



Creating boy-friendly Schools

by Bill Johnstone

For the past three years, Thornlie Primary has been a pilot school for three groundbreaking programs in boys education. The 'Boy's Lighthouse Project' and 'Success for Boys' are two Australian government initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes for boys. Thirdly, we introduced the 'Rock and Water' program to our school.

Winner of a Netherlands Innovative Education Award, it offers educators new approaches to interact with (both) boys (and girls) through physical/social teaching.

The vast body of research underpinning these initiatives confirms boys lag behind girls, particularly in literacy and numeracy. (This is a worldwide phenomenon!)

It is suggested that a number of factors contribute to this.

Among these are:

- Physiological development — boys' brains mature and grow at a slower rate than girls'. (Never fear, they do catch up!)

The 'myelin factor' is one suggestion for this. Myelin is the 'glue' linking both hemispheres of the brain, allowing sensory perceptions to translate into logical thought and reason. It forms earlier in girls.

Consequently, the way boys and girls of the same age generally react to their world differs.

Boys are less likely, for example, to have the same depth of understanding about

and make rational responses to the world their senses perceive.

Girls develop language earlier and generally have advanced oral communication skills, essential for literacy achievement.

Boys tend to respond emotionally rather than rationally to situations, events and their environment.

If they don't like the space they're in, the way an activity is going or, more importantly, the person working with them, the barriers go up and they withdraw from learning—or worse, display their displeasure by being disruptive.

If boys are emotionally negative to what is going on, learning has little chance of occurring.

For them it's not what is being taught, it's how it being presented and by whom.

Boys love doing. They are active rather than passive learners, so a key to gaining their enthusiasm for learning is to think 'active'.

Girls generally have a higher tolerance for passive learning situations that require sitting, listening and sharing discussion.

All children (boys in particular) need a supportive, emotionally positive school



community and learning environment; a safe place to go, to grow and be valued.

Teachers and parents who recognise this are seeing the rewards of enhanced engagement.

We can make boys attend school (after all it is mandatory); but it is engagement that is vital to optimise outcomes for boys.

At Thornlie, our teaching-learning environment is built on the foundations of health, wellbeing and inclusivity.

A strong commitment to 'Parents as Partners' has resulted in an increased adult involvement in classrooms, in turn increasing the capacity to restructure learning experiences to feature an activity focus.



To facilitate that strong connection, we have established a very successful and well-used community room. Managed by parents for parents, it is a base for many activities and initiatives at school. Social gatherings, meetings and regular professional talks to encourage good health, understanding of teaching and learning in today's world and general interest talks are but some of the venue's uses. Workshops are regularly held at school to assist parents to gain an understanding of student learning processes.

We see it as a way to help parents to support their children on their learning journeys.

Boys in particular enjoy having Mum or Dad as part of the school scene.

A large number of adults constantly in and around the school, supporting programs, has been the positive consequence of the community room.

This has reinforced our commitment towards education as a partnership

Chess features strongly in our program. We teach a modified version of chess to our Year 1s. The game demands participants take some time to think, forward plan and develop strategies before acting.



Boys tend to act or do before thinking, so chess has proved invaluable in refocusing them towards a structured approach to learning and problem-solving, where a forward plan needs to be applied.

A new program we are about to introduce at Thornlie is the 'Massage in Schools' program, where students will be taught peer-to-peer massage techniques.

Initiated in the United Kingdom, the vision of the 'Massage in Schools' program is that every child attending school will experience positive and nurturing touch every day. The program has been credited with making children calmer, happier and more ready to learn.



Parents and teachers participated in a massage workshop and we are looking forward to some positive results throughout 2006.

Mentoring is a strong aspect of our 'Health and Wellbeing' focus. We have developed a peer support and mentoring program. Our senior students link with pre-primary and Year 1 children for regular buddy sessions, with activities ranging from reading to running.

Now in the playground we regularly see evidence of the sharing and caring relationships established through the buddy system. For our younger students, there is always someone they can get support from; for our senior students, there is the satisfaction gained from helping others.

Thornlie is a 'Rock and Water' school.

One of the most influential programs to promote an anti-bullying school culture, this also exerts a powerful influence on awareness, emotional consideration and safety of self and others.

The program assists students to gain self-confidence, self-control and self-respect. Students, particularly boys, demonstrate greater engagement with their learning and develop more positive attitudes and relationships. The skills gained through 'Rock and Water' increase the children's capacity to manage their anger and frustration.



These are crucial behaviours for developing a 'no bullying' culture in schools.

Four thousand educators throughout Australia are now trained in 'Rock and Water'.

Websites with further information
successforboys.edu.au
rockandwaterprogram.com
massageinschools.com