

Adapting Curriculum and Teacher Pedagogies to Cater for Boys in Primary Years

Mrs. Suzan Hirsch B.Ed, M.Ed.
St. Patrick's Catholic Primary School
Diocese of Broken Bay
1 Royston Pde
Asquith 2077
Sydney NSW
Australia
Email: suzanhirsch@optusnet.com.au

Abstract

In 2003, St. Patrick's Catholic Primary School, Australia, began their Multiple Intelligence journey. Starting by collecting data in the final years of primary school, the shift then moved to each grade, Kindergarten through to Year 6. The various ways individual students think and learn were not only identified and celebrated but they were also catered for. As the curriculum and teacher pedagogies adapted, the students attitudes towards school and themselves as learners changed, particularly the male students. Educational results at St. Patrick's have risen over the last four years and students are now analytical, reflective learners who acknowledge and celebrate their differences and achievements.

Keywords: Multiple intelligences, boys, Primary School, thinking

1 Situational Analysis

St. Patrick's Catholic Primary School is a co- educational school with 275 children currently enrolled. In 2006, St. Patrick's was awarded with a National Award for Quality Schooling by Australian Education Minister Hon. Julie Bishop for their successful Boys Education initiatives. St. Patrick's is the lead school for Boys Education in the Diocese of Broken Bay with thirteen schools currently using the Boys Education initiatives and models started by Mrs Suzan Hirsch at St. Patrick's. The Boys Education Initiative focuses on: classroom practice, mentoring, role models, stereotypical attitudes, boys and literacy, IT and self esteem. This paper focuses on the classroom practice aspect of the project, in particular, the use of Howard Gardener's Multiple Intelligence approach in classrooms to maximise student learning outcomes and results.

2 Why did we need to implement a new approach to cater for boys?

Even when putting the proven developmental and brain differences between males and females aside, there is a distinct difference in the way boys and girls think and learn which can be clearly seen in the classroom. Examining the average classroom the difference between the boys and girls engagement and attitude towards school are blatantly obvious. Boys, on the whole, are disinterested and disengaged from the classroom experience compared to their female peers, this difference in engagement is particularly pertinent during Stage 2 and 3 (9-12 year olds) before the boys have even reached high school. This disengagement of many boys has been evident from the data collected in the thirteen schools in the Boys Education Project in the Diocese of Broken Bay.

A Queensland Government Report states that "...As a group, boys are at higher risk of failing to achieve at school than girls as a group. Boys on the whole are less likely to complete high school and more likely to be suspended or excluded. Community concerns about boys' engagement and performance at school link with broader social issues for some young men. These include a worrying suicide rate, significant violence and harassment, and alienation from wider society. ...". As educators of the future generation of men, it is vital that

we focus on adapting the curriculum and pedagogy to cater for boys, to thereby change their attitudes and engagement toward learning and school in order to best prepare and educate them for their future.

Just *one* of many of the approaches undertaken at St. Patrick's Catholic Primary School, Asquith to encourage the boy's engagement and positively change their attitudes towards school was to introduce the Multiple Intelligence Approach to teaching and learning.

2.1.1 How Howard Gardener's Multiple Intelligence Theory was used to benefit the students at St. Patrick's Catholic Primary School?

For many years there has been a strongly held belief that intelligence was a single underlying general ability characteristic. The assumption was that everyone could be grouped according to how much intelligence they had. "...Howard Gardener began to develop a model of intelligence which abandoned the concept of one single characteristic, and proposed that there were seven different and separate kinds of intelligence..." (McGrath, Noble 2003). Gardener's model has had an impact worldwide.

"...Gardener has discovered that all individuals are capable of at least seven different ways of learning- linguistic (Word), logical-mathematical (Logic and Maths), musical (Music), visual/spatial (Space and Vision), bodily-kinaesthetic (Body), intrapersonal (Self), and interpersonal (People) - and their methods for processing information may be identified by specific intelligence profiles..." (Teele 1996). By discovering student's dominant intelligences it was possible to provide them with the opportunities to use these strengths when learning.

The focus has now moved away from asking 'is the student smart?', to asking the question 'how is this student smart?' Educators at St. Patrick's knew and celebrated the different strengths of their students, however, there was no correlation between the identification of differing strengths and teaching strategies prior to this initiative.

