Improving boys results may just be a lot of fun and games

As I write this, I have just finished reading the final Semester 1 school report in the Senior School. A colleague remarked that it was his perception that in a certain year, on average, the boys had not achieved as high results as the girls. This was the impetus for my article.

Early in my teaching, there was a strong push on Girls’ education. HSC results in the mathematics and sciences were not as good as boys, many female students had low self-esteem, girls underachieved in certain areas and traditional subjects and traditional careers were pushed. Strategies were discussed and put in place to change this. Now-a-days, the classroom gender gap might not be what you expect. It’s more likely to be male students that just can’t seem to keep up with their female counterparts.

Ask 10 people why boys lag behind girls in school and you’ll likely get 10 different answers, ranging from brain-based biological differences to the increased focus on academics in primary school, the decline of play at recess and lunch, and a lack of male teachers as role models. The truth is that all of the above influence boys’ achievement at school. Many lay the blame on the very early years of their education. Biologically, boys mature less quickly than girls. An academic environment that focuses on quiet, sit-down learning can be off-putting for many boys. Policies that prohibit students from playing with toy weapons and “hands-off” rules that ban any and all physical contact between students can exacerbate boys’ perception that school is simply not for them.

Richard Whitmire, author of Why Boys Fail: Saving our Sons from an Educational System That’s Leaving Them Behind, says that the problem starts early. Reading and writing have always been important for learning. However, an extra emphasis on literacy in the early years sets many male learners back from the get-go. Boys are at a developmental disadvantage when it comes to early literacy challenges - girls tend to pick up reading earlier, boys typically need more time.

Perhaps we need to start at what boys are reading at a young age. We need to make reading and writing more ‘boy friendly’. There is nothing wrong with sports magazines, sci-fi adventures, cars and mega-structures. Have dads come into the classroom to read books or talk about how they use reading and writing in their daily work; those kinds of real-world connections can help boys understand why reading and writing matters.

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Most boys aren’t interested in learning something unless they believe it’s relevant to their lives. Boys are much less likely than girls to read for pleasure but often very willingly read things that will help them achieve their needs and wants. Praise and encouragement are also critical. Early criticism with wrong answers also does not help. Humiliation hinders success.

Girls are not better than boys, and boys are not better than girls. But boys and girls certainly are different, especially in groups. A boy alone may be quite content to focus on a task, look at a book, do a puzzle, but when boys gather together, competition and activity usually erupt. They love a hands on approach. Many schools appear to value most highly the skills that girls excel at. A boy who learns that he is a failure or a problem is unlikely to enjoy school. Failure in the classroom leads to the emotion boys fear above all others—shame. Shame, in turn, leads to lower self-esteem and disconnection from the school community. By the time high school rolls around, boys are at greater risk for problems.