Pessimistic)

**Versus:** I failed my mid semester maths test. (Optimistic)

**Pervasiveness**—Optimistic thinkers will assess the event based on likely immediate causes and will not let the event negatively influence other areas of their life. A pessimistic thinker will catastrophise the event and it will have an effect across many aspects of their life.

**For example:** Simon misses out on being selected to represent his district for soccer. He is considered to be one of the top players within his school. Reaction: I am a hopeless loser, who sucks at soccer and everything else I do. Nothing ever goes right for me, ever. Everyone will think I am an absolute loser. Simon takes several days to recover from the news and in the meantime