McGrath and Noble, 2003, state that Multiple Intelligences help meet the four basic needs which all students have in order to learn in the classroom. Those needs and the ways in which these needs are addressed through Multiple Intelligences are:

Fun- *When the curriculum is adapted to use the multiple intelligence model it becomes more creative, stimulating and fun. Bonds with peers and the teacher are developed and because their strengths are being catered for the boys then are enjoying their lessons and are far less likely to misbehave.*

Sense of Purpose- *Students, especially boys, need to see a reason to what they are doing; they need to understand the importance and relevance of different learning tasks. Identifying their dominant intelligences assists them to see the relevance of those intelligences to their own lives, their hobbies and even to a future career.*

Sense of Freedom- *By providing students with varied activities using all the different intelligences throughout the teaching and learning program allows the students to choose activities that appeal to them as well as having opportunities to try different modes of activities. It is important for students to not only use their strongest intelligences but to also build up and improve on their less confident intelligences.*

Self-esteem- *Multiple Intelligences allows a classroom environment to be created where various strengths as well as differences are valued and celebrated. By recognising that we all have different strengths this encourages peers to develop a mutual respect for each others talents and achievements.*

2.1.2 How did St. Patrick's begin implementing Howard Gardeners Multiple Intelligence Theory?

Prior to 2003 the Stage Three boys at St. Patrick's were clearly less engaged in their learning and had a negative attitude towards school compared to the girls. Our data from Attitudinal Surveys and Interviews as well as the daily body language and dispositions of the boys was a clear indication of this. In 2003, after recognizing that there was a need to adapt curriculum and pedagogy to better cater for the boys at St. Patrick's, professional development in MI was given to all staff as part of the Boys Education initiative. Staff then began by, initially, exposing the Stage Three students to the Multiple Intelligence Theory (MI) and the students (male and female) were introduced to the notion that we all learn differently yet there is not right or wrong way to learn. The metalanguage of each intelligence was used in order to prevent 'dumbing down' the theory for children.

The educators did not immediately 'test' or examine the types of intelligences within their classroom but originally observed, documented and predicted the preferred intelligences of their students. This aspect was critical as it allowed each educator to examine and familiarise themselves with each student in their classroom. This would, however, not be of any use if the children were not exposed to activities of varying intelligences. During the educator observation and prediction stage the students were offered a number of different ways to complete the same task. Below is just one example of how one task was modified for observation of student choice and reasoning.

Personal Development and Health: Water Safety Same Task, different ways of thinking/approaching it

<i>Visual/ Spatial</i>	<i>Body/ kinaesthetic</i>	<i>Maths/Logical</i>	<i>Musical</i>	<i>Interpersonal</i>	<i>Intrapersonal</i>	<i>Verbal/ Linguistic</i>
<i>Create a banner which highlights the importance of Water Safety</i>	<i>Design and perform a Puppet Play which informs your audience about Water Safety</i>	<i>Create a logically sequenced comic strip to highlight the importance of Water Safety</i>	<i>Create a jingle or rap song about Water Safety</i>	<i>In a group create and present a play which highlights the importance of Water Safety</i>	<i>Write a diary entry of ways you could make people aware of Water Safety.</i>	<i>Write a poem or speech about Water Safety</i>

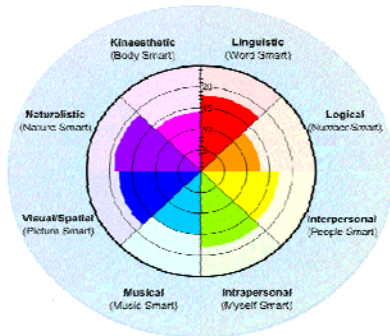
Throughout the task the students (girls and boys) reflected on their thinking and learning in their journals. They reflected on why they chose their selected mode, how did they feel when given a choice and a reflection of the finished product. This documentation and observation process was continued for two months of the first year and has been the starting point each year since.

Once the staff had examined, observed and documented each student's learning preferences the official surveying of the Stage 3 students began. A Multiple Intelligences Checklist for Upper Primary and Secondary (MICUPS) Survey found in McGrath and Noble, 2003, was administered allowing us to discover the dominant intelligence/s of each child. The students also completed an online Multiple Intelligence Survey found at http://www2.bgfl.org/bgfl2/custom/resourcesftp/clientftp/ks3/ict/multiple_int/index.htm.

