DEAKIN UNIVERSITY | DEAKIN CENTRE FOR RESEARCH FOR EDUCATIONAL IMPACT

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Volume 3 / Number 4 / October 2026

Understanding gender perspectives among elite private boys' school alumni: 1970-present

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THE PROJECT

This project was initiated following a series of high-profile media reports about students from elite all boys' schools publicly engaging in misogynistic conduct, and earlier research showing how the cultures of elite private boys' schools can support the unchecked growth of dominant, violent modes of masculinity. Alumni of elite schools in Australia are over-represented in positions of influence and power in corporate and public life, and therefore their modes of masculinity – including their views and values related to gender and other social justice issues – matter, because they are more likely to influence the lives of others.

This project investigated the perspectives of men who attended elite boys' schools in Australia between the 1970s and the late 2010s, including how they developed ideas about gender both within their schools and in their lives more broadly. The project sought to find out more about how such men across the generations understand gender issues, how they construct their responsibility for working toward gender equity, and how school cultures and experiences beyond schooling may have supported them to value gender equity and become 'good men'.

Thirteen alumni from elite private boys' schools around Australia were interviewed and invited to reflect on their memories of what sort of boy or man was most highly valued at their school, what they learnt about women or girls while at school, and how their lives outside and post-school shaped their views and understandings about gender equity and other social justice issues.

KEY FINDINGS

We found that the men's engagement with gender equity was varied and shaped by a broad 'curriculum of privilege' including school and non-school based experiences such as family, university, and corporate workplaces. Key findings include:

- **Sport and masculine dominance in elite boys' schools**: Alumni remembered their schools as places where rowing and football were at the top of the hierarchy, and bullying was common practice. Women and girls were scarcely seen in leadership roles. Novels studied in English literature included *American Psycho* and *Richard III*, containing misogynistic depictions of gender, and reading lists featuring few female authors. Relationships and sexuality education was recalled as minimal and not helpful for learning about girls. Despite these structural factors, some recalled key messages about good character and gender equity from individual teachers and leaders that had a lasting impact.
- **Generational distinctions in alumni's attitudes toward gender issues, feminism and gender equity**: Older men (over 40) were more likely to be concerned about social changes brought about by feminist and queer social movements, and worried about the influence of popular and digital culture on contemporary ideas about gender fluidity and sexism. Younger men, by contrast, were more comfortable and familiar with contemporary public and political discourse about gender, and feminism, and more aware of the contemporary focus on issues such as gendered violence and its impacts on women and girls.
- **The influence of mothers, friends and feminism**: Interactions with important female figures in their lives, such as mothers and University lecturers, shaped the men's later ideas about gender, power and equity. One participant spoke about having a feminist mother who shaped his thinking about gender equity and the role of women. Others spoke about encountering feminism at University and female friends who changed their thinking about gender.
- **Gender in the corporate workplace**: The corporate workplaces many alumni occupied post school were important contradictory scenes where markers of globalised corporate progressivism – such as gender equity targets – sat alongside ongoing gender discrimination and sexism. Many alumni recognised ongoing gender inequity in elite professions such as medicine, law and business, believing change was required but stopping short of becoming advocates for change.

> "Our principal was explicit about what the ideals were, and it wasn't about using your influence and success for your own good, it was for the betterment of the world"
> — Patrick, 24

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some key actions that could be introduced in the 'curriculum of privilege' to support privileged boys to become good men, including working toward gender justice. Key recommendations for consideration by school leaders include:

- Prioritise implementation of the respectful relationships curriculum and address how this aligns with, and enhances, the focus on character education that already exists in many elite schools. This would help address how the structures of elite schooling, not just individual teachers or leaders, can support gender equity and social justice.
- Encourage boys to explore and engage with empathy and care through their existing character education programs, to explore and critically evaluate their feelings about traditionally feminised and caring professions such as teaching, and to study examples of where these values have thrived in more corporate 'masculinised' work places.
- Harness boys' familiarity with contemporary digital culture to investigate the tech billionaires who own companies like Meta, Palantir and Open AI, and how they are shaping the many challenges currently faced by liberal democracies. Elite boys' school alumni are overrepresented in positions of corporate and public power, and it's essential that they understand and critically evaluate the vision and impacts of decisions being made by the men who are currently the richest and most powerful globally.
- Include books by female authors in English literature, and encourage boys to read books written by women, and by feminists.

NEXT STEPS

There is a need to continue researching how elite schools are trying to educate boys to become good men, and the impacts of an elite boys' school education on alumni. We are seeking to work with elite schools to look at the alignment between character education and respectful relationships education, and how these two important areas of curriculum might respond to the significant challenges that liberal democracies are currently facing globally.

We are also interested in working further with elite schools to understand, via alumni engagement, the impact of their character education and respectful relationships programs beyond the school gates. We are currently seeking funding from the Australian Research Council for this work and are looking for schools to partner with us.

> "It's inherently difficult to be a woman in surgery. At the top end... Where the actual surgeons are, it's still very male dominated"
> — Andrew, 47

REFERENCE

Charles, C.E., Variyan, G. & McKnight, L. The curriculum of privilege: elite private boys' school alumni's engagements with gender justice. *Australian Educational Researcher* **51**, 1015–1033 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-023-00665-1

FUNDING

REDI small grant.

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