The Human Relationships Education Curriculum and Gender and Violence Programs

MARTIN MILLS, University of Queensland

ABSTRACT Research has identified gender-based violence as a major issue facing Australian schools. This paper draws on data collected from two Queensland State High Schools which attempted to confront this issue by implementing gender and violence programs for boys. These programs were introduced into the school through the Human Relationships Education (HRE) curriculum. The paper argues that whilst this is not the most comprehensive means by which schools can address such concerns, it is often the most strategic. For example, in one of the schools discussed here the program in HRE served as a springboard for implementing a more whole-school approach to the problem.

...while schooling is a site for the reproduction of gender relations, it is also a site for intervention and change. (Gilbert & Taylor 1991, p. 5)

Introduction

Significant Australian research exists which demonstrates the importance of schools considering issues of gendered violence and its relationship to dominant constructions of masculinity (for example, Collins, Batten, Ainley & Getty 1996; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1994; Milligan, Thomson, Ashenden & Associates 1992; Morgan, Maddock, Hunt & Joy 1988). This research indicates that schools are places where girls and othered boys are often the victims of violence. Some schools have responded to this problem of gendered violence in schools through the implementation of programs designed specifically for boys. This paper considers aspects of two Queensland State High Schools’ attempts to implement such programs with grade 9, 11 and 12 students through the Human Relationships Education (HRE) curriculum over an eight to nine week period. I was involved in the implementation of the programs in both of these schools. The two schools are referred to here by the pseudonyms of Tamville High and Mountainview High. The paper draws on interview data collected from boys and teachers who were involved in the programs and also a senior policy officer working in the Queensland Department of Education’s Gender Equity Unit.¹

Programs which attempt to provide boys with an understanding of issues of masculinity and violence do not find their way into the curricula and structures of schools unproblematically (Dunn 1995). This paper focuses particularly on problematics related to curriculum issues rather than on pedagogical matters. Differentiating between the curriculum and pedagogy is of course somewhat arbitrary, because the concepts and their practice are inextricably linked (Grundy 1994, Weiner 1994). This is particularly the case when considering notions of the hidden curriculum (see Bowles & Gintis 1976; Henry, Knight, Lingard & Taylor 1988; Lynch 1989). The term ‘hidden curriculum’ usually refers to the powerful normalising processes which are at play in schools. For instance, the ways

¹ The Queensland Department of Education has recently been given the more corporatist title of Education Queensland, and the Gender Equity Unit has been incorporated, and ‘downsized’ in the process, into the more general Equity Unit.
in which students learn to interact with authority, accept or reject particular gender positions, to negotiate conflict and/or to accept or reject particular forms of knowledge as Truth are all aspects of what has come to be known as the hidden curriculum. Integral to the hidden curriculum are, thus, the ways teachers teach and how they relate to students. However, the distinction between the curriculum and pedagogy is used here in order to facilitate discussion of some of the issues involved in implementing 'boyswork' (Martinez 1994) programs in schools; the term 'curriculum' is thus used strategically to mean the formal school curriculum.

The focus on the curriculum in this paper is as a point of entry for gender and violence issues into schools. Foster (1994) has argued that the curriculum needs to be reformed at an epistemological level. This would entail a reconfiguring of valued knowledges and a consideration of how such knowledges contribute to, or work against, a more gender just society. Such a reconfiguration is critical in the long term. However, there are currently options within the school curriculum which provide spaces for teachers to implement strategies and to cover content which problematises issues of masculinity, sexuality and gender and violence. This can be seen in, for instance, the English curriculum (Martino 1995, Misson 1995), social science curricula (Lee 1996) and at the whole school level (see Curriculum and Gender Equity Policy Unit 1995; Patrick & Sanders 1994).

