

research



And now for the good news . . .

Educating boys is no longer a problem

In this excerpt from the newly released *Educating boys: the good news*, Deborah Hartman gives an overview of the changing attitudes to boys' education, an introduction to her model 'boys doing well', and the strengths-based approaches being adopted in schools, nationally and internationally.

About 15 years ago, when educating boys first hit the headlines, 'problem' was definitely the word we heard most: boys causing problems, boys having problems, boys as problems. You would have thought by the tone of the discussion in the media and by many academics that to be born male was to ensure that you lacked almost everything socially useful and were destined to be a problem to yourself, your parents, your teachers and society at large. Much has been made in the media of generalisations about boys' lack of academic success, lack of motivation, lack of respectful behaviour and general lack of direction. This problem-focused, sensationalist approach has created unnecessary fear amongst the public. In a media context most of the information regarding men was about the unacceptable or dangerous behaviour of young men and of men generally. Media reports often overstated the genuine concerns of teachers and parents that many boys may not be doing as well in school and in life as they would hope.

The findings of the federal government's inquiry into the education of boys were published in

2002 (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training 2002). This report represented a change in the tone of the public discussion. It acknowledged that the best and most practical work on this issue has come from the ground up, with parents and teachers forcing the issue onto the agenda of departments of education and other systems that had been reluctant to take it up. That's not news to some of us who have been advocating for reforms for 10 years or more. But the recommendations from the report were good news. The report clearly established the major areas of concern in educating boys that are shared nationally and internationally, and also offered new directions for better meeting the needs of all boys while simultaneously meeting the needs of girls.

This report was followed by the national Boys' Education Lighthouse Schools Programme (BELS Stage 1 and Stage 2), which funded a number of schools across Australia to investigate their unique boys' education issues. The report on Stage 1 of BELS made specific

recommendations about how schools can best tackle boys' education. It outlined examples of programs and strategies being tried by individual teachers and schools (DEST 2003).

The response to parent and teacher concerns by states has been less consistent, but at the same time that this specific boy-focus occurred federally, many states embarked on system-wide curriculum reforms and state-wide pedagogy or quality teaching projects investigating teacher practice generally, as well as a focus on boys. These projects have been driven by the clear research findings that, of the factors fully within the power of the school to influence, the teacher-student relationship within the classroom is the most significant factor (Rowe 2000). In short, in school, it is the teacher that makes the most difference to successful student outcomes. This evidence, and the various state curriculum and teaching reforms, have had an important influence on approaches to boys as, contrary to what we might have previously thought, relationships with adults as well as with peers are crucial for boys'

motivation to do well. However, until recently there has been little consensus in the theory or practice around educating boys, and it is still a highly contested area for both academics and practitioners.

Sharing the knowledge

In April 2005, 960 educators gathered to share our best thinking and practice in working with boys at the fourth Working with Boys, Building Fine Men Conference. We listened to boys themselves and to researchers and teachers who represent some of the best current research and practice in educating boys. The papers delivered at that conference have been compiled into a book, *Educating boys: the good news*, which exemplifies some principles of practice in educating boys and an emerging positive model of educating boys. These works provide evidence that a new approach to boys in schools is effective in supporting boys to achieve the best academic and social outcomes possible along their pathways to being fine men. The papers are organised depending on their main focus in this positive model: identity, relationships or learning. Each section has a paper with an academic, theoretical or research-based discussion of the issues followed by some practical examples of school programs exemplifying the practice in that area.

This paper is an excerpt from the introductory chapter, which outlines the principles underpinning successful approaches to educating boys and describes the emerging positive model of success for boys. It also discusses how the contributors' papers highlight aspects of it. The approaches outlined here represent an enormous shift in the thinking and practice of educating boys. They show an approach to gender that will be likely to enhance positive gender relationships between boys and girls and lead to positive outcomes in school and in life for both boys and girls.

Principles of success: Strengths-based, data-informed, solution-focused

These principles apply to the wide variety of contexts of Australian and New Zealand schools although, as schools vary greatly, the implementation of them also varies appropriately depending on the school and community contexts.

