



For the boys



One school takes steps forward in its outcomes with a systematic approach to finding what works for male students.

By Madeleine Regan

‘I reckon’ as a basis for teachers making decisions about teaching and learning has given way to the use of sophisticated research into best practice in education.

Hale School in Western Australia has experienced this change in its focus on boy-responsive pedagogy. Alex Cameron, head of Hale’s Junior School, says: “It was important to know ... how boys learn and for us, as teachers, to respond appropriately. We began to examine research and, in light of this, ask ourselves what works for boys.”

Hale School, established in 1858, is an Anglican day and boarding school for boys, with 1500 students from years 1 to 12. It’s about 10 kilometres north of Perth. There are three sub-schools. The Junior School has about 300 students and more than 30 teachers.

Cameron has been in his position for six years. Prior to that, he held classroom and leadership roles in government, Catholic and independent primary schools in Western Australia and Queensland for more than 30 years. He is the representative of Independent Primary School Heads of Australia – Western Australia, on the National Advisory Council of the Australian Primary Principals Association, a position he has held for three years.

One of the first strengths Cameron identifies about the Junior School at Hale is a collaborative environment that supports both teachers and students. The Junior School is positioned in a way that allows it to capitalise on expertise from across all of Hale. The teaching team includes members of the Junior School Executive, year-level teachers and specialists.

The core business at Hale School is teaching and learning and developing strong relationships with the boys. All qualified staff, including the headmaster and heads of the sub-schools, are classroom practitioners who engage with teaching and learning and keep up with research-based methodology. As Cameron says: “... [Our] school is not only a place for student learning. We like to think that all involved in the Junior School are members of a community of learners.”

He emphasises that staff are “absolutely passionate” about teaching and developing their skills and practice. For example, the Junior School Executive was instrumental in initiatives to build capacity in all teaching areas. One strategy was to establish Communities of Practice in 2012. Each week, teachers met in interest groups that investigated educational topics. “We abandoned traditional staff meetings and created teaching and research groups, which teachers opted into,” Cameron says. “The groups included: boy-responsive pedagogy; emotional intelligence; developing apps for teaching; mathematical literacy and visible learning. Members shared reading materials and latest research, reflected on their practice and considered ways to investigate boys’ perceptions. They also considered strategies for implementation in the classroom. It was an exciting initiative and generated lots of energy and interest in new ideas and practices to support and increase the impact of our teaching.”

The Communities of Practice met weekly for three terms. The boy-responsive group was the largest of the teams and a number of its recommendations proposed to staff were implemented. These included consideration of parallel classes for students that would develop skills beyond academic work. Cameron adds, “It was a good segue into our focus on assisting boys [in developing] social skills through physical activities.”

The Rock and Water program was selected as a strategy for enhancing the social and emotional development of boys in the Junior School. Cameron first undertook training to teach this program in 2004 and he has taught it at several schools. The goals and developmental tasks of the program were developed originally for young girls in the Netherlands during the 1980s and then adapted to meet the needs of boys in the 1990s. The program aims to help boys understand their qualities, energy and emotions, and build their ability to make links between feeling, thinking and acting, with an emphasis on movement.

At a staff retreat at the beginning of 2015, Junior School teachers learned about the elements of Rock and Water in a full-day professional learning program.

In Term 1, Cameron facilitated all lessons, whilst class teachers observed and participated as a way to increase their professional learning. During Term 2, the number of lessons has increased to two a cycle; class teachers take one and Cameron teaches the other classes. Cameron says this peer teacher model is also used

in other ways in the Junior School and works well, as it expands the roles and skills of teachers and enriches the classroom programs. For example, an author-in-residence, who is also the drama teacher, works with peers to enrich student writing.

In *Rock and Water*, boys are taught four main ideas: how to be strong, grounded and centred; knowing when to be a rock and when to be water; how to manage personal space; and the principles and practice of self-defence. During a lesson, Cameron says: "You might think the boys are participating in a PE or martial arts lesson if you were walking by the gymnasium. But there is a difference – shoes are off to give a sense of feeling strong, grounded and centred and there are no pens, papers or laptops."

The lessons include many physical activities, games and challenges that allow the boys to role-play scenarios, experience emotions and practise responses.

The students are constantly reminded that in challenging or difficult situations they need to be calm and strong. When they are, they make good decisions. The activities challenge the boys to put this thinking into practice.

The focus on leadership in the Junior School is also an opportunity for boys to explore their potential. The Pastoral Care program, the House system and student councils help students develop qualities and skills for leading their peers. For example, Year 5 students prepare for more formal leadership roles in Year 6 through a unit of work that helps them explore different leadership styles and reflect on lessons of leadership they may encounter. As

Cameron says, "You can't just give a badge to a student and expect him to be a leader. We assist students [in undertaking] a project and they are provided with opportunities to understand the skills required, as well as the administrative side of leadership. They learn how to run meetings and even record minutes."

Student councils give boys a role in making decisions about the school. The five councils are: spiritual; pastoral care; academic; the arts and sport. A teacher and a prefect support the councils, which assist in making decisions about what initiatives are taken up in the school. Examples of initiatives that have been undertaken include playground buddies, service learning activities, lunchtime competitions and games, and school design initiatives.

When Cameron reflects on what he hopes for in the experience of a Hale Junior School student, he emphasises the need for "an outstanding holistic education for each and every student. Providing quality opportunities to develop cognitively, spiritually, socially and emotionally, and physically, allows young people to develop positive life skills that lay foundations for success in their self-concept, relationships, careers and community involvement. The school motto, 'Duty' encourages the boys to use these qualities to make a difference to others, the community and the wider world." ■

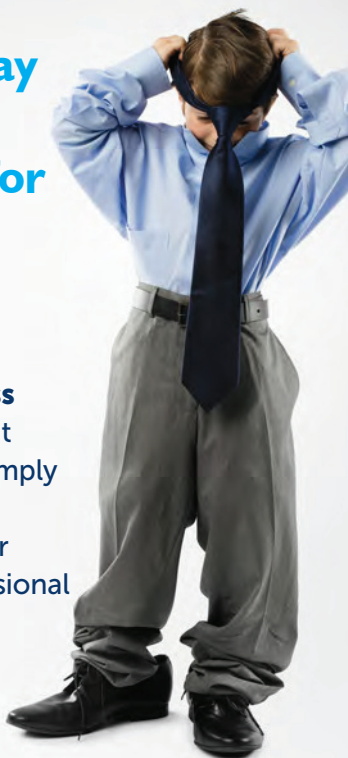
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