

Boy, it's tough growing up

by ADRIENNE HUBER

WHAT a pity we spend so much time deciding how deficient boys are compared to girls and how deficient and unfair teachers and schools are to boys.

What this must do for the self-esteem and overall confidence of boys individually and collectively! What I have read about girls is that they seem to be finding their way through the pre tertiary (and maybe tertiary) education maze, but I'm not so sure.

How confusing for girls who supposedly do so well at school only to find the "better" jobs go to males who "failed" at school. What is this saying to all of us? Very mixed messages. Should we abandon schools? It seems boys get by nicely "without" whatever they do not have that girls do "have". That is, if they make it to adulthood and haven't become a suicide statistic first. I suspect girls grin sweetly and bear it with the aid of psychotropic and other drugs to blur it all out of their minds or developing eating disorders instead

of acting out in obvious attention getting physical ways as boys frequently do.

How much more constructive to speak of ways in which schools support both boys' and girls' learning by being mindful of them as people who are individuals within a community and culture.

Parts of the following are extracts from of an article of mine published in the UK's National Literacy Trust journal *Literacy Today* in September 2000. You can find the entire article at www.yearofreading.org.uk/Pubs/huber.html

In this article I describe eight (quite by coincidence four boys and four girls) children's developing literacy. Their journeys are most interesting as the first three were not identified as experiencing any difficulties developing literacy while the last five were. Yet their journeys to literacy all share something in common. The adults in their lives held particular views about each of these children as people – not boys or girls – but people... people who were either could or could

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Comparing boys and girls can only undermine self-esteem

Reaching out to young people in rural and regional Australia

Reach out and touch my heart
Reach out and touch my hope
Reach out and touch my mind

Touch my hand so I may write a wonder
Touch my heart so I may have a voice
Touch my hope so I may be more courageous
Touch my mind so I may know what to do for a friend

You help people when they are down
You make them smile not frown
You go from town to town

You go to all the schools
And show them your web-site
Everyone thinks it rules
REACH OUT!

'Sally', RORRT, Gnowangerup, WA

The Reach Out! Rural and Regional Tour (RORRT) has played a vital role in increasing awareness of Reach Out! in young people like Sally, as well as in service providers living in rural and regional Australia. When the Reach Out! Rural and Regional Tour (RORRT) began in 1999 it was in response to the need to do something in rural Australia where overall suicide rates were twice as high and Internet access far more limited than in the cities. That was when the idea to take Reach Out! on tour was born.

Reach Out! – www.reachout.com.au – is a service that uses the internet to help young people get through tough times. The Inspire

Foundation, the organisation behind Reach Out!, developed the service to inspire young people to help themselves by providing them with access to important information, stories, contacts and suggestions on a whole range of issues facing young people today, in an environment that is fun, interactive and engaging.

The Reach Out! Rural and Regional Tour promotes the benefits of using the Internet to link up young people with those who can support them as well as providing a positive profile of young people by building a local community website.

The RORRT has four key objectives which focus on promoting positive mental health outcomes for young people in rural and regional areas:

1. To capture and share positive experiences of young people in rural and regional Australia
2. To promote help-seeking behaviour and coping skills via the promotion of local services and the Reach Out! Service
3. To assist and enhance existing community networks to better support their youth
4. To promote 'Net Social Benefits' – the use of the Internet as a valuable tool for the delivery of social services.

So far the RORRT has toured NSW, Tasmania, Queensland and Western Australia, engaging with over 23,000 young people, in 280 schools, in over 230 towns. These young people have been profiled on 263 town websites which can be accessed via the Reach Out! website (www.reachout.com.au).



Advertising feature

The next stop on the RORRT is Victoria with the consultative phase of the tour kicking off on August 6, 2001. During this phase, the RORRT team will visit 15 regional centres to meet with local youth service providers, teachers, principals, school counsellors and youth advisory councils who will help determine youth issues and gauge interest in the RORRT. Smaller local communities will also be invited to attend these regional meetings to identify events and provide direction for the formal leg of the RORRT visit.

The formal phase of the Victorian RORRT is scheduled to commence in late August for a period of 12 weeks. This phase of the tour will consist of a series of presentations, mostly in schools in rural and regional towns, letting young people know about Reach Out! and how they can access local help services.

This part of the tour provides an excellent opportunity for local service providers to introduce themselves to young people in schools and promote their service:

"I think it was really good because it allowed us to get into the schools...it was more difficult for us to get into the school before and RORRT was a great way for us to be able to promote our service to the young people there." (Rural youth worker, Anglicare, QLD)

For each town visited during the formal phase of the tour, the RORRT team will build a website to profile young people and the towns

they live in with interviews, stories, artwork, poetry and images. As a result, the RORRT has already had a huge impact on the lives of young people living in remote areas:

"Seeing their images and art and stuff was probably the strongest thing in the whole site...The kids were just queuing up to have a look and a listen. That was really powerful stuff...genuinely a really motivation thing that was good for them." (Mental health worker, QLD)

You can help the Reach Out! Rural and Regional Tour work with communities to promote positive mental health for young people living in rural and regional areas. If you are a teacher, principal or school counsellor in a rural or regional school in Victoria then you can help us determine key issues for young people living in those areas and also tell us which schools you think the RORRT should visit in your area. If the RORRT has already visited the students at your school then we would love to hear about the impact you think the tour has had in your community.

For further information about the RORRT contact Kylie Lee, RORRT Manager, (in the office) 61 2 9818 3055 (on the road) 0419 434 178 (email) kylie@inspire.org.au, or check out the Reach Out! site at www.reachout.com.au.

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nots. The children lived up to or down to these expectations which were not necessarily even made explicit to them.

What Beryl Chalk, my colleague, and I did in a brief three hour workshop with the last five children, a parent of each child and their two teachers had nothing to do with traditional or non-traditional pedagogy or what schools are expected to do, and everything to do with the children as people. How significant adults in their lives viewed them and their capabilities, and opportunities the children had to express what they knew and could do as competent people mattered.

Understanding how children learn and develop social practices such as literacy and numeracy, and the role families play, in other words, the process of “intergenerational family acculturation”, can help us to remove barriers to learning. Allocating children to advantage or disadvantage on the basis of whether they are from middle or working class backgrounds seems absurd in light of intergenerational family acculturation. It is through this form of intensive learning from the earliest moments of life that young children learn how to be in, act on and learn from their world.

My work with children, their families and other adults would seem to indicate the micro and macro differences within and between families within the same class grouping are so diverse that to lump a child into one category or another based on class is another form of oppression which we can clearly do without. The individual child’s needs cannot be truly addressed when she or he is still treated as representative of a group rather than as an individual within the rich cultural and social milieu of the intergenerational family and community.

As a psychologist I was trained to think in terms of pathologies, deficits and behavioural approaches but these did not help me understand how to help people. Using behavioural interventions for most families of young children seemed insensitive to say the least. Not many had the time, energy, inclination or understanding to really succeed.

However, focusing on what was working well seemed to have a profound impact on what happened with those who came to me. I found I no longer needed to see the children. Rather their parents came with a rich narrative in which a child’s life experiences and their concomitant family expectations were embedded. In this narrative also resided the way forward.

Here are some examples of what I mean.

Liam cannot read, will not write, will not listen. He can speak. He will tell you what he thinks of you and whatever he has been asked to read or write. Christine thinks everything is funny but her peers are not amused by her. She does not “do” reading and writing. She draws tiny pictures hoping no-one will see them. Casey sits staring into the distance and plays with her pencil. She says she is thinking. She shows no interest in reading and writing and is easily distracted.