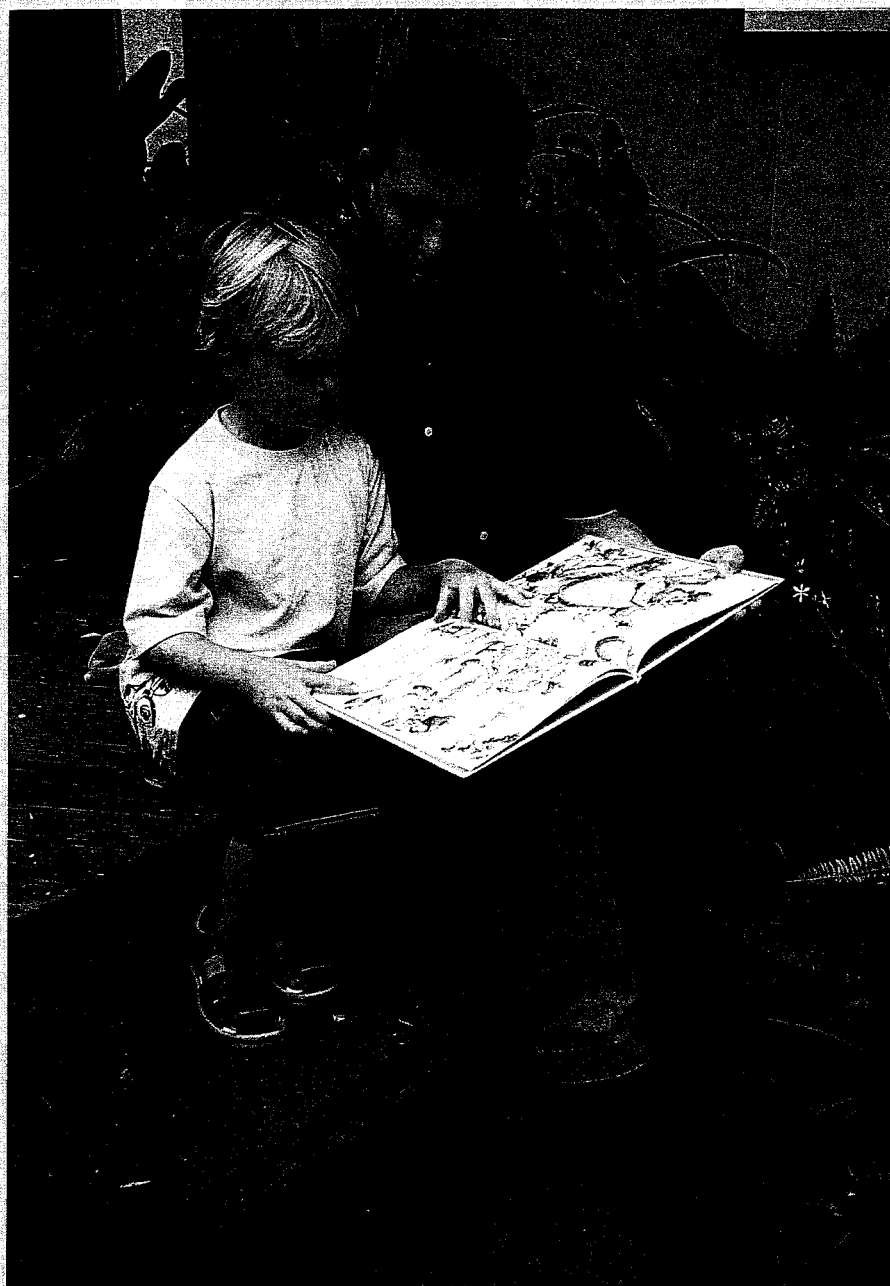
Strengths-based

Schools that are having success in improving both the social and academic outcomes for boys are adopting strategies that could be characterised as strengths based. This concept, more familiar in community development (Kretzmann & McKnight 1997) is now being applied to education generally and particularly to the education of boys. Barwick (2004) shows how the emerging strengths-based, male-focused approach to boys is informing youth work in New Zealand. Evidence from New Zealand also suggests that some schools are having more success than others in educating boys and that those schools are also more successful with Maori students (Education Review 2000). Recognition of differences, and developing ways to accommodate and celebrate these differences in a complementary way, seems to be a key to success.

