

PREFACE

● SHE'S FIFTEEN. She used to get high grades and was really motivated until her so-called friends decided that she was no longer 'cool'. No boyfriend. She didn't talk about boys in the way they did and wouldn't even have one drink when they went to parties on the weekend. Putting on some weight didn't help either. Things got worse the day some boys noticed her school uniform stained with a small patch of blood as she returned to class after being granted permission to 'leave the room'. 'Period patch' they shrieked and burst into hysterical laughter as she walked by after class. It wasn't hard saying goodbye to her old friends because she had learned too quickly that they weren't really true friends, but she couldn't escape their bitchiness or the boys' cruel harassment that easily. She also became known as the dyke with the 'period patch'. Every morning when she woke up she felt that she wouldn't be able to endure another day. Plus her dieting had become so severe that she had started to feel weak and just found it difficult to concentrate in class sometimes. She also became good at living a lie at home. She would eat only to throw up afterwards in the toilet.

Meanwhile, her former friends are feeling other kinds of pressures – apart from having to look good, they are going to parties on the weekend, binge drinking, having unsafe sex, learning how to stay 'cool' and how to get a 'reputation'. They're not tight or frigid! It's not that easy being a girl, especially when boys and other girls start calling you a 'slut' behind your back.

But all schools offer compulsory Health and Sexuality education curriculum and have harassment policies, don't they? But to what extent are they adequately addressing these issues? To what extent is there a denial about the extent of such policing of sexuality and gender in

young people's lives at school? After all, isn't this mainly about girls' 'out of school' behaviour which has no bearing on their learning?

Meanwhile, we're told by politicians and policymakers that girls are doing better than boys at school, that sex education has gone far enough, that girls are no longer victims of harassment.

● HE'S FOURTEEN, quiet, not into 'real' sport, loves reading, does dance classes. Some of the 'cool' boys call him 'gay', 'tampon-head', 'nerd'. One of his teachers, a late twenties 'cool' male teacher hired by the principal to be a role model to the boys, hears these cool boys talking like this but says nothing. They're just having a laugh, he rationalises. Another male teacher, also meant to be a role model for the boys, with the aim of encouraging them to read and write, allows a boy in the class to read out a verse of poetry. Since boys don't like writing poetry the teacher's strategy is to get the students to use their own language and to choose content that appeals to their peers. The class erupts into laughter as the boy reads his poem out aloud in a feigned exaggerated lisp. It's about a male student called 'tampon-head'. He has a boyfriend who is a ballet dancer. The teacher laughs, the students laugh. They're 'just being cool'. See, boys can really read and write. All they need is good male role models!

The quiet boy withdraws. He gets a reputation as a 'loner'. He just doesn't fit in with other boys. He should mix more with other boys, play a bit of football, just make more of an effort, some teachers tell his parents. He lacks social skills, they think. His parents receive his end-of-term report card and note his declining performance in several subjects. When the parents meet with the school counsellor and year co-ordinator, they are told their son is a 'fringedweller', 'immature', 'not mixing with the other boys in normal activities like football'.

Meanwhile, we're told by politicians and policymakers that we need male teachers in schools, that the 'feminisation' of schools has led to a 'crisis of masculinity', that boys' brains can't read or learn as well as girls so they need special programs and incentives like paying their parents to buy books, that sexual diversity is not to be discussed in schools, that homophobia is not such an issue in boys' lives at school as we are making it out to be.

‘They’re too scared to ask us what’s really going on’ or ‘They just don’t really want to know about what’s really going on because then they would have to deal with the real issues’, some students tell us. This book arose out of our ongoing frustration and incredulity at the widening chasm between what is happening to and for students in schools, and what right-wing backlash politicians and policymakers say is happening in schools and what needs to be done.

This book also arose out of our ongoing frustration and empathy with teachers and school counsellors who are working with the realities every day while framed and confined by the rhetoric of policy and politics.

Why don’t we ask students what’s happening in their lives at school? What are we afraid to hear? What will that mean for policy and politics? Are we invested in maintaining a schooling system constructed by adults, policed and framed by an adult culture based on misogynistic and heteronormative power and privilege? Why do we individualise the concern rather than address our school structures, policies and culture? And why do some teachers fear losing their jobs or their status if they dare to ask these questions?

So this is a book for teachers by students who worked with us to get their voices heard. Each chapter draws on the perspectives and writings of boys and girls and uses these to build up a specific knowledge about what it means to be a boy and a girl at school, what it means to be ‘cool’ and ‘normal’, and the effect of these social constructions on learning and relationships.

We deliberately foreground student voices and experiences so that you can explore and understand the social construction of gender and how it impacts on both girls’ and boys’ lives at school. This is important knowledge for teachers and those working in schools.

Student welfare or pastoral care policies in schools are silent about the effects of certain forms of gendered power relations on both learning and the social cultures of masculinity and femininity. Our intention is to make student voices and perspectives accessible to teachers in order to help build a threshold knowledge for teachers on gender and schooling.

At the end of each chapter we have included focus group discussions that are designed to function as Professional Development

workshops or discussion forums for teachers. These workshops translate the content of the chapter into a form which can be applied to one's local school in order to generate deeper understandings about students' lives and experiences of gender. This culminates in a chapter that is devoted to providing guidelines for schools as a basis for recasting or reformulating their existing student welfare policies. What is provided here is a template for schools to work through a process of building a teacher threshold knowledge about gender diversity and schooling, and to articulate this in the form of a whole school based approach to addressing difference and interrogating what it means to be 'normal' or 'cool'.

We hope this book will be a useful resource for teachers and schools, and contribute in significant ways to further discussion about the gaps and silences in current school-based policies and approaches to addressing social justice, difference and diversity.

We also hope this book encourages you and provides practical support in undertaking your own research into the realities of your own school. Let's ask the students, let's question our adult cultures and investments, let's connect the rhetoric of policy to the reality of people, place and practice.

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INTRODUCTION:

Acknowledging student voice

When given the opportunity to write about their experiences at school, what do Australian students say? What do they tell us about the effects of what it means to be ‘really cool’? How do their perspectives relate to current educational policies and practices in schools concerning ‘pastoral care’, addressing harassment and the commitment to creating safe schools? Based on what young people from different kinds of schools reported, this book provides insight into the impact of school cultures and structures on student relations and learning.

We wanted to give students the opportunity to write from a ‘private’ anonymous space where they were not subjected to the conventional forms of surveillance and policing from within the school and from teachers and their peers. In this sense, our work is grounded in a particular politics committed to hearing and recording the voices of young people (see also Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1998; Haag, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001). We believe that they have much to offer educators in terms of providing insight into improving the quality of learning and schooling (see Ancess, 2003; Lingard, B, Hayes, D, Mills, M & Christie, P, 2003). However, we are conscious that recording their voices is not entirely unproblematic and that researchers are implicated in a set of power relations that involve the authorisation of particular realities. Keeping this in mind, we are conscious of not wanting to colonise student voice in a way that subscribes to a tendency that masks the politics of knowledge production (Lather, 1990; Martino, 2003). As Trinh (1990) states: