Educating boys

'Soft' skills focus transforming the men of tomorrow

Some of Australia's best schools are seeing impressive results from new programs that nurture wellbeing, mentoring and emotional literacy, writes **Fran Molloy**.



Deputy headmaster Phil O'Regan with Knox Grammar School students. Photo: supplied

A focus on soft skills, positive emotions, mentoring and kindness are transforming the face of boys-only schools as they respond to changed parental and societal expectations.

"In the last 10 years or so, there's been a much greater emphasis on explicit teaching of non-cognitive traits in boys," says Knox Grammar School deputy headmaster Phil O'Regan.

Teaching 'non-cognitive traits' involves building emotional literacy in boys, he says – and the school has a strong focus on wellbeing, mentoring and social competence.

Its wellbeing program, Knox Total Fitness, adapts positive education principles to "improve students' mental fitness and resilience", O'Regan says.

The program builds rapport between different year groups, with seniors encouraged to be role models and mentors to younger students, helping them set academic and personal goals and explaining positive psychology concepts.

"For example, our year 10 and year 11 boys are leading the 'hard conversations' with younger boys as they move through adolescence, like: how do you make ethical and responsible decisions in a time of uncertainty?" says O'Regan.

He says having students talk through real situations and experiences with boys just a few years older is far more powerful than having content delivered by a teacher.

"This program influences the way boys think, their character development and their understanding of what it means to be a good citizen within our community," he says.

Ilona Welch is the former head of English and now the head of wellbeing at St Augustine's College in Sydney's Brookvale – where she has taught for more than 20 years.

"Education has really changed over that time," she says.

"We've shifted from a 'transactional' model, where teachers are the holders of knowledge and dissemble that to the students, to teaching that is more relational," she says.

There is now a greater focus in classrooms on skill acquisition, flexibility and critical thinking, she says.

"Twenty years ago, content was king – our job was to convey information and make sure that boys knew it, but content is not a valuable commodity any more. Instead we value skill – particularly relational skill."

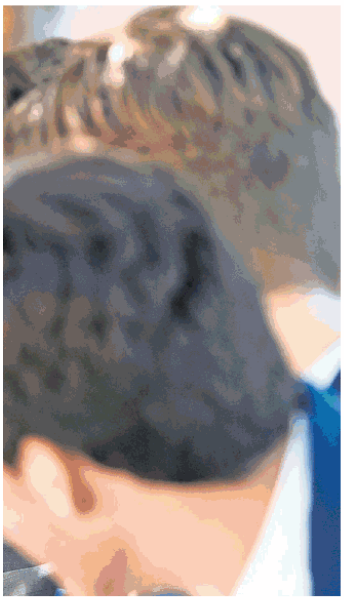
Welch says some boys found English a challenging subject because they had to grapple with issues relating to emotions and the human condition, and bring this understanding to their writing.

"As an English teacher, I focus on those skills of communicating, of critical thinking and of interpreting the world around you, as opposed to concentrating only on plot and characters and scenes."



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Sydney Grammar boys learn about empathy through pastoral care programs. Photo: supplied

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Welch says fostering social and emotional wellbeing in students doesn't just deliver warm fuzzy feelings – it also delivers academic results.

"A substantial amount of education research over the past 20 years has shown that giving specific instruction in social and emotional learning has a direct positive impact on students' grades," she says.

This approach sees social competence as a critical skill that can be taught, she adds. "Rather than leaving it to be some kind of airy-fairy implicit behaviour that we hope they will pick up by watching people around them, we teach boys how to build relationships and communicate emotions."

Year 5-8 students have timetabled wellbeing sessions where they learn a positive psychology framework based on work by US psychologist Martin Seligman, exploring emotions beyond a simplistic dichotomy of good/bad or happy/sad.

"We teach them to savour positive emotions like gratitude, hope, zest and energy," Welch says.

Students also practise empathy via role-played conversations and learn to identify their own character strengths.

Older students run sessions within their own peer groups on how to support their mates, and how to encourage friends to get help if they need it.

"We try to enhance student voice and agency, because that builds authenticity and credibility into these conversations that we want the boys to see great value in."

Phil O'Regan says the shift in education also encourages far more collaborative practice between students.

"There's strong emphasis on students being more autonomous and self-directed in their learning, working on solutions together rather than having the teacher deliver answers."

O'Regan says this extends to various academic and co-curricular collaborations with girls' schools.

"We have long-standing relationships with our Uniting Church sister schools, Pymble Ladies' College and Ravenswood, which involve various learning activities," he says.

Knox has an ongoing Positive Relationships collaboration with Pymble Ladies' College led by year 11 and 12 students that develops presentations for younger students about respectful and ethical relationships.

"Our students have normal productive experiences together rather than artificial, constructed moments of getting together for a dance for a few hours," O'Regan says.

Students from Ravenswood School for Girls joined the Knox Grammar School army cadet unit a decade ago, and this year, Ravenswood student Emma Woodcock is the first female commander of the 1200-strong unit.

"Across all the ranks, boys are led by girls and girls are led by boys; students see each other take responsibility in leading groups based on who they are and what they can do," O'Regan says. "They are putting positive relationships into practice."

'There's no divide': Mateship flourishes across ages, interests



School captain Josh Seward and wellbeing prefect Tom Copping at St Augustine's College. Photo: supplied

"Having a strong wellbeing strategy in the school, where we try to develop positive emotions and relationships – that helps us feel part of a safe community where we can learn, and where we can really become ourselves," says Tom Copping.

Tom is a year 12 student at St Augustine's College, and is also wellbeing prefect.

"The wellbeing program has a mixture of boys of different ages, and it really builds a sense of community and camaraderie where we can learn from each other and where we can also be vulnerable to our emotions and really express ourselves in ways that seemed not 'masculine' in the past," he says.

But there is strength in vulnerability, Tom says. "This is the real, 21st-century way that we learn and flourish."

'We can be vulnerable to our emotions and really express ourselves.'
Tom Copping

Tom says his father, who attended the same school more than 25 years ago, thoroughly approves of the changes that have transformed his alma mater, and would have loved to have had these opportunities.

St Augustine's school captain, Josh Seward, says these programs also give student leaders the opportunity to provide feedback to teachers about current priorities within the student group.

"Mental health is a big issue that's growing and evolving, and we have been able to work with groups like Tomorrow Man and Gotcha4Life to have stigma about mental health issues to be directly hit on the head, rather than vaguely addressed," says Josh.

The program also engenders respect for different strengths, Tom adds. "I'm really into drama, and debating, I do mock trial; and I'm sitting next to Josh, who is in the first XV for rugby, he's in the first XI for cricket, and there's no divide, there's a real sense that we can all flourish in what we enjoy."