A strengths-based approach begins with identifying what's already going really well in a school. Schools identify the strengths of the teachers and the community and the strengths of the boys. A strengths approach to boys does not mean that teachers are naively sweet about boys or the difficulties that some boys present, but there is an acknowledgement that *every* boy, no matter how difficult, has strengths to be capitalised on and extended. Our job as teachers is to draw out those strengths so that he can grow into the best man he is capable of being.

This approach to educating boys implies that the solutions to the

Recognition of differences, and developing ways to accommodate and celebrate these differences in a complementary way, seems to be a key to success.



difficulties of boys partially lie within those boys and within the schools and communities in which they live and grow. It is a positive approach that lends itself to collaborating with the boys and the community and finding shared solutions to any problems or difficulties. It is a creative approach where solutions are found as part of the process, and may take us to some unexpected places. Solutions to literacy difficulties, for example, are not necessarily found in a remedial reading program, but in a program that draws on the strengths

and interests of the boys in their real lives, such as working with motors. These solutions are often ones that the community can contribute to in a meaningful way.

The evidence of the strengths or assets of the boys, the school and the community is an important data set. Schools interrogate a broad range of school-based data to give them clues about where they are going really well with boys at the moment and where they are not going so well. They use this data to identify their priority concerns and to inform their interventions before they start. In this way they use local data to inform their actions, rather than be driven by system-wide priorities.

Data-informed

One reason why it has taken so long for a degree of consensus to form about approaches to educating boys has been a lack of useable data. National, state and school-based research was slow in coming. National data collected across all states was very important in establishing the need for changes in educating boys. It provided benchmarks on which to base any further actions. Recent research has now confirmed the groundswell of parental concern for boys and anecdotal teacher evidence that many boys are not doing as well as we would hope. There is now no dispute that boys are over-represented in the lowest academic streams and remedial classes. Boys' literacy levels from Year 3 onwards are of particular concern, especially in the area of writing. While boys still excel in the very top levels of some subjects, there has been a deterioration of achievement levels for boys over the past 10 years in many academic subjects. This trend, while more obvious amongst rural, Indigenous and low socioeconomic boys, cuts across and holds true for all social groupings of boys (ACER 2002, 2003; DEST 2003; Rowe 2000).

However, as Peter Cuttance rightly cautions us, we must be careful both

about the data we collect and the interpretation we put on data. Systems, schools and teachers collect large amounts of data on students and report on their progress in a variety of ways. Often the data is not collated in ways that provide a coherent picture of both the academic and social progress of particular students. Sometimes gender is ignored altogether or outcomes are not tracked across years. Many schools are first alerted to the persistence of boys' poor achievement when school-wide statistics on a range of criteria — such as class literacy and numeracy levels, leadership activities, detention slips and school awards — are collated and analysed.

School-based data takes many forms. An important issue in data collection is whether the data provides adequate information to develop successful interventions into boys' education. A related issue is the range of criteria used to determine whether boys are successful in school and whether schools are successful in meeting the needs of boys. The criteria schools choose to document are revealing. Recent research (Fletcher 2000, 2005; Browne 2000) clearly links academic success with social outcomes. Boys are over-represented in the 'hard' end of school discipline procedures, including exclusion from school. They are also over-represented as early school leavers. There are strong links between early school leaving and mental health and social issues, such as depression, drug abuse, unemployment and criminal activity. Yet many schools do not track the social well-being or connection to school of students in any systematic ways.

Concern that many boys do not possess the academic skills or personal qualities they will need to succeed in a modern workplace is a common theme in writings on boys' education. While many argue that only certain groups of boys are affected, all participants in the

discussion acknowledge the need to address the issue.

Two relevant questions that data may reveal are:

■ *Which boys are experiencing the most difficulty?* This data informs school strategies that will support improvement for the most disadvantaged or under-achieving boys and would lead towards parity of outcomes between boys who cluster at the tail of our achievement scales and those who are currently achieving well.

■ *How can we enhance the learning experiences of all boys?* This data, such as behaviour statistics, attendance, truancy and retention rates, informs school strategies which lead to positive changes in school culture that move towards deeper engagement, and therefore improved outcomes, for all boys and towards parity of outcomes between boys and girls.