However, all too often this work is left to personal development type subjects, such as HRE, as was the case with Tamville and Mountainview High Schools. These subjects are often devalued within the school curriculum. For many of the students interviewed in the research, HRE was not a subject which was placed high on their list of priorities. That students do not take this subject seriously is not the only problem with implementing short-term programs through HRE. HRE is also a subject to which many teachers do not devote a lot of time and thought. Time is a major pressure which teachers face in schools. HRE is a non-assessable subject; it is often not attached to any clearly defined subject department, and there is little accountability in terms of the amount or types of content teachers cover in their lessons. Thus, at times HRE can be delivered in an ad hoc manner. However, at the same time, there are many dedicated teachers assigned to HRE who have a commitment to many of the philosophies inherent in programs such as those considered here. Furthermore, because of the way the curriculum is structured, HRE type subjects might provide the only opportunity in many schools for gender and violence issues to be covered by boys.

However, even with committed teachers and students who take HRE seriously, there are still problems with such programs. Dunn (1995) argues that one of the main problems with this type of program is the hope that it will be provide a 'quick fix-it solution' to an existing long-term problem. No such solutions exist. This is stressed in a position paper on gender and violence distributed by the Queensland Department of Education's Equity Unit which states that: 'One-shot' programs or programs for individual groups of students are ineffective because they do not take into consideration the ways in which gender, violence and power relations are consistently and continually constructed by the 'texts' of schooling and other societal institutions' (Equity Unit 1997, p. 8, see also Kenway & Fitzclarence 1997). This is often the case. However, whilst short-term programs which seek to problematise masculinity will not in themselves provide students with new ways of looking at the world, they are not without merit. It is possible that they can provide a basis upon which more long-term solutions can be built. They have the potential to provide a springboard from which students can come to question issues of gender and
power. Furthermore, they can also help to ‘normalise’ attitudes and beliefs which are marginalised in the cultures to which the students belong.

**HRE: A short-term solution**

A vast number of programs which find their way into schools, as was the case with the programs considered in this paper, are of the one-off variety. Schools seek to address a number of social issues through additions to the regular school curriculum, for example: driver education, first aid, sexual health, drug and alcohol education and gender and violence education. Thus, gender and violence education, like the other issues mentioned, often becomes an add-on to the official curriculum, and is usually implemented as an add-on through HRE. This is a major failing of schools which seek to improve gender relations amongst members of their school community. As Connell (1993, p. 15) has stated in regard to social justice, matters of gender justice should not be an add-on but fundamental to good educational practice.

This was a concern of a number of teachers from the two schools. For instance Rebecca from Tamville remarked:

> Like take the eight week program on its own, they’re (the students) less likely to shift if they don’t get the message reinforced...I think you know having, not having it...as just a one-off program as well I think would help kids to see that the school’s serious about it.

Rebecca’s point that students may perceive it to be tokenistic when it is only covered in a one-off program is important. Schools do need to give credibility to such programs by reinforcing and modelling non-violent forms of conflict resolution (Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997, p. 125). This credibility is further damaged when the only programs provided are presented through one of the marginalised areas of the curriculum. This can be a problem in relation to having the issues treated seriously within schools. A senior policy officer with the Queensland Department of Education’s Gender Equity Unit stated in relation to this:

> Julie: ...and I suppose in some ways HRE is the thing we have always had a problem with in terms of looking at these issues as part of the curriculum. HRE is so marginal and our preferred method of working has been for some time to work through the core curriculum and not through the marginal curriculum.

A similar sentiment was expressed by a number of the teachers who would have preferred to see gender and violence programs being part of the broader curriculum. Donna, from Mountainview, in response to the question of whether or not the HRE curriculum is an appropriate place for gender and violence issues commented:

> Donna: Well it probably is, but then I’m not too much in favour of HRE being a separate entity anyway. I come from the idea that it should be covered by every teacher in each lesson. But however if we have to have it as a separate lesson I think this is the place to do it.
Martin: And do you think kids take HRE seriously?

Donna: No not in the main. Um the more perceptive ones probably do but ah certainly most of them in the main they would not. They see it as a, a non...a lesson that is non-examinable and non-assessable and ah therefore there is very little relevance to them personally.

