



# Boys behave better

**BEHAVIOURAL problems of male students are an ongoing challenge for teachers in Australian schools. A Dutch program places the issue in a broad, philosophical context, giving teachers a deeper understanding of the unique problems adolescent boys face. ANDREW SHAW investigates.**

FREERK Ykema was a Physical Education and remedial teacher and counsellor at a school in the north of The Netherlands when he helped develop a program to combat boys' behavioural problems.

Not happy with the processes then in place, in 1995 he trialed his Rock and Water course at his school to address boys' motivation and self-confidence. In 2000 the course won a national award in The Netherlands for targeting boys' education.

Ykema now trains other teachers in countries throughout the world to deliver the Rock and Water course.

Today, in Melbourne, Ykema is teaching the basics of Rock and Water to an energetic mob of teachers in the gymnasium at De La Salle College in Malvern.

The teachers are a little self-conscious, but most of them seem to get the idea as Ykema calls on them to make eye contact as they try to drag each other to opposite sides of the room.

The lesson he repeats is: don't worry about winning or losing, rather think about the quality of the experience you are having.

**How did you originally become involved in behaviour education?**

The [Dutch] government asked me to help develop a boys' program, but the



**From left: Narissa Pohiner, Julian Connors, Stewart Scoble and Greg Matthew take part in the Rock and Water seminar at De La Salle College.**

program was only focused on violence and it was a rather negative approach.

But the moment I started working on that program, something inside me woke up. I felt connected. But I also felt, 'This program is negative, we must teach them the skills that they really need to become a real person'. Maybe it hit me because I was also struggling with the same question. I was about 40, it was ten years ago.

**Is this a typical reaction from the teachers: laughter, a little bit of self-consciousness?**

Always, always. Normally the first hour they don't know what to expect. But after that they start to relax. It has

to be fun, because if it's fun you can internalise; you can bring it into your mind, but also into your heart.

**What's the key thing you want teachers to take away?**

The program is all about communication, because human communication is very complicated and it can cause a lot of anxiety in young people, and also in older people. If people are anxious, boys in general tend to aggression and girls to depression.

**You talked about not concentrating about winning or losing in the competitive exercises. Why is that?**



sPress  
Tuesday 3/5/2005  
Page: 4  
Section: Supplements  
Region: Melbourne  
Type: Suburban  
Size: 272.79 sq.cms.  
Published: -T-----

Brief: UNINEWC  
Page 2 of 2



We need to understand that competition is just part of life: we can do it, but we will not emphasise the winning or the losing, we will emphasise the qualities that you can take out of it.

**Is there a spiritual dimension underpinning what you are doing?**

I think spirituality is a normal condition of human life. It doesn't matter if you're a Christian or a Buddhist, or [have no religion], it is normal that you grow into a spiritual awareness.

This means you start to understand that the question is not only who am I, but who are we all together; that you feel connected to nature and also to the people. It also means that you start to take responsibility for your life.

**Where are you off to next?**

I started in February in Launceston, Tasmania, and I did seminars in Newcastle Sydney, Melbourne, Cairns, Darwin, Mackay, Coolumb, Perth. It's 12 weeks and then back home, then back to Australia in October.

*You can find out more about the Rock and Water seminars through the University of Newcastle's 'Boys in Schools' program.*