I followed these children’s learning and literacy development from when they started kindergarten at age five until the end of Year 2 during which time they turned eight years of age. With their parents I explored their intergenerational family history over three to five generations including their families’ whole of life experiences and responses to life events and circumstances.

Stephen is in a rush. This frustrates his mother who cannot read what he writes. Jody has so many ideas she never knows where to start writing. Michael is very immature. He finds it very hard to be clear about what he has to do or what he is going to do. Chris is also immature, shy and spells phonetically. He masks shyness by being very active. Marie sees everything, yet sees nothing. Her spelling is poor because she sees the whole word but is not interested or able to work out when she has spelled a word incorrectly. These children’s teachers and parents are concerned about their literacy development.

“ Understanding how children learn and develop social practices such as literacy and numeracy, and the role families play, in other words, the process of ‘intergenerational family acculturation’, can help us to remove barriers to learning ”

These children are eight years old.

Now read on ...

Liam did not think his reading was valid because he could not read university textbooks. Like everyone in his family he hid his sense of vulnerability behind academic scientific prowess. He worked hard at deflecting attention from what he saw as his weakness. Christine could not read or write or speak because she did not know how to without using her very well developed sense of humour, which went unappreciated by her peers. She chose not to participate rather than be rejected. After all, she had been given her family’s most prized role: the “wag”, the family jester. Casey liked to learn in secret and only show her learning when she was sure she had it perfect. As an only child on show at all times, perfection had been vital to her mother’s sense of wellbeing. Now this was Casey’s lot. So Casey worked hard at distracting attention from her “imperfect” learning.

These family patterns were carried into the classroom and framed how the students were learning. Yes, Liam, Christine and Casey were learning, not according to most literacy theories, but according to their families’ understanding of how the world works.

The last five children, their parents and teachers took part in activities such as musical chairs and Masterminding, a home-made adaption of the colour-codebreaking boardgame, Mastermind. The latter involved inductive and deductive reasoning to demonstrate how to pay attention to parts of the whole as well as the whole. This was followed by a narrative recording of the process (each child wrote about how the game had been played and their adult partner helped them minimally and only when they really got stuck) and storyboarding (the adult partner drew what the child told them about the process). Musical chairs became Musical Thinking. When the music stopped everyone wrote and/or drew what they were thinking at the time. The activities were designed specifically to explore families’ guiding principles about how to be in, act on and learn from the world in a powerful, non-judgemental way.

Parents saw how other children were, how they acted on and learned from their experiences and students how other adults were, how they acted on and learned from their experiences. Musical thinking helped Jody (and her teacher) stop thinking and write, Marie to locate parts of the whole and Stephen to recognise process as important. Masterminding helped Stephen’s mother appreciate that his different way of doing things was okay. Chris and Michael became Masterminding “experts” and consequently class “leaders” overnight and were no longer “immature” in their mind or actions nor in their parents’ or teachers’ perceptions. Jody’s mother realised she was not the only one who thinks “differently” and is now “going to do something with her life”. Marie’s mother is no longer anxious about her daughter’s literacy. Stephen’s mother now really appreciates what teachers do. The teachers now see learning and literacy, their students and themselves in new and exciting ways, too.

Traditional approaches to these children’s perceived

“learning difficulties” would have been to remediate their “deficits”/“delays” by more of the same that they found so difficult without addressing the underlying understandings and perceptions of themselves, their parents or their teachers which were supporting their way of being, acting on and learning from their experiences in the world. Six months after the workshop the children’s literacy had continued to improve in line with their sense of self-esteem and burgeoning confidence. All with pleasure and no pain whatsoever.

This approach came out of my work as a psychologist and educator working with children and adults across a range of issues not only those raised in education settings. It seems to me that this approach empowers all children, their parents and their teachers to reach new and exciting possibilities using their very own gifts and abilities. Such potential can be easily overlooked in our focus on where we and our children are falling short. Let’s celebrate our diverseness that is the essence of our humanity, not tear our children apart for our inadequacies.

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