



Boys' Voices

What do boys think of school? Do they loathe it or love it? Do they think their school cares about them? Do they care about the school? Do they care about winning academic awards?

At Chairo Christian School, achievement data shows that the boys of this coeducational school are not proportionately represented in academic achievement and awards. This is not uncommon in coeducational schools.

Through the *Smarter Schools National Partnerships* program, Chairo Christian School ran a series of group interviews with 49 boys, from Year 5 to Year 12. Some were high-achievers, some were not. Some had attended the school all their school lives, some had not.

'We want to better understand our boys, so we can further help them to succeed academically, and to grow into fine young men,' said the school's Deputy Principal, Peter Wells.

'There has been plenty of research into boys' education. Our intent was to talk to the boys themselves, to capture the "student voice".'

The Boys' Voice project is part of a four-prong, year-long review into boys' education. The other three parts of the review are parent surveys, data analysis and research into what Mr Wells calls 'Biblical notions of manhood'.

The boys were interviewed in March 2012 by Ron Ruzzier, an Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor.

'The purpose of the conversations was to check on the hunches about what might be at play in the minds, hearts and school experiences of the boys,' said Mr Ruzzier.

To a question about pride in academic achievement, Mr Ruzzier found that 'there was no evidence that there is a culture of dumbing down and that it is cool to be a fool. The statement expressed by one student that "It's not bad to be good" encapsulates the general sentiment of the students I interviewed.'

Chairo Christian School is a coeducational school with 1100 students, from Kindergarten to Year 12, across three campuses: Pakenham, Drouin and Drouin East.

Challenge: To enhance education programs for boys.

Action: Forty-nine boys are asked for their thoughts on academic achievement, the school, and their teachers.

Results: The school is now considering how the insights from the interviews can inform teaching practice.

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– Peter Wells, Deputy Principal



The question, 'Do you love the school?' was answered quite positively, with responses such as:

'Yes I do love it, it's like my home, my friends are here, and it's like a community of its own.'

'I wouldn't say I love it; I love the choice and variety in electives, like cooking, sports, outdoor ed and excursions.'

'I wouldn't marry it, but I love things about the school.'

'I don't love the school, but I don't dread coming here. I feel safe, everyone knows me.'

Mr Ruzzier said of the last example above, from a Year 10 student: 'As an educator, this answer is as good as it gets.'

The boys were also asked to 'design the world's best teacher'. The question elicited a large number of responses, most saying that the best teachers are relaxed but strict, are very knowledgeable and have a sense of humour. 'This is entirely consistent with global research about what students want to see in and from their teachers,' said Mr Ruzzier.

One of the most astute comments about teachers was from a Year 5 boy: 'Eyebrows are a giveaway when a teacher gets grumpy'.

Mr Ruzzier said that it was still too early to know if the interviews with the boys had improved outcomes for the target group. 'What we have started, though, is a process where the Board, school leaders and teachers are not only using data to inform teaching practice, they are using what we call "student voice" to do so.'

'The interviews brought out mature, sensible responses from the boys,' said Mr Wells. 'What came through was that warmth and good relationships are absolutely important to boys at school. They also need lots of physical activity, both formal and informal.'

'The boys were also overwhelmingly supportive of the Christian element of the School and of the value of daily devotions such as Bible readings, music and prayer.'

Mr Wells said it was important for the school 'to listen to this generation of boys and to understand their experience of school. It's also important to look at the boys' experiences in terms of the Biblical notion of manhood, which is different to notions of manhood via popular media.'

'Our year-long investigation into boys' education includes research by a pastor (and school Board member) into reclaiming the philosophy and theology of manhood.'

The Boys' Voice project has given Chairo Christian School a broad brush view of boys' experiences. Combined with other aspects of the investigation, it is expected to lead to the school revisiting its teaching practices, rather than simply restructuring class groups.

'We want to be clear about what it takes to educate boys well,' said Mr Wells. 'The very refreshing insights from the Boys' Voice project will be invaluable.'