Academic criteria, such as literacy and numeracy levels, are the core business of schools. Yet even these are often not systematically analysed to reveal gendered or other patterns within the school population. Subject choices are often very revealing of gendered patterns of interest and of views of acceptable male or female identity.

Attendance levels, awards, participation in leadership and co-curricular activities may all be considered criteria for engagement of boys in the life of the school. Chris Sarra described at the conference how one Indigenous school completely changed its appalling attendance pattern by rewarding complete attendance. The number of unexplained absences improved by 94% in the 18-month period following the implementation of a reward program for attendance. This in turn led to greater academic success among the students.

Many schools are now acknowledging not just the end

point of achievement but the qualities of perseverance, cooperation, organisation and effort that could lead to success. Boys may well demonstrate these qualities in different ways to girls. How does the school acknowledge and reward students? Who gets acknowledged for what kinds of activities and by whom? Do schools currently collate, distribute and analyse these records in ways that give you a clear picture of all boys, groups of boys, or individuals? Can you make comparisons between girls and boys or between any groups with the data currently available to you? Would you be able to use this data to plan meaningful interventions? These are questions schools are asking themselves when they systematically begin to address boys' education issues.

Many schools are developing benchmarks against which success is measured. A pre-intervention level is determined from current information. A goal of an acceptable level is decided upon before a program begins, and then measured against regularly to evaluate the progress. Benchmarks can measure progress of individuals or groups of boys. They are a useful tool in tracking changes and in evaluating the intervention programs of the school.

The BELS Stage 2 project has a strong emphasis on evidence-based action and program development. Participating schools are basing their boys' programs on the evidence of need gathered within their schools. Many of those schools are developing a much broader approach to the issues identified through their data gathering and are developing solutions that can be tested over time.

Solution-focused

Schools doing well with boys in many contexts identify the main issues facing all the boys or particular groups of boys within their school. They also use the information about the strengths of

the boys, the teachers and the community. These two data sets should inform the programs they put in place to address their concerns in ways that will be successful with the boys. For example, schools often investigate the learning preferences of the boys and compare these with the girls. They identify the learning strengths of the boys, the girls and individuals and groups. They then look at levels of community involvement at the moment. Do they involve any dads? What do they invite men and women to do in the school? This information supports schools to develop priorities for their interventions and take a systematic long-term approach starting with their most urgent needs. It often leads to very innovative approaches that come from the boys themselves or build on the resources of the community.

The Family Action Centre (FAC) at The University of Newcastle has been working with and advocating for men and boys for the past 10 years. We have been instrumental in practice-based research that raised awareness of issues facing boys in schools and have supported teachers and parents to find solutions to these issues. Over the past four years the Boys in Schools Program of the FAC has conducted action research in conjunction with groups of schools in a variety of urban and rural locations in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Schools in the project are taking at least 18 months to gather data, identify their boys' education issues and to come up with and test possible solutions. Based on an analysis of their own school-based evidence, schools go through several cycles of identifying their issues, planning, acting, observing what works, reflecting on that and then re-planning.

Through this long-term work it has become clear that there is a consistency in the types of issues raised, patterns of learning preferences, and interests. These

reflect differences between boys and girls, common themes in the concerns of the boys and common notions of approaches to address the issues successfully. This has led to a model of practice, (Hartman 2004) that enables us to take a holistic approach to a boys' development and a whole-school approach to boys' success. The model links male identity, learning and relationships in ways that acknowledge that success at school involves a complex interaction of these three aspects. It provides a framework for intervention that addresses many aspects at once: for the boy, it addresses physical, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects; for the school, it allows interventions simultaneously in pedagogy, curriculum, pastoral care and school organisational structures.

This approach leads schools to interrogate their school culture and climate, and to examine the attitudes and behaviours of the boys and girls, teachers (both male and female) and mothers and fathers. Issues of male identity and other social identity factors come to the foreground. Participants make the connections between the academic and the social; between the personal, home, community and school lives of the boys; between the teachers and the students; and between the boys' and the girls' experiences of school. This is a whole-school approach, rather than a one-off program.

