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Exploring the strengths of boys and young men – a new approach to an old problem.

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The ongoing work in boys' education strategies has implications not just for schools but for all services that deal with boys. This paper looks briefly at some of the issues confronting boys today. It will then outline a strengths based framework for discussing and meeting some of the challenges faced by the education as well as social services sectors of the community. The paper proposes that a holistic, strengths based approach to the education and social development of boys will improve increase resilience in boys and young men and thus improve mental health outcomes.

Background

Evidence from recent reports, including the House of Representatives Inquiry into the education of boys (2000) suggests that boys are lagging behind girls in key academic areas (eg literacy attainment, school retention) and socially. Boys are over-represented in drug and alcohol abuse, violence (both as victims and perpetrators) and suicide completion rates. While this disparity between boys and girls is evident in all socio-economic groups and geographical locations, it is more pronounced in low socio-economic groups, rural locations and some minority communities, particularly Indigenous communities (DETYA, 2000, Cumpston and Smith, 2003).

After interviewing 1800 boys from Years 9-11 in South Australia Slade and Trent (2002) reported that the boys' views expressed clearly and largely uniformly across the schools, year levels and levels of achievement included:

1. The adult world is not listening, or not 'genuinely listening'.
2. Most boys don't value school; it's more about getting credentials than learning, and these don't operate usefully as short term motives to do the work.
3. Most girls get treated better, but so do boys who find it easy or necessary to comply and conform, and who quietly get the work done.
4. School doesn't offer the courses that most boys want to do, namely courses and coursework that prepare them for employment.
5. Most boys neglect or reject homework because it is too intrusive, destructive and ultimately unachievable without sacrificing more valued aspects of their lives.
6. School pushes most boys into a downward spiral of disaffection, resistance, resentment, anger and retaliation that, for many, is just too hard to stop.
7. School poses too many contradictions and debilitating paradoxes:

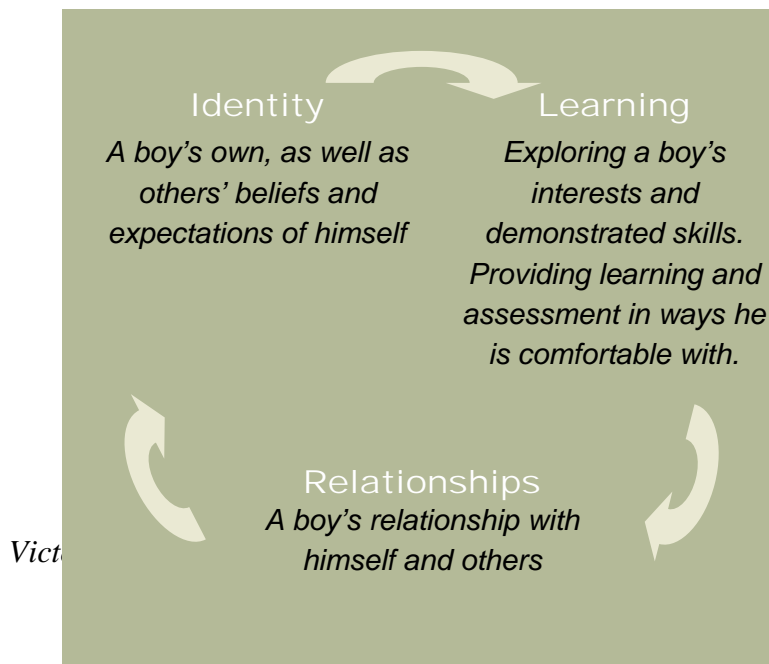
- School expects adult behaviour but doesn't deliver an adult environment.
- School pushes the rhetoric of education (e.g. fairness, respect, flexibility, a celebration of difference, etc.) but produces the opposite in practice.
- School is about getting most boys out of education.
- School is about preparing youth for adult life, but adult life gets in the way of school; culturally celebrated achievements and rites of passage into adult life (e.g. sport, driver's licence, owning a car, part time work, providing for their own needs, helping to run a household, establishing an adult identity, social life and sexual relationships) are negative influences on school achievement and on the preparedness of boys to stay at school. (Retrieved from http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip01_6/default.htm 21/04/05).