The comments made by students are an indication of how students perceive HRE and are thus an indication of the problems associated with attempts to implement programs through the HRE curriculum. For instance, the following comments were made by students in relation to whether or not students valued HRE at Mountainview:

Will: Not at all (laughter). Not at all it’s um I don’t know throughout the years we haven’t really got in many discussions so maybe it’s too difficult for the teachers. They’re probably not qualified to do all the stuff but we just watch these out of date movies and instead of looking at the issues we just look at the characters in it: ‘Ah he’s from Home and Away,’ or ‘Gee this is corny,’ and so I don’t think it works at all. Not at this school anyway...I mean when I look to HRE every week I just think a blank lesson. I’ve studied in a lot of them and um when we’re in holiday mode for a period I’d say so you wouldn’t get the best attention out of us.

Oscar, from the same class, provides support for Will’s opinion:

Martin: Do people take HRE seriously?

Oscar: Ah not usually no. Like because we’re just covering the same things over and over they just tend to turn out, just like a free period. Do whatever we want.

On the whole, the grade eleven students at Tamville had a more serious approach to HRE. For instance, Ben commented that ‘It’s just sort of like another class.’ Although there are still misconceptions about what constitutes the HRE curriculum. Sean for example remarked:

Some people think HRE...as soon as it comes up...they think oh it’s a bit of a joke, all you talk about is sex...and stuff like that.

For a number of grade nine students the subject HRE was often equated with the gender and violence program we had been running, there was no distinction made between the subject and the program:

Martin: Is HRE taken seriously by students?
Peter: hh yeah. I take it seriously and stuff because uhm like I don’t I try not to like ahh speak uhm foul or dirty around girls or anything like that. And uhm be careful what you say around them because they could get offended easily and uhm yeah....

This is perhaps not the main thrust of HRE, however, Peter does demonstrate that his understanding of HRE is that it has a gender dimension to it. Than, sees the lessons of HRE, which he also associates with the recently completed gender and violence program, as not being relevant to him:

Martin: Do you take HRE seriously?

Than: Ah not really...It doesn’t help me much. So I don’t get into that situation... It depends on the person whether they’re being picked on or something they might be interested in that. Some guys like they’re quite known that they’re quite strong see and then they know that they won’t be picked on see. So that’s why they don’t really take it seriously.

Martin: If we’d done it in English or if we’d done it in science would that have made a difference?

Than: No.

Martin: No? It wouldn’t have made any difference?

Than: It won’t make any difference.

Whilst many students do not have a high regard for HRE, this does not mean it is ineffective. Rebecca from Tamville, who was the grade nine class’s regular science and HRE teacher, in response to a question relating to how successful the programs were with her class, states:

(laughter) Not very (laughter).

However, she continues to say:

Not very. But I mean I find that with teaching in all sorts of respects. That you, a little bit of an input or a little bit of change is worth it. Um so I do think that seventy minutes for eight weeks in terms of teaching that’s a fair commitment and so they’ve had that sort of an exposure...I think there is more that that can be done with schools and that...could be part of an integrated approach to the issue.

HRE did have its supporters, for example Simon sees it as something special:
I think (HREs) a good position for it because it makes the kids alert that this is something special and that human relationships vary. You know I think, I think that’s a good, a good place for it.

Victoria, the HRE coordinator at Tamville, takes a pragmatic view to introducing gender and violence issues into education through the HRE curriculum. She recognises the difficulty of embedding something in the curriculum; her views on this would I am sure resonate with those educators who held significant hope for other whole school initiatives, such as the ‘language across the curriculum’ programs of the 1980s:

I think there are other places that it can be done, but I don’t think it does. Because um when you, when you have people who talk about integrating these things into other subject areas it’s been my experience that the minute you talk about integrating it into something else it gets lost...And so people will pay lip service to doing it, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritties, especially when you are dealing with a whole lot of staff...And that is the kind of thing that worries the life out of me because you can’t just guarantee that you are going to get those teachers to do it. And I mean with the best intentions in the world too, because you’ve got teachers who say, ‘Yes it’s a worthwhile thing to do.’ But they might not do it because they don’t feel comfortable with it. Or they don’t have the training in it. Or they are worried about the time constraints with other things and so it just gets left behind because it is lower and lower on their priorities all the time. Yeah. So for that reason HRE...might be the only chance you get to do it. Might be the only chance you are ever going to get to raise those issues.