A model for boys' success

Male identity

A strengths-based approach to educating boys includes an acknowledgement that male identity is an important and legitimate aspect of development. In short, it *does* matter that boys are growing up to be men (not just people). A positive self-concept is an important aspect of male identity. Boys from all family backgrounds actively seek to fashion a male identity they are comfortable with. This is a lifelong process. It is not a static entity.

Individuals and society change over time. Socioeconomic status, ethnic and geographical situations are important factors in this process as they form the background for individual identities. The task of growing up to be a fine man is neither straightforward nor predictable. Schools doing well with boys in a variety of different geographical and socioeconomic circumstances are taking male identity into account in the education of their boys.

This element of the model implies that it is important that schools need to take a positive approach to supporting boys to develop a strong, secure yet flexible male identity. School communities, including the boys, can be involved in discussions of what it means to be a fine young man in order to clearly articulate shared values about male identity. To support a positive male identity it is important that boys have both male and female role models in their lives, including at school.

Once again, the example of Chris Sarra is instructive. In his discussion of Cherbourg school Chris outlines the important role of Indigenous men in creating a school culture that included high expectations of school success and behaviour, ensuring that Indigenous boys had a positive sense of Indigenous male identity, rather than colluding with negative perceptions from the wider society of Indigenous males as delinquents. Teachers at the school also needed to reassess their expectations of Indigenous boys to ensure they created a climate of high expectations of academic excellence.

In a moving personal account of her research in New Zealand boys' schools, conference delegate Celia Lashlie discusses the social and emotional strengths that boys develop through adolescence and the ways that schools and parents can support them on their journey towards manhood. And also from New Zealand, Michael Irwin encourages us to ask the boys before

we embark on any program designed to meet their needs.

Richard Fletcher argues that current state education policies and theoretical perspectives hinder the research on the relevance of the gender of adults who interact with boys. The significance of male teachers is a feature of the discussion. Many advocate for more of a gender balance in the teaching profession and in leadership positions within schools. Richard argues that there are important reasons for schools to include males in a systematic way, and that schools can identify the qualities in males that they want to model for the boys.

Many schools have developed programs to include adult males as role models or older male mentors to boys as a strategy for supporting the development of a positive sense of male identity for boys within school. Paul Tracey from Hunter Sports High describes the camp at the beginning of the year for Year 7 boys, which includes male teachers, older male students, fathers or father figures and some women teachers. This school has a parallel program for the Year 7 girls. The school attributes the dramatic decrease in violent incidents by Year 7 boys to the positive climate that is created during this camp and continued by other strategies throughout the year. Other schools have significant events, including work experience, where boys are given opportunities to work with and develop significant relationships with older males.

Andy Kay describes the ways that boys disenchanted with school can connect with mentors at Typo Station, a residential program for boys to learn the skills necessary to return to the mainstream.

While the role of men is very important, it is also argued that all teachers need to analyse how their teaching programs and school structures send positive messages to boys about male identity, and equally to girls about female identity. I have previously analysed

A model for boys doing well

Boys doing well

Identity

Opportunities to explore, celebrate and expand his:

- Empathy
- Ideas of being male
- Interests & Strengths
- Cultural & family background
- Self concept and resilience through success & failure

Learning

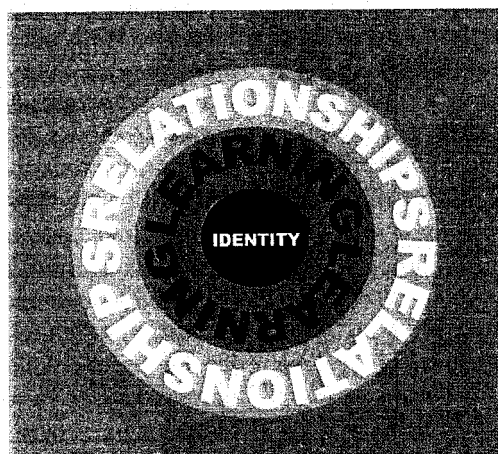
Opportunities to explore and expand his:

- Interests & Demonstrated skills
- Learning and assessment in ways he is comfortable with
- Learning from taking risks and failing safely
- Using, sharing and expanding repertoire of strengths in a group

Relationships

Opportunities to explore and expand his:

- Working with others
- Negotiation skills and resolving conflicts
- Male and female role models
- Effective relationships – see them and try them out



how women teachers can successfully work with boys to support a positive male identity. (Hartman 1999).

