



7 September 2019

Dear Oakhill parents and friends

In the past week, as a school community, we joined hundreds of other educational institutions and millions of individuals in expressing our deep sadness and anger about the detestable endemic abuse of women and children, nearly exclusively by men. The reality of countless rapes, murders, and other forms of abuse and disrespect towards women and children by these men, moves us to shameful introspection as a nation in general and as men in particular. Oakhill expressed solidarity with the nationwide outcry via various demonstrations on our campus, online and in the local community initiatives.

But still, I wondered... Are we doing enough to influence and equip our students sufficiently to take a strong stance for what is right and to confront what is wrong through courageous expression and action?

Our core business is to educate. We make a point of weaving our core values into our teaching, coaching and learning. Among those that our students often hear and talk about are kindness, caring, inclusion, belonging, empathy, compassion, respect, etc. - the golden thread of treating others in the way you wish to be treated. Oakhill students are familiar with 'Kindness counts; manners matter!' We are good at this and also at pointing out our strong stance against explicit unkindness, exclusion, disrespect, bullying etc. This year we decided to cast the spotlight on our implicit bias, discrimination and exclusion on the basis of difference, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, language, socio-economic status, etc.

We initiated several programmes, beyond just 'chalk-and-talk', on these topics by creating safe spaces and opportunities for our students and staff to have honest and often very difficult conversations. These engagements required a willingness to experience discomfort and vulnerability but they embraced the processes with sincerity, maturity and courage. In my August letter on our website, I wrote in more detail about these initiatives.

In 2018, our ethos of well-informed critical thinking and allowing students a voice eventually led to changing our uniform and appearance policy to being gender-neutral. It was not easy to achieve this but it was accomplished through allowing everybody to speak, through respectful listening and through confirming our common value for gender equality and against gender stereotyping, which is the thin edge of the wedge, which extreme is gender-based abuse.

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THE JOY OF LEARNING

We strive to empower our students to take action and make a difference. The statement that we published online and the demonstrations at school originated from Oakhill students' request that we should officially and publicly add our voice of solidarity to the demonstrations against violence towards women by men in our country. We are proud that their moral compass urged them to take a strong public stance by dressing in black and by rigorously debating the issues in classes. We further encouraged our students, parents and staff to join the silent vigil at the post office and many have participated.

When our students return to school after the weekend, we will continue to offer them values-based teaching and learning that seeks to grapple with local and global problems because we know that education remains the most powerful agent of change in our world. We, therefore, encourage every good citizen who desperately wants to make a difference to heed the words of Tim Minchin: "Be a teacher! Even if you are not a teacher; be a teacher!"

Kind regards