

International Boys' Schools Conference

South African Boys' Schools Conference

Bishops, March 2009

Conference Report

The conference seems to have been a great success and a valuable opportunity for leaders in Boys' Schools to come together, share ideas and affirm their identity as schools for boys.

Evaluation forms indicated that the conference was well organised and that the format was very good. The keynote speakers were well received and while not everyone enjoyed all the speakers, it does seem that different speakers appealed to different members of the audience. Feedback about the workshops was positive and delegates commented that they enjoyed the opportunity to meet in smaller groups, share ideas, and focus on specific issues.

Problems were experienced with catering, a lack of liquid refreshments, and poor ventilation in the conference venue. These problems were exacerbated by the uncharacteristically hot weather.

Attendance at the conference was disappointing. There were only 90 delegates present from 30 different Boys' Schools. It is not clear why this was the case but it might be worth investigating further.

Some delegates felt that the conference was overly Eurocentric and dominated by men. It was noted that there was only one female keynote speaker and no black speakers. An opinion was expressed that future conferences might need to be more multicultural and inclusive.

Ideas shared at the conference which seemed to resonate with the delegates included:

- The portrait of support and encouragement painted by Dr Ian McCallum in his story about saying to boys, “It’s not your time yet. Your time will come.”
- The discussion during the spirituality workshop which revealed the clear purpose of Christianity in schools as being about inclusivity and compassion.
- John Gilmour’s challenge to embrace risk.
- The prompts to critically question and reflect on accepted practices in our schools.
- The importance of understanding our own environments better and best practice in educating boys.
- The need to slow down, reflect on what we are doing, and deepen our understanding of ourselves.
- The importance of relationships in our schools (relationships between teachers and learners/teachers and parents/teachers and teachers).
- The important role teachers play as role models (“What we are, influences what they become.”)
- The theme of masculinity which ran through the conference. This prompted delegates to think about how they might engage boys in debates and discussions about masculinity.
- The need to reflect on and be conscious of the kind of men our schools are trying to fashion.
- The challenge presented that Independent schools create really good “seconds in command”.
- The need to consider how we might reduce stress and strain in our schools (particularly on staff).
- The importance of connectedness with self.
- The need for balance and the importance of taking care of ourselves.
- The need for teachers to be more self-reflective.
- The interplay between nature and nurture was discussed; each speaker spoke about the biological differences between girls and boys and how brain functioning and structure influence behaviour BUT that we can still influence the world of our students, we have the power to choose and keep the values and the truths that we know.

- The idea that teenagers are a work in progress; they make mistakes and are open to even more mentoring which is our responsibility
- The importance of enabling boys to make connection with who they are – the need to focus on helping them to developing knowledge of themselves.
- The need for leaders in our schools to take stock of the well-being of their staff and promote more self care rather than adding to their stress levels by lack of flexibility and understanding.
- The need for debate and discussion in our schools about how to connect to those who live “on the other side of the fence”.
- The need for “bullying” to be a constant item on the agenda in Boys’ Schools.
- The importance of sex education in Boys’ Schools as an ongoing process and the need for us to keep re-visiting both the content and the mode of delivery in sex education classes.
- The importance of creativity in teaching and educating boys.
- The importance of sharing our best lessons with one another.
- The findings of the IBSC research on what works for teaching boys and in particular the importance of relationship in the teaching process.

Delegates seemed to value the opportunity to hear and share ideas about best practice in the education of boys. Many delegates commented that they would like to hear more about the research on practices that work in Boys’ Schools. More discussion on the specific needs of boys is needed and in particular how we might meet these needs.

Reflecting on the ideas shared at the conference, delegates considered the following to be among the biggest challenges currently facing South African Boys’ Schools:

- The need to re-evaluate accepted practice, traditions, and concepts of masculinity. (Our need to “refine the treasure” rather than throw the baby out with the bathwater).
- Who are the change agents in our schools? How do we get into those “in between spaces”?