The guidance officer at Mountainview expressed a similar view:

Sarah: Yeah um I don’t know. We talked about this before some people think it should be a you know in all the different subject areas. I have a real...really um strong concern regarding that because I think that it might disappear...I guess I’d still go for having specialist teachers for HRE just like you have specialist teachers for any other curriculum area and it’s a curriculum area in it’s own right perhaps.

However, Sarah also commented that the HRE programs could be supported by an across the curriculum approach to gender and violence issues.

Even though teachers saw the programs as important, they recognised that they were not going to bring about major changes in the students’ attitudes and behaviours. For as Simon states, ‘Well you’re not ...going to create miracles in an eight week program.’ Most of the teachers interviewed were in agreement with this. For example Victoria remarked:

If you are going to modify anything that’s happening it’s a slow process and um that’s the sad thing actually that you are not going to see a lot of changes just, just in a few weeks or even, or even in a year.
They cited numerous examples of the forces arraigned against them in the enormousness of the task of changing attitudes. Simon was quite emphatic about this:

You know because there’s tremendous pressure for violence. You’ve just got to look at any TV show. And I...I watched um the last twenty minutes with my daughter the other night of Melrose Place and I think there were two infidelities, a suicide, you know, a fight and a fraud, a swindle. You know. Well look at the crap that they’re getting...And all...and all those cases there’s about unequal distributions of power in relationships. You know that’s the over-arching theme of this crass modern world.

The impossibility of schools working outside of existing relations of power within the broader community is recognised in the Federal Sticks and Stones: Report on Violence in Australian Schools. The report states that: ‘It is unrealistic to draw a line at the school gate and suggest that what happens inside that boundary is the school’s business, and what happens outside that boundary is the community’s responsibility’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1994, p. 1). However, schools can be a strategic site within which normalised constructions of gender can be disrupted (Connell 1989; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill 1996; White & White 1986). Those working within schools are not powerless to effect change.

Most of the teachers interviewed here argue that it is essential that something be done in schools to begin a process of change. Their views on the role of education would have fitted neatly with Bob Connell’s (1989) argument that whilst factors such as family, employment and sexual relations are powerful influences on the formation of masculinities,

...schooling is the next most powerful influence across the board, and in some cases and some situations it is decisive. It may also be the most strategic, in the sense that the education system is the setting where an open debate about the democratisation of gender relations is most likely to happen, and can gain some purchase on practice. (Connell 1989, p. 301)

It is perhaps through the process of debate that changes can be initiated. For many of the teachers interviewed for this research, a significant aspect of the programs was seen to be the raising of consciousness about, or a bringing into discourse of, alternative subject positions for males.

Victoria: I think they (boys’ programs) raise consciousness more than anything else...So you might not change a lot of behaviours. You hope you change some, but I think it raises consciousness about a lot of issues. And that’s the thing I think is pretty important for a lot of these courses because if you don’t have them, for a lot of kids and especially for a lot of the boys, they’re never going to hear those points of view at all...They will never hear them unless somebody puts them in front of them in a structured course like this.

Thus, for many of the teachers here it was the future rather than the present which motivated their commitments to programs such as these. The boys may not demonstrate
an immediate rapport with the programs. However, there is a strong hope that some of it will take effect in the future. For instance Simon remarked:

You know you’re going to make them think...And it’s not for them now it’s for...it’s for their future. That’s why the program is important. When they’re twenty-one or twenty-two or when they...when they come home late at night and get angry with their wife they’ll restrain themselves from belting her... We’re looking for the long term aren’t we...Not just the short term playground behaviour. That’s how I see it anyway.

However, and fortunately, Rebecca noticed some recent positive changes in her grade nine class. There also appear to be other positive spin-offs from the program. So too did Simon:

You know like Than and another boy in year nine, Vang were having a kick boxing contest out on the oval the other day when I was on playground duty you know. They weren’t actually hitting each other but it could have had that potential. There was about fifty or sixty kids gathering...you know when a fight happens in a school they start gathering around and so on and ah I didn’t say anything about the program I just walked over and they saw me and they both stopped. See kids need that sort of circuit breaker sometimes.

