

Inquiry Into Restorative Practices in Youth Settings:

Background:

Menslink has had some involvement with Restorative Practices, founding Chairperson David Roberts is a qualified trainer in education practices and CEO Richard Shanahan, (a qualified educational facilitator) toured the United States recently and visited one of the founding centres- Real Justice and the Shankhill Project in Northern Ireland.

About Men's Link:

Incorporated in 2002, Men's Link is a dynamic, not for profit community organisation that promotes the value, well-being and social participation of men, in particular young men, by providing appropriate and professional services with outreach activities. In practical terms Men's Link was formed because of particular needs arising in our community that required a specialised community service that was good at engaging young men. Past Patrons for Men's Link programs have included Rob de Castella and local Citizen Of The Year Bob Sobey. Current co-patrons include six times Tour de France rider and Atlanta Olympian Stephen Hodge

Some of the reasons we exist include:

- Higher drop out rates and truancy rates from school
- Higher risks of suicide (4:1)
- Higher risk of criminal involvement and incarceration
- Shortage of male role models in schools and the general community
- Young men are by far more likely to be the victims and perpetrators of violence outside of the domestic situation

Where do referrals come from?

- A large percentage from single mums (70%)
- Schools
- Youth Justice
- Family Services
- Young men (self referral)

Statements addressing the Inquiry:

1. Menslink supports wider implementation of Restorative practices in the Youth sector particularly in the school system. Implementation should blend with current successful practices such as mediation, counselling, school disciplinary policy etc. Restorative principles could be utilised to influence overall safety and community development by drawing on the strong principles of restorative practices. Such principles would be instilled at a macro level in the school's policy, values and strategic plan. It would also be instilled in the micro level by having trained facilitators within the school community, capable of facilitating conferences.

2. Student involvement and education in restorative practices is important, this could be achieved by inclusion of restorative practices in curriculum, in discussions at student levels such as SRC's etc.
3. Careful consideration needs to be given to who is appointed as facilitators in the school environment. Certain positions such as the school deputy principle/welfare teachers etc have dual roles that may contraindicate involvement in certain situations. Involvement of students or young people in facilitator roles is unlikely to succeed unless the young person has unusually high levels of maturity and detachment. Involvement of students may be more suitable by inclusion in other roles within the setting. These roles may reflect the broader principles of restorative practices (such as a safety officer/student advisory roles on restorative practices/advocacy roles on restorative conferences).
4. Menslink is concerned that restorative practices will be viewed as a wide ranging solution to key education issues such as violent behaviour, truancy, high suspension rates etc. That this will overshadow a key factor that is often ignored by education policy makers- many of these issues have a high ration of male involvement. As a result we encourage policy makers to address the obvious gender issues that are inherent problems in the education system. Quoting Miranda Devine from the Sydney Morning Herald (referring to NSW Education/May 5th2005)-
Boys lagged behind girls in literacy, numeracy and HSC results....boys were less likely than girls to complete high school or enter university. Whereas 20 years earlier boys had outperformed girls, now about the only areas in which boys came up trumps was in truancy, suspension rates and jail time, and deaths by road death, accident and suicide. These statistics are not too dissimilar in the ACT yet there remains a reticent to address the issue.
5. Menslink is not suggesting that all boys and young men are disadvantaged by the education system, the majority benefit from a strong professional service. Yet a significant minority have some poor educational outcomes, this issue needs to be carefully addressed with the sensible development of gender policy, addressing key issues for boys and young men. I would welcome an opportunity to address the committee if further clarification is required.

Richard Shanahan (CEO Menslink-Churchill Fellow)