- Addressing initiation and other similar practices in our schools. (There is a place for it, but it must be a positive experience. The need to debate its purpose and think about how we can promote bonding. The importance of remembering why these practices exist in our schools.)
- Choices for boys – are we expecting too much of 18 year olds? Perhaps adult wisdom needs to regain control of those “in between spaces”. Are we “maturing” our children too early?
- Damage done to all Boys’ Schools through, for example the headlines about bullying incidents (like the one at Parktown).
- Alcohol abuse (the management of this, parental involvement, social messages, etc.)
- Addressing the relationship between the models of masculinity that exist in Boys’ Schools and antisocial behaviour such as bullying and alcohol abuse.
- The need to establish healthy definitions of masculinity in Boys’ Schools.
- The need for Boys’ Schools to honour rites of passage rituals (such as the fathers and sons weekends, epic etc) and preserve positive images of manhood.
- The importance of finding authentic connections within the school community.
- The need to develop partnerships with parents (bringing parents back into the school environment as active players in their sons’ lives).
- Finding ways to engage fathers (in particular) in the process of parenting boys.
- The need for our schools to take a lead in social responsibility. We need to develop ideas on how to be agents of social change. The challenges of multicultural education need to be addressed.
- Making contact with the boy that has completely disengaged.
- Helping boys to find things to believe in or invest in when they leave school (other than the individual goals they aspire to such as financial achievement). It was offered as a possibility that ecological issues may be a necessary focus for the younger generation and might provide them with a “purpose” beyond themselves.

- To develop and recognise Emotional Intelligence in schools.

Delegates at the conference identified the following specific practices that they would like to change or introduce in their own schools:

- Establish a forum across Boys' Schools to address initiation issues and other rituals. (An opportunity to share and critically examine practices in one another's schools. Using the collective wisdom to identify alternative practices.)
- Establish rites of passage experiences and rituals which initiate boys into positive models of masculinity.
- Broaden the "alternative" extra-curricular programmes (expand the range of activities that boys are engaged in beyond the traditional boys' sports (for example make the cultural programme part of the mainstream programme).
- Identify strategies for teachers to connect better with learners on a whole school basis.
- Implement strategies designed to achieve good classroom management / discipline and mutual trust and respect.
- Introduce an experience similar to the Bishops Epic
- Encourage competition which is really positive, rather than a "win at all costs" attitude.
- Review strategies used in the school to engage and involve parents.
- Seek to work in greater collaboration with other Boys' Schools to share resources, experiences and wisdom.
- Find balance!

Individual delegates gave the following examples of changes they personally wanted to make or try, following what they had been exposed to at the conference:

- Critically review and amend "old", accepted practices.
- Establish a sense of "connectedness" with staff and re-evaluate the school's position with regard to where they want to be (particularly with regard to clientele's expectations).

- Remember that our core business is education, growth of young men and their souls: that's why we are here.
- Initiate conversation around boundaries – guarding children's space, adult responsibilities
- Implement the research findings of the IBSC report on best practice in teaching boys.
- Get to know the boys better and take more of an interest in their personal lives in order to deepen relationships with them.
- Introduce an Energy audit and by so doing, improve the ecological awareness of the school community.
- Increase father-son involvement (guide).
- Prompt personal reflection on current teaching practice.
- Look after myself as a teacher.
- Remember that teachers have the right to change their minds; risk taking also leads to change.
- Remember that sometimes it is necessary to "re-invent the wheel" for growth/change/relevance of education.
- Make a conscious effort to recognise not only negatives in system, but moreover positives of Boys' Schools and learner development.
- Seek to understand how boys are different (from girls) and what their specific needs are.
- Be more self reflective
- Engage more in the one-to-one dialogue with each person I come into contact with (deepen connections).

The feedback received seemed to indicate that conferences like this which focus specifically on the education of boys are important and should be established as an ongoing tradition. In particular the relationship between the IBSC and South African Boys' Schools is an important one which needs to be continued and deepened.