

RIGHT OF REPLY | Conversation about boys' and girls' schools is worth having, but let's get some things right

Rondebosch Boys' headmaster Shaun Simpson pens response to Prof Jonathan Jansen's column, 'No, man, boys' and girls' schools have run their course'

06 June 2025 - 04:30

BY SHAUN SIMPSON



TIME-TESTED Rondebosch Boys' High School was founded in 1897 in Cape Town.

Image: Zaian/supplied

I read an article recently in *The Economist* about how some of the world's finest universities are painting themselves into a corner. Once seen as the bastion of unbiased, balanced and peer reviewed research, the reach of social media as a different kind of not-so-peer review has led to a good number of papers and professors having their methodology and confirmation biases called out and questioned.

Dr Francesca Gino of the Harvard Business School made the claim in a now disputed research paper in 2012, that placing a line that attests to the truth of their responses at the start of an official document significantly increased the accuracy of what people provided. Contested or not, perhaps this rule could be applied to the pseudoscience of opinion pieces written by popular experts in a field. [Prof Jonathan Jansen's article](#) that recently appeared in the *Sunday Times* and the *Herald* newspapers, questioning the relevance of monastic schooling, has all the characteristics of this phenomenon. The problem with a person of significance having an opinion piece published is that one of the pellets thrown out by this particular high-profile shotgun might just land and cause damage before the opinion has been rigorously tested.

In a school setting, after a time, particularly in working with teenagers, one becomes almost immune to bold statements parading as 'fact'. As a parent you have heard numerous 'everyone says' or 'everyone is doing it' arguments. As a principal one gets used to 'I have spoken to a number of parents' when clearly the number is three – my friend, his friend and the friend of a friend – or the 'staff are complaining' when the number is one albeit the most vocal and fear-inducing battle axe.

I spoke of establishing 'the truth' in the opening salvo of an article and Jansen does this in describing the concept of monastic schooling as 'Victorian'. The word 'Victorian' is one of those gauntlet words, thrown down to place the writer's values solidly in the 'hip and happening' modern world and the target as outdated and outmoded.

Let's examine this premise: democratic government systems have existed for many centuries now, as have ships, motor cars and cricket teams. Because their beginnings were all in another era, does this mean they have not adapted and evolved into their modern equivalents? It feels at times as if the commentators themselves are in fact judging the present with their mind's eye in the past; perpetuating old stereotypes and prejudices from what they remember in vignettes from *Tom Brown's School Days*, *Goodbye Mr Chips* or *Dead Poet's Society*. It is they who have not moved on and who have not spent time finding out what has developed and changed in the schools they pretend to be knowledgeable of.

Speaking of Tom Brown, it is interesting to note that Rugby, the boys' school in which it is set, is 458 years old, which makes it far more Elizabethan than Victorian. Harrow is a similar age and the oldest English boys' school, King's School, was founded by Saint Augustine in 597. The oldest boys' school in continuous existence is believed to be Shishi High School in China, dating back to around 140 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. These claims may lead to a call for boys' schools to step out of the stone age but they do not support the claim that boys' schooling is a 'Victorian' concept and all the associations of patriarchalism, stuffiness and conservatism that are supposed to be conjured up with that epithet.

It is notable that many boys' schools in South Africa owe their existence to missionaries, the church, or the desire to establish English traditional schooling, but David Copperfield, who suffered some of the worst abuses of 'traditional British schooling' was famed for saying, 'our beginnings do not know our ends.' Several prominent South Africans, fighters for unity and justice, among them President Nelson Mandela, judge [Albie Sachs](#), judge Edwin Cameron, Sir Sydney Kentridge QC and the Reverend Bishop Peter Storey managed to rise above the toxicity of their boys' schooling to become highly sensitised to human suffering.

Like 'Victorian', 'toxic masculinity' has become a suitcase term. If professor Jansen fears that these schools breed this ill, why would he send his son into such a den? Has he since had to work on interventions and counselling to reclaim and detoxify his son? There are jocks and there is jock/locker-room mentality in every kind of school. If our children are led towards hyper-masculine behaviour, this comes most strongly from the home or online platforms and entertainment media who broadcast 'macho-ness' to all boys across the airwaves. This does not excuse this behaviour, but is not the exclusive domain of the boys' school.

The suggestion that boys' schools are somehow incubators of gender-based violence is a lazy stereotype. Real academic study could very quickly draw a line between boys' schooling and gender abuse, if such a line existed. I suspect, however, that there will be no correlation because I see, time and again, the boys of boys' schools going out and doing significant things and developing successful, balanced relationships in the real world. The only reason that the kind of violence alluded to 'breaks out in the public sphere' in high-profile boy's schools is a media-driven, tut-tutting Schadenfreude that places bad behaviour at 'these kinds' of schools as newsworthy. The fact that in less-spoken-of public, co-ed schools across the country, daily acts of violence and gender-based violence, violence towards teachers and violence from teachers hardly makes a shudder in the press.