Victoria also commented later that some of the grade 11 students had been asking about when they could have HRE again. (The grade 11 classes do not have HRE as a regular class at Tamville. HRE has to share its time slot with a variety of other school based programs, for example study skills.) However, perhaps it was at Mountainview where there appears to have been the most obvious effect of the program. It is worth giving some specific attention to some of the events which occurred at Mountainview during the course of the program there.

**Mountainview snapshot**

The Mountainview program had grown out of teachers’ concerns about the behaviours of grade 12 boys. The school’s guidance officer along with a small group of teachers, in consultation with the State Department’s Gender Equity Unit, had decided to implement separate gender and violence programs for female and male grade 12 students. The boys were divided into two groups. The first and larger group, approximately twenty-five students, consisted of those who were considered to be the most likely to respond to the program in a positive manner. The second and smaller group, approximately eight students, consisted of those who it was considered by the school would most benefit from a small group approach. This last group was facilitated by a male community psychologist, and the other by a male teacher from Mountainview and me.

It is with the larger group of boys that I am concerned with here. In the early part of the program many of the boys were very loud and vocal in their claims that the ‘gender regime’ (Connell 1987) of the school served the interests of girls, and hence was an unjust arrangement. Many of the boys clearly saw themselves as victims of feminism and demonstrated what Eva Cox has referred to as ‘a competing victim syndrome’ (Cox 1996:221; see also, Cox 1997). This is a claim which is acquiring significant currency in
popular discourse in relation to the wider ‘gender order’ (Connell 1987). For instance, the arguments that men are becoming ‘tomorrow’s second sex’ (Men: Tomorrow’s second sex, 1996, September 28-October 4) and that male power is a myth (Farrell 1993) were views articulated by many of the boys at Mountainview.

In the first session it was claimed by a large section of the class that boys were the most discriminated group in the school. They pointed to the fact that no boys held positions of responsibility in the school. One boy commented later:

James: ...at the start of the year when you came in...the boys had been bumped out for school captain and two girls had gotten it...when the guys received so many...so much of a high percentage of the student vote...that the guys were really having a bad opinion of the girls and that did cause a lot of conflict at this school....That really did. Um, just the fact that the boys felt unrepresented. They felt left out. Unneeded. Um, I heard a parent say, she had two young boys, ...she said that, ‘If that’s the way that males are treated at Mountainview State High School, I will not be sending my children up there.’

This feeling of injustice was similar to that being displayed by some of the boys in the study carried out by Kenway, Willis, Blackmore, and Rennie (1997, p. 25). The perceived discrimination that the Mountainview boys were facing was reflected in a list the boys drew up of the most powerful groups in the school. They positioned grade 8 boys as the least powerful and the grade 12 girls as the most powerful groups amongst the student body. Thus, the victim politics of mythopoetic and men’s rights claims were impossible to sidestep and had to be confronted head-on.

This was easier said than done. The resistances we met from the boys were significant, even though this group of boys was considered to be the group who would be most responsive to the issues. Some of them commented later that they had done programs like this so many times before that it had been boring. One for instance stated:

Luke: Last year we had a program for just boys. We’d been told that we were a problem group of boys. Someone special had been brought in for a day to work for us. Then we heard that two people were coming in to do the same thing again this year and we thought ‘Here we go again’!

The depth of feeling in the room and the anger which was directed at women from the first session, and at a later date also at gays, would seem to indicate that more than boredom was at play.

One student did attribute this resentment to other sources:

James: I think that a lot of people our age associate these sorts of issues with gay and being gay and all the rest of it. So I think they were afraid of that sort of area and just as a result resent the program I guess.
If, amongst these boys, homosexuality was associated with being supportive of feminist aims or of gay rights, many of them went to great lengths to demonstrate their heterosexuality.