The decision was made to complete both the pen and paper surveys as well as the on-line survey to ensure that they both revealed the same results and hence to validate the surveys and the results. This allowed us to see each child's intelligences in a preferred order and also allowed us to notice any general patterns between the boys and girls dominant intelligences.

The staff all presented their Multiple Intelligence Graphs to their own class whilst the children shared their own and a lot of discussion was held about the way the teacher teaches the students. They are asked to imagine if the teacher only taught in the way that they

personally learn best. Accepting and celebrating our differences as learners is a mammoth part of the journey but it is also important to have an open mind, to try and learn from peers with different preferred intelligences. This links back to the initial question ‘how is the student smart?’. The classrooms have plenty of visual reminders of the MI Theory and the language is very common to the students of St. Patrick’s. Students have hence become far more reflective, analytical and accepting students.



A sample graph the children receive after the survey.



Children in Year 5 with their Term 2 graph of intelligences

Rather than labeling students, this process was employed to celebrate and identify the fact that we all think and learn in different ways. It is important to realise that a style is merely a preferred way of using one’s abilities. “...It is not in itself an ability but rather a preference. Hence, various styles are not good or bad, only different. We all have a style profile, meaning that we show varying amounts of each style, but we are not locked into any one profile. We can vary our styles to suit different tasks and situations...” (Stenberg1994). It is vital that the students are aware of this to avoid labeling and feeling confined to one intelligence. The Stage 3 students were surveyed three times a year to identify and notice any changes as these intelligence preferences do change, particularly as students are exposed to their weaker intelligences.

In 2004, the St. Patrick’s staff then decided to take this one step further and surveyed all the 275 students from Kindergarten through to Year 6 using age appropriate Multiple Intelligence surveys also found in McGrath and Noble, 2003. As part of the Boys Education Project every student in the school also completed an Attitude Survey so that as well as preferred and least preferred intelligences the teachers could also gain information on: the social needs of the boys/girls, the boys/girls views on what it means to be a male/female, the boys/girls views on school life, their self esteem, school justice, role models.

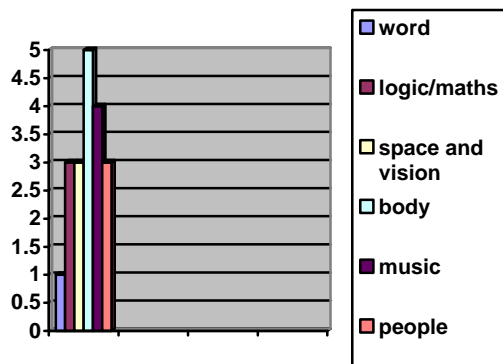
A Student Learning Identity Portfolio (SLIP) was created and given to each staff member at St. Patrick’s. The SLIP contains learning information on every child in the school. It includes the Multiple Intelligence Survey results as well as the Attitudinal Results, which are identified, collated, analysed and split into class groups as well as gender. This SLIP is now created three times a year; start, middle and end, so that we can track and monitor changes in relation to the changes in our teaching and learning focuses.

2.1.3 What were the common trends in data?

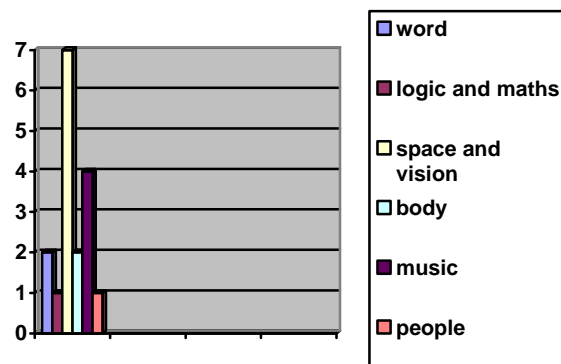
The different Kindergarten to Year 6 results, emphasise the importance of not labelling the students as preferring to learn through a specific intelligence. This is vital as year to year the results change due to different experiences and opportunities to use different learning styles. It can also not be assumed that if an educator is teaching the same grade two years in a row that he/she can use the same teaching and learning strategies. Each Year group has different results and mixtures of results and therefore they must be catered for accordingly.

Below is an example of gender differences in preferred and least preferred intelligences in just one grade at St. Patrick's.

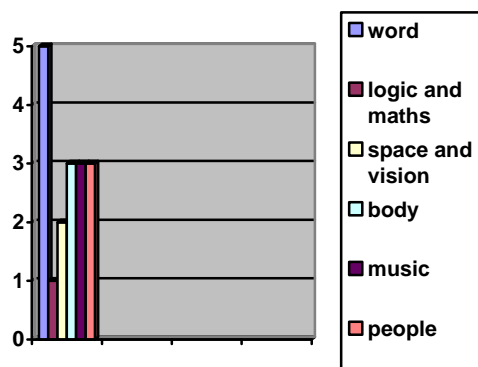
YEAR 1 BOYS PREFERRED INTELLIGENCE



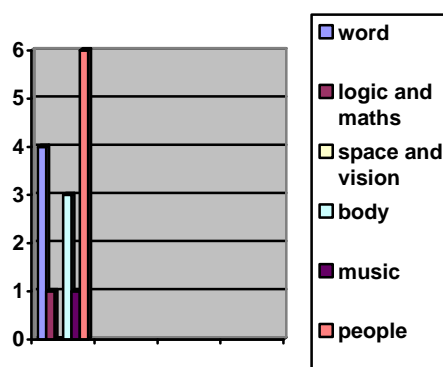
YEAR 1 GIRLS PREFERRED INTELLIGENCES



BOYS LEAST PREFERRED INTELLIGENCE



GIRLS LEAST PREFERRED INTELLIGENCE



In 2003 at St. Patrick's, ten out of thirteen classes, Body was the highest preferred intelligence for the boys, whereas, Word was the least preferred intelligence for boys, with ten classes scoring Word Intelligence as the least preferred. Although results vary slightly year to year, between 2003 and 2007, the preferred Body Intelligence result has dominated the results of our boys. Overall across the four years the boys in Kindergarten through to Year 6 also preferred using their Visual/Spatial, Mathematical/Logical and Interpersonal (self) intelligence. In almost every class more girls than boys preferred learning through the Interpersonal (people) Intelligence.

2.1.4 How do we use this information to Program for our Key Learning Areas?

After collecting our data from every child and having a greater awareness of how each child in our care thinks and prefers to learn, it was time to put the results and data into action. The MI focus was part of a larger Boys Education Action Research Project run by Mrs Suzan Hirsch. To begin the trial the Stage Three teachers began to program each Key Learning Area (KLA) using the Multiple Intelligence Approach. To begin, time was needed to reshape the format of our programming to incorporate Multiple Intelligences and hence an extra column was created in each of our programs where clear documentation of each dominant intelligence and how and where it was catered for could be easily seen. This documentation occurred next to each of our teaching and learning activities in order to check that each intelligence was represented equally throughout each unit so all children could be exposed to all intelligences, both their dominant and weaker intelligences.

The aim became to not change what was being taught but to change how it was being taught. It was vital to ensure that for every KLA all of the intelligences were used so that

every child's strengths were catered for but it was also important to expose the students to all the intelligences. In every unit of work the children should have the opportunities to learn through every intelligence and also have some menu board situations where they can choose their preferred intelligence for their learning.

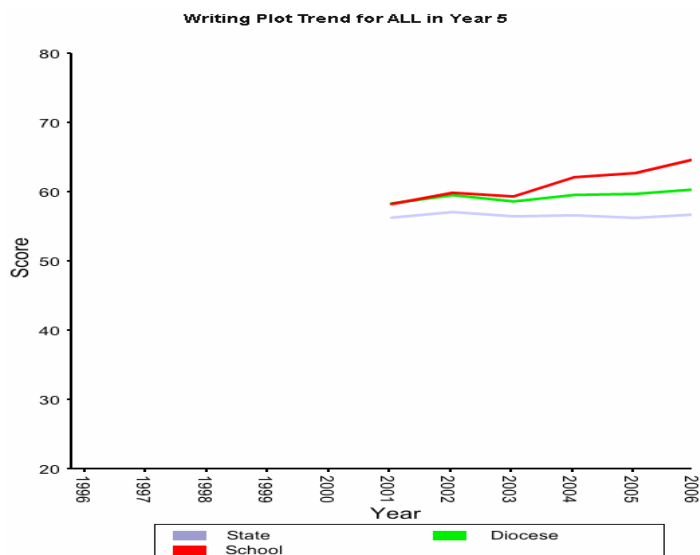
The activities are all different and should engage different intellectual domains and different levels of thinking to cater for all the boys and girls in the class. By listening, praising and appreciating the boy's perspective being brought into these activities it gives the boys positive feelings about the strengths they bring from their male identity and their social context.