The relevance of boys' schooling (and girl's schooling) is a conversation worth having but let's base it on proper, considered science, not on popular prejudice

It is a well-known scientific fact that teenage brains are not good at consequence. This means that every school can expect some moment of behaviour not encouraged by the values of the school and that cannot be used as an indicator of the 'kind of school' being reported on. It is true that a society becomes what is tolerated, but none of the out-of-kilter behaviours that are reported sensationally are tolerated behaviours and, in these cases, because the tallest trees receive the strongest winds, you can be assured that they receive a far more rigorous investigation and outcome than occurs at most schools across the country.

So, why do I protest so much? Surely educators who have spent many years in both coeducational and monastic classrooms as professional educators, are as trustworthy (even more so than?) as a professor, no matter how high profiled, when it comes to observing what actually happens in the classroom?

I remember during my studies in psychology coming across a study where by nodding enthusiastically every time a teacher stood in a certain spot, the class was able to confine the teacher to one side of the lecture theatre because he/she became subconsciously used to being affirmed in that spot. In my experience the same happens in the classroom, no matter how subtly, you inevitably end up teaching in a way that suits the 'noddors', the affirmers. I am using a gross generalisation here – good teachers adjust their teaching – but what the hey, I am responding to a noted generaliser. During the adolescent years, particularly the preadolescent years, the science will tell us that those 'noddors' tend to be girls. I will now say what many educators seem to fear to say in these post-Victorian times: girls learn differently from boys. In their adolescent years, girls talk differently from boys and filter messages (both said and unsaid) differently from boys. Girls, on the whole, cope better academically in a formal classroom setting than boys. This is easily verified by the fact that in any co-ed school academic ranking, the top will consist of four boys and six girls.

There are many factors at play inside and outside the classroom and girls can be incredibly cruel to one another, but adolescent boys are being pumped full daily with a highly volatile drug. The symptoms of this daily overdose of testosterone are well known. It is difficult to concentrate, it is difficult not to be plagued by sexual thoughts. There is a desperate need to 'get it all out' physically, to fidget, to snigger, to poke and to jeer. All of this leads to the teacher on the whole teaching for the girls in a style that leads to affirmation because everyone wants to be affirmed. There are several top coeducational schools across the world who separate boys' and girls' classrooms from the ages of between 13 and 16 because studies have shown that this works, given the disparity in maturity between girls and boys.

And herein lies the crux; boys thrive in boys' schools because the style, the language, the methodology and the pace are suited to them. Good boys' schools allow boys to work off their testosterone-driven physicality if they want to. Good boys' schools offer an opportunity to draw boys aside and speak to their hearts in communal dialogue about things that matter to society, about being better men, about breaking the Jansen mould.

New research, particularly in South Africa, is showing a growing rift between boys and girls in academic achievement and that boys are dropping out of schools at an alarmingly higher rate. It would be worth studying whether this is true in monastic boys' schools. Perhaps, however counterintuitive it may seem to those who have only anecdotal experience of the depths of boys' schooling, the answer to turning this crisis may just be to encourage boys' schooling.

I have admired in certain contexts Prof Jansen's public methodology of stirring the pot and then stepping back to see what rises. But it strikes me, that as an A1 social scientist, he has in his [Stellenbosch environment](#) a perfect sample to study with cohorts of boy's school alumni in the corridors and a large boy's school right on his doorstep. Check the statistics — look at the academic throughput of monastic versus co-ed schools. Look more closely at comparative academic achievement through the high school years. Check whether misogynist attitudes are more prevalent in these young men. Check if their schools have played any part in forming curiosity and social conscience. Measure if incidents of gender-based violence are more prevalent in this sample group.

I am reminded of Celia Lashlie, a New Zealand social worker and outspoken feminist who began 'the good man project' in the men's prison system because of the alarming statistics of recidivism among men. It was from this work that she became a strong proponent of separate boys' schooling.

For an understanding of how she came to this different view, I would suggest reading her outstanding book *He'll be OK: Growing Gorgeous Boys into Good Men* and hear it from someone who has been at the coalface of changing men's internal lives. The relevance of boys' schooling (and girl's schooling) is a conversation worth having but let's base it on proper, considered science, not on popular prejudice.

Let's review the work that has already been done, both at home and abroad, and encourage our prominent educational academic researchers to do some A1 rigorous, studious, peer-reviewed work.

- *Shaun Simpson is the headmaster of Rondebosch Boys' High School in Cape Town.*

For opinion and analysis consideration, e-mail Opinions@timeslive.co.za