Some argued emphatically that they were the victims of feminism, and a number of activities elicited angry responses about feminists, often referred to in the increasingly popular term as ‘feminazis’. One student stated, after a newspaper activity examining the positioning of men and women in news stories, that the dominance of men in the public sphere was ‘natural’. According to this student, the reversal of the ‘natural state of affairs’ at the school was because there were too many feminists in the school and that the girls at the school were protected by the administration. Thus, in the ‘real world’, as opposed to the ‘non-real world’ of school, girls would find it difficult to succeed because of their inferiority. This boy had significant support from his classmates.

The anger towards women and gays was clearly evident in an activity which allowed students to make comments and ask questions anonymously. Some of these comments and questions included: ‘Boys will be boys, and girls will have all the power’; ‘What right do gays have to have rights?’; ‘Women want to be equal to men at work. Why do they want things over men?’; ‘Why do women want equal rights with regard to work etc. but still want ladies first’; ‘Why does a feminist act like a Nazi?’; ‘Why should women be treated equally?’; and ‘If they’re banning semi-autos why not ban flags?’. This last comment/question was a reflection of the rhetoric of the gun lobby’s responses to the anti-gun laws being proposed by the Federal government after the Port Arthur massacre, an event which occurred during the course of the program. A number of boys drew on the homophobic and misogynist aspects of the gun lobby arguments in order to define their perceptions of being a ‘real’ man. (See Connell, 1995, pp. 212-16 for a discussion of gun lobby style masculinity politics in the United States.)

Interestingly, however, as time went on a number of boys began to privately express their concerns with the way things were progressing in class and began to offer suggestions about how we could improve the program. During the course of one lesson, a student responded to the activity by stating quite emphatically and eloquently that the issues were not irrelevant, but that they had covered them so many times before that it had become monotonous. This was reflected in some of the anonymous comments at the end of the lesson: ‘We have heard all this before and though we might not act like it we know the right thing’ and ‘You’re the one who thinks there is a problem. We know all the right answers to all the questions. It’s just that we are sick of doing this type of thing. You’re so easy to make things difficult for.’

At this point we decided to abandon the planned program, to put our doubts aside and to work with the assumption that many of them found the issues relevant. In the lesson following these suggestions we asked them to think of some ways in which the issues of gender and violence could be tackled within the school. If they knew there was a problem, what could they do about it? After substantial dialogue, it was suggested by one boy that they could implement with the grade eight boys a similar program to the one we had been providing to them. A number of the grade twelve boys argued that the school administration would never let them work with grade eights. However, approximately half of the group volunteered to do this work if the administration agreed. Some of these boys had been those most vocal in their criticisms of the program.

Contrary to the boys’ expectations, when this idea was taken to the school administration they were very supportive. The grade twelve boys were provided with time off school to attend a day long in-service style program and were invited to attend the year
eight camp to run a session with the boys there. During the course of this in-service the year twelve students were provided with a theoretical background to constructivist theories of gender (given by a senior policy officer from the Department of Education’s Gender Equity Unit), with the opportunity to trial and select some activities they could do with the grade eight boys, and with time to express their hopes and fears about doing this work.

Some problems did occur with the implementation of the grade eight program. The camp was cancelled due to a lack of interest on the part of the grade eights, and the activities had to be done at school. These activities, which were largely drawn from Salisbury and Jackson (1996), were not implemented in what would probably be considered an optimal manner. Those grade twelve students who were well prepared did well with their groups of grade eights. However, some of them rushed through the program too quickly, leaving them with little to do with the grade eights in the remaining allocated time; some of the grade eight students’ responses to the grade twelve boys made aspects of their program a little difficult to implement; and due to reasons such as these there was perhaps a little more teacher intervention than had been intended. However, what is important here is that many of the grade twelve boys at Mountainview who had been very antagonistic towards issues of gender equity were prepared to engage, even if only momentarily, with what Connell (1995) has referred to as an ‘exit politics’: that is a masculinity politics which brings into question the legitimacy of dominant ways of performing masculinity.