In order for the benefits of Multiple Intelligences to be successful, it had to underpin all aspects of learning including assessment and homework. We couldn't return to pen and paper testing as the only form of assessment when we were celebrating the differences in the way we think and learn on a daily basis. Multiple Intelligence Homework Task Cards were created on a different unit for each term. Each unit set of cards have at least three choices for each intelligence on that particular theme, they are laminated, brightly coloured and visually appealing. These task cards offer choices and are open-ended so that children have a range of opportunities to meet the objectives. The children present their MI task to the class every second Friday and evaluate their own task as well as their peers. The tasks are displayed around the room with pride, to inspire other children. This evaluation process and presentation focus is vital as it gives the boys a sense of purpose and a chance to gain recognition, feedback and praise from their peers.

By integrating Multiple Intelligence theory into homework this highlights to parents the benefits of this theory and increases awareness of what is being done in the classroom. Several well attended Parent Information Evenings were held to explain the Multiple Intelligence Theory, our actions and results to the parents and they were given an information brochure and surveys to take home.

Conclusion

Over the last four years this Multiple Intelligence approach to programming the curriculum has immensely benefited both the boys and girls in Stage Three and has now been implemented (in differing degrees) in every classroom. The increase in boy's engagement has been remarkable and noticed by the staff, parents and the students themselves. The boys work has increased in standard as has their effort. The girls efforts have also improved, but they were more engaged to begin with compared to the boys. The most common comments from the female students were about the boys. They commented on the lack of misbehaviour and interruptions from the boys, they too noticed that the boy's energy was now directed to their learning. Our yearly compulsory standardised Australian NSW tests, Basic Skills Test is taken in Year 3 and 5. Since the year we started using Multiple Intelligence Approach in our teaching and learning there has been a steady increase in results as shown in one example below:



Left: NSW Basic Skills Test Graph from 1996-2006. Our MI focus in teaching and learning from 2003 has had a positive impact on our BST Results in all three tests: Reading, Writing and Numeracy for both our boys and girls.

Attitudes towards school have also changed as a result with the Attitudinal Survey results becoming far more positive for all students. By recognising the differences in our students at St. Patrick's Catholic Primary School, respect is being shown, relationships between teachers and students are strengthened and learning results increase. Although our Multiple Intelligence Approach was part of a Boys Education Initiative, as with all our Boys Education work, our female students also benefited from the approach as did the staff. We are all different, celebrating our differences is one part of the journey, catering to our differences is the critical component. After all, if we all think alike then no one is really thinking!

References

- HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING, 2002, Boys: Getting it Right, Report on the inquiry into the Education of Boys, Commonwealth of Australia.
- MCGRATH, H, NOBLE, T. 2003, Seven Ways at Once, Pearson Education Australia Pty. Ltd, Melbourne.
- TEELE, S. 1996, Redesigning the Educational System to Enable All Students to Succeed, in Nassap Bulletin, November 1996, National Association of Secondary Principals, USA.
- STENBERG, R. 1994, Allowing for Thinking Styles, in Educational Leadership, Vol52 November 1994, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Illinois.



Suzan Hirsch has a true passion for making schools a better place for boys. She has completed her Masters in Educational Studies, specialising in Boys' Education through Newcastle University and is currently working on her Phd. As well as being a full time teacher on Stage Three and a co-ordinator, Suzan has undertaken a number of boy's education initiatives at St. Patrick's Catholic Primary School, Sydney, Australia over the last four years. She was asked to lead a Boys Education Committee Project throughout three schools in the Diocese of Broken Bay throughout 2005, this project was extremely successful and won a National Award for Quality Schooling- Excellence in School Improvement. Following the success of the 2005 Project, Suzan is currently implementing Boy's Education Action Research Projects in twelve schools

throughout the Diocese. Suzan has had several journal articles published in the area of Boys Education and has presented her findings at a number of Boys Education Conferences in Australia.