Relationships

It appears that schools who are doing the most to educate boys well take into account the complexities of boys' lives and the challenges that face them as they actively seek to form a secure yet flexible gender identity, learn in ways that suit them best, and develop strong, meaningful relationships.

Evidence from the FAC projects and the BELS schools suggests that, while teachers are the key to success

... literacy has changed dramatically with the introduction of new technology. Boys are leading the way with new literacies and can help teachers keep up through working together on collaborative projects.

for boys, it is rarely pedagogy alone, or any one intervention that makes a difference. This model, emerging from the data-informed, strengths-based, solution-focused approach of the FAC indicates the need for a shift away from a relatively narrow focus on particular gender-specific problems towards a more comprehensive focus on the differing yet complementary educational and social needs of boys and girls.

The development of the social and emotional intelligences necessary to build resilience and to regulate their behaviour is also an important developmental task on the path to manhood. Don Edgar stresses how important these skills are for men in the modern workplace. Freerk Ykema, in discussing the development of his award-winning Rock and Water program, clearly articulates the different challenges that boys and girls face in developing these skills.

All of the other conference papers gathered in the section on 'Developing Social and Emotional Intelligences' showcase programs where boys' male identities are specifically taken into account in the teaching of the skills necessary for boys to develop in this area of their lives.

An important aspect of strategies adopted by many successful schools is an acknowledgement that good relationships do matter to boys. The explicit inclusion of social and emotional aspects of intelligence into teaching and assessment strategies appears to be very effective for boys. Relationship skills and expectations need to be explicitly taught. These strategies are supported by clear research evidence that social and academic outcomes are linked and that good relationships between teachers and boys are vital for success.

David Shores' program supports teachers to look at their own emotional regulation when dealing with boys so they can be effective role models. Brian Senstock tackles

the difficult issue of homophobia for boys in a rural community. It has been argued that homophobia is a limiting factor for all boys, restricting their behaviours and choices, as well as having devastating effects on students who either do or may like to identify as gay (Plummer 2000).

Learning

Martine Delfos discusses her research on learning differences between boys and girls that are evident from the earliest days of life that may be the key to why some approaches — particularly activity-based learning — work better with some boys than others. Martine clearly links genetic pre-dispositions with social learning in ways that are very helpful to teachers trying to understand boys' learning needs. She argues that there has been a negative attitude to boys' learning preferences in the past that has not been useful. Gurian (2001), Nagel (2005) and others support Delfos' emphasis on understanding fundamental learning differences between boys and girls. They suggest that it is crucial that differences are taken into account when determining the learning programs for boys and girls. Research into learning differences — and in particular the practical implications of new brain research — is controversial and in its infancy. A longitudinal study may shed some light on the effectiveness of some of these new approaches. It seems that practice is leading theory as many schools are exploring learning differences as part of their pedagogical approaches to boys, with great success.

Many schools are testing their intuition about boys' learning styles by using scales that measure learning preferences. Multiple Intelligences Checklists (McGrath & Noble 2000) are one way to determine the self-reported learning preferences of the boys and girls. Schools using these, such as Hunter Sports High, report that consistent

patterns emerge with kinaesthetic or physical learning styles consistently ranked as a first preference and verbal skills consistently ranked as last preference by the majority of boys in their school. In contrast, verbal intelligence is consistently ranked highly by many girls.

Boys' interests and talents are an important part of their male identity. Many school programs have utilised the interests and talents of the boys in order to expand their options or indeed, for some boys, to keep them interested enough to stay at school long enough to achieve their employment goals. Bob Smith's Boys' Business program links boys' interests in music and high-energy activity with social and behavioural goals. His boys' only program and teaching approaches appeal to boys who have not previously opted to join a mixed choir or other school music opportunities. In the Netherlands, boys' learning preferences and strengths are even taken into account in driving courses, as Lauk Woltring explains in his paper.