Connell (1995, p. 224) says that such a politics are likely to be episodic. This would appear to be the case at Mountainview High. Many of the boys who chose to work in the grade eight program were concerned about issues of sexual harassment and male violence towards women. They wanted to see change, and be part of that change. However, at the same time many of these boys still attributed behavioural differences between males and females to ‘nature’, and some whilst recognising the legitimacy of various feminist claims trivialised others, and in some instances argued that ‘many feminists go too far.’ These latter attitudes reflect aspects of reactionary masculine politics, but the boys’ willingness to engage in change shows how such politics are not always as monolithic as they seem. Thus, whilst these boys at times prop up the existing gender order, they have also demonstrated that they can work within the cracks and fissures of dominant masculine practice, thereby undermining its stability. They provided substance to Connell’s (1994, p. 5, original emphasis) claim that: ‘Support for women’s emancipation is always a possible stance for men.’

Opportunities to demonstrate this support have paradoxically been opened up through the ‘what about the boys?’ backlash. The work done at Mountainview High represents an attempt to engage with this debate. However, it has done this not by treating boys as victims, and hence seeking to make the school more ‘boy friendly’ (Fletcher 1995a), but by examining the effects of dominant representations of masculinity for girls and boys. The boys who engaged with this program demonstrated to themselves and others that whilst at times they might feel that they are powerless victims, they are also able to be active agents who can take on the responsibility of working with other boys to problematise masculinity.
Conclusion

The experiences at Mountainview demonstrate that even though it is preferable to have a whole school approach to gender and violence issues, one-off programs implemented through the HRE curriculum do have the ability to bring about change. However, the events there also indicate that such issues cannot stay within the confines of the HRE curriculum, but need to become part of the broader school community. The potential of the outcomes from the HRE program at Mountainview to bring about alterations in the gendered relations of power at the school hinge upon the success of the grade 12 boys to continue their work with the younger boys outside of the official curriculum. HRE has served as a starting point for introducing gender and violence as a social justice concern into the lives of a number of boys in the school. It must not be the endpoint as well.

The use of HRE is therefore a question of strategy. It is one accessible point of entry into schools for discourses which can disrupt the legitimacy of masculine hegemonic arrangements. It is not necessarily an optimum means of addressing gender issues. However, it has important implications. The inclusion of gender and violence programs anywhere in the curriculum helps to disrupt any pretensions that might exist about the neutrality of the school curriculum. It indicates that schools are prepared to take some responsibility for a social problem. However, in doing this it is important that the dominant construction of masculinity, and the consequent effects of such a construction, is treated as a social issue. In problematising hegemonic discourses it needs to be understood though that whilst not totalising, hegemonic masculine discourses hold a powerful position within Australian society. The adoption of such an understanding will help to acknowledge the small gains that are made through the introduction of such programs. Thus, any attempt on the part of boys to disrupt these discourses has to be seen as a significant step towards promoting gender justice. As Simon states:

It’s a pretty big thing. A pretty big ask for kids for children. But when they become adults hopefully they’ll...some of them will see that there’s a different way.

Changing the dominant construction of masculinity is a big ask. Schools must not expect too much change on the part of boys without seeking to change the support structures offered by schools for such changes. Thus, as Foster (1994b) states:

Schools... have a responsibility to provide learning environments that are supportive of all students. The work of schools should also encourage students an examination of male-female relations, and a rejection of the notion of women and the feminine as ‘other’ to men and the masculine. In my view, this task can just as profitably be approached through fundamental curriculum reform, particularly at the epistemological level, as by working directly to change the attitudes of individual students. (Foster 1994b, p. 7)

It should be stressed here that the support of the school administration at Mountainview was significant in providing in-service time (and finances) for teachers and students. The sense of importance that the administration allocated to this program was not lost on the
boys involved in preparing to work with the grade eight boys. The extent to which this program continues to operate will be largely determined by the support it is given by the Mountainview administration. It is also important that the school does not rely upon such programs to bring about change. Thus, boys’ programs which are conducted through HRE courses need to be seen as an introductory step, not as an end in themselves. For as Dunn (1995, p. 58) has argued, ‘...schools should operate in such a way as to make discrete boys’ programs unnecessary in the long term’.

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