

Boys' schools examined afresh

Critical reflection is needed for a good progress report, writes Jason Bantjes

DURING the course of this week leaders of boys' schools from around the world will gather in Cape Town for the annual conference of the International Boys' Schools Coalition.

This meeting is an important event on the calendar of all concerned with the education of boys. The conference, which will be attended by the heads of most, if not all, of SA's boys' schools, provides an opportunity for local educators, parents and policymakers to think about the challenges faced by the country's contemporary single-sex educational institutions.

South African boys' schools are among the oldest schools in the country and their histories are tightly intertwined with the country's colonial past and apartheid legacy.

These schools were established in the tradition of English public schools, with a strong focus on competitive sport and a distinctly masculine culture. Boys' schools have tended to position themselves as exclusive and elite, privileging and celebrating very particular ways of being and doing.

Traditionally, these schools have had a history of exclusion and were largely inaccessible to the country's black majority, poor families and boys with disabilities. In some ways, many of South Africa's boys' schools still reflect the values and ideals one might associate with elitism, capitalism and colonialism, says the writer.



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average it seems that boys do better academically socially and psychologically when they attend single-sex schools.

This is important within the context of global trends that show how poorly males are performing in schools and universities compared to their female peers. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of local research about how males are performing in SA's educational institutions, which highlights the need for local researchers to determine what kinds of educational environments are good for our boys and what practices promote and hinder their psychosocial development and educational attainment.

If we accept the evidence from high-income countries that boys' schools are good for most boys, then we must consider critically which of our boys have access to these institutions. Unfortunately, access to single-sex schools in SA has been restricted in the past and any benefits that might accrue from attending these institutions have not fallen on the poorest and most marginalised members of society.

Under apartheid, white parents with able-bodied sons had the choice of sending their boys to single-sex institutions. In addition public money was invested in creating schools dedicated to the education of white able-bodied boys. These single-sex schools were established in what were white-only residential areas and little or no thought was given to making the school environments physically accessible. By contrast, most black parents had no choice but to send their children to coeducational schools.

Post-1994, access to boys' schools has improved and these institutions have become more racially, although not necessarily socio-economically, diverse. Previously white-only boys' schools now offer education to boys from black middle-class families, bursaries have been made available to boys from historically disadvantaged communities who show sporting or academic talent, and some space has been made for boys with disabilities to gain access.

Researchers have, however, noted with concern that the racial transformation of SA's previously white-

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only schools has not been accompanied by a change in their culture: black learners who attend these schools are often required to assimilate into the dominant culture. It has been suggested that in this process of cultural assimilation, many black learners are subject to acts of micro-aggression which force them to separate from their own cultural heritage.

This is not a phenomena unique to boys' schools and is probably true of many of the country's ex-model C schools, but it is nonetheless an im-

portant consideration for traditional boys' schools who might be deeply invested in preserving their culture and ethos at the expense of becoming more inclusive.

In terms of access to boys' schools, there are two implicit challenges. The first of these is to find ways to allow the poorest members of our society to also have the choice of single-sex education and to open these spaces to boys with disabilities by making sure these institutions are accessible.

The second challenge is to ensure boys' schools are truly inclusive in terms of how they make space for and support diversity, a process that may entail a change in institutional culture and letting go of some traditions.

Another way in which boys' schools may unwittingly perpetuate exclusionary practices is through their production and reproduction of masculinity traditional gender roles and heteronormative ideologies. This brings into focus the responsibility boys' schools have to examine how they are implicated in the privileging of particular forms

of masculinity while subjugating and denigrating other ways of expressing gender and sexuality.

Of course, the dominant ideas about masculinity which are reproduced by local boys' schools have been shaped by the country's socio-political and economic history of slavery, war, violence and apartheid. Local scholars such as Breckenridge, Swart and Morrell have described how dominant forms of masculinity in SA have traditionally valorised characteristics such as physical strength, courage, and an acceptance of hierarchical authority.

In 19th century Boer republics, for example, it was commonplace for white Afrikaner boys from a young age to be organised into Boer Commandos; militaristic social structures which encouraged performances of brute strength, courage and physical domination through violence.

Similarly in colonial Natal, boys' schools employed compulsory participation in sports like rugby to inculcate values such as physical prowess and bravery, as well as ideas

of racial superiority, gender hierarchy, and class chauvinism.

The discovery of gold and diamonds in the north of the country between 1900 and 1950 gave rise to a migrant labour system and the creation of large hostels for men who worked as miners. The high concentration of male miners living together under harsh conditions and doing dangerous work fashioned explicitly racial masculinities characterised by inter-personal violence, risk-taking and enduring physical pain.

In indigenous black cultures, socialisation of boys entailed training in fighting with traditional weapons, which was a practice deliberately employed to instil discipline, courage, and fighting skills.

Under apartheid, similar values were apparent in the white Nationalist government's response to insurgency. Conscription of white men into the South African Defence Force under apartheid also contributed to creating models of masculinity which are congruent with military ideas of control, power, domination and violence.

This history has created dominant forms of masculinity in SA which are distinctly pugilistic and predicated on heroic displays of toughness, fearless defence of honour, physical domination, control, risk-taking, the use of strategy and violence, and male camaraderie.

There is a danger that boys' schools which are not prepared to reflect critically on their own traditional practices may inadvertently allow exaggerated performances of these "masculine" values and in so doing create restrictive and oppressive gender norms which result in bullying and violence against those who fall outside of what is considered "manly".

The explicit challenge is for boys' schools to think critically about how resources and the exercising of authority within the school may reflect and reinforce unhealthy ideas about power, manhood and masculinity.

The particular history of local boys' schools has left these institutions with the challenge of how to honour their pasts, preserve their culture and celebrate masculinity without being elitist, exclusionary or patriarchal.

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