Schools in all states have emphasised the importance of teacher pedagogy in teaching boys well. Many of the boys' initiatives overlap with school-based pedagogy or quality teaching projects. For example, in NSW schools are investigating boys' interests to ensure that the significance of school knowledge is made explicit to boys and, in the process, discovering exactly what a quality learning environment or intellectual quality may mean for boys. Research that emphasises the links between brain development, biological characteristics and social learning may go some way to explaining why these universal principles of pedagogy may be absolutely crucial for boys.

The emphasis on authentic instruction and assessment, interactive activities and tasks that link with real life seem to be effective with many boys,

particularly those who have learning difficulties or are likely to leave school early. For example, in the Mirani cluster, conducting a BELS project, a group of boys are engaging in community-based repair of small engines to develop literacy and business skills. Glenmore Park High School began by making a curriculum unit more 'boy-friendly' and ended up in a real-life marketing campaign.

Literacy

In his paper on factors influencing literacy development, Ken Rowe emphasises teaching practices as a key factor. He argues that inattentiveness by boys in the classroom may be caused by an inability to achieve early literacy and suggests that the key to early literacy attainment is good teaching practices (Rowe 2000).

Debates about particular literacy methodologies are always current. Wheldell and Beaman (2002) stress that phonemic awareness is one of the necessary building blocks to effective literacy. All of the papers in the literacy section favour an eclectic approach which can encompass many different literacy strategies, including phonemic awareness. Glenda Raison describes her research which concludes that a range of collaborative approaches can engage boys in literacy. The common theme in the papers on literacy is that, for boys especially, reading is a social practice, not just a mechanical or a solitary one. So the content must be relevant to their real lives, they must be able to see the purpose for their effort (such as having an audience, or the chance of winning a prize), and it must be radical enough to be engaging to them. Victoria Clay offers a framework based on boys' interests which is a useful tool for teachers wanting to vary their approaches to engage boys. Chuck Marriott talks about the many ways that low-progress readers can be encouraged towards success. Games, team competitions, and tracking your personal best are all ways that

basic skills can be made fun for boys.

Annette Peach and Peter Hughes from Gordonvale State School in Queensland describe their program where older boys mentor younger boys in literacy. The theme of male role models for literacy is taken up by Stephanie Tranter taking about the FAST (Fathers and Schools Together) Program, where dads come into primary schools to work with the children in fun literacy activities.

Paul van Eeden and Colin Thompson describe boys making radio programs and DVDs using literacies for the 21st century. They argue that literacy has changed dramatically with the introduction of new technology. Boys are leading the way with new literacies and can help teachers keep up by working together on collaborative projects. The DVD, *Boys' views*, is one such collaborative project that gives a boy's perspective on schooling.

Towards a new theory and practice

The papers in *Educating boys: the good news* represent some of the best thinking and practice in educating boys today. They show we've come a long way in 10 years. We are moving away from a problem focus towards a more comprehensive theory and practice based on positive notions of male identity, learning and relationships. This approach begins to address the complexities of male identity, its inter-relatedness with other factors and its links with school success. Schools represented in the book, and many others who could not be included, are developing comprehensive practical and theoretical approaches that are data-informed, strengths-based and solution-focused. And the evidence is they are having great success with their boys.

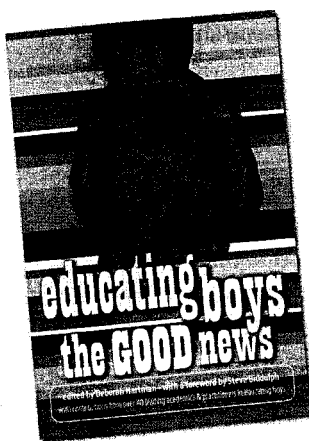
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Editor's note: The book *Educating boys: the good news* is available through the Family Action Centre. See the order form on the inside back cover for details.



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Research and Dissemination Co-ordination at the Family Action Centre and the co-ordinator of the Graduate Certificate and Masters Programs in Educational Studies at the University of Newcastle. She is particularly interested in women's work with boys and the relationship between the social and academic outcomes for boys and those for girls. She believes that child-care and school settings offer us important opportunities for developing wonderful, equitable relationships between boys and girls and for assisting both boys and girls to reach their full potential.