Much of what the boys told the researchers focused not just on educational issues but on issues relating to growing up, forming an adult identity and getting ready to take on the demands of adult life. Interestingly these comments were coming from boys who were successful at school as well as those at-risk of not completing their educations.

The research literature points to four key themes for directions on improving educational and social outcomes for boys, only two of which relate directly to educational practices. The four are:

- Exploring male identity
- Developing positive relationships with others
- Improving literacy attainment
- Improving teachers' pedagogy.

A model for combining these four key themes and which helps explore the interrelationships of identity, relationships and learning has been developed by the Boys in Schools program. The model assumes a strengths perspective on education and boys i.e. the model acknowledges that there are skills, attitudes and understandings that boys bring with them from their lives outside school. Further, these skills and understandings can be utilised by the education system to make schooling more relevant to the lives of boys. The acknowledgement of the cultural, social and familial backgrounds of boys has implications for educational and social services and programs.



Male identity

Notions of male identity and its development are much debated in the popular and academic press. The theories of how a masculine identity is formed run the full gamut from biological (*I'm a boy because I have a penis and this determines my behaviour*) to maleness being a purely social construction (*My behaviour and interactions with others are a function of my society and environment*). The implications of these views, and all those in between, can be seen in school environments every day. *Boys will be boys – we expect them to be noisy, demanding and aggressive, and will therefore tolerate it.* Or alternatively – *Boys and girls are just the same. They learn in the same way and there's no reason to treat them differently.*

Social workers, youth workers, teachers -all of those involved with boys at some level are motivated and undeniably keen to *do something to help the boys*. Logically this is viewed as achievable through professional development and this is commendable. However, many professional development activities fail to address the fundamental question of what are an individuals' beliefs about male identity and its formation. Knowingly or not workers carry their philosophies, beliefs and prejudices into their workplaces every day. The vast majority act professionally and will argue that their personal opinions and values do not influence their practices. However, when workers are invited to explore and reflect on notions of masculinity a broad range of both positive and negative opinions and feelings are expressed. Opinions and feelings that very often workers then do acknowledge influence their practices, however inadvertently. So the first step in meeting the challenge of “the boys’ issue” and achieving system wide improvements in services, is examining the individual worker’s and the services underlying beliefs and attitudes towards men and male identity. This in turn provides a platform for critical reflections on service and agency practices.

*A boy's sense of **identity** can be explored and enhanced by focusing on and exploring his:*

- *Ideas of being male*
- *Interests*
- *Strengths*
- *Cultural & family background*
- *Self esteem and resilience through success & failure*

Relationships

Possessing a positive sense of identity and the accompanying feelings of positive self-concept or self-worth, is one of the corner stones of developing resilience in young men. Martin Covington has written extensively on self-concept and has concluded that preserving one's sense of self-worth is a strong motivator for either positive or negative behaviours displayed in family, community or school settings.

Developing and maintaining good relationships with peers and adults is also crucial to developing resilience. Protective factors for young men (and women) include:

- A strong social network of family, teachers and peers
- Safe supportive neighbourhoods
- At least one close friend
- Positive interactions with other people
- Attachment to the community and one's culture
- Parenting that combines warmth with clear limits and firm consequences
- Involvement in extra curricular activities and having interests and hobbies

A boy's ability to form positive relationships can be explored and enhanced by focussing on and exploring his:

- *Ability to work with others*
- *Negotiation skills and ability to resolve conflicts*
- *Examining male and female role models*
- *Effective relationships – see them and try them out*

Learning

The pedagogies used by teachers are reciprocally influenced by the schools and communities within which teachers work, this is the nature of teaching. Current pedagogical models acknowledge the need to draw on cultural and personal backgrounds (NSW DET, 2003; Productive Pedagogies, 2003). Any intervention to address “boys’ issues” must acknowledge the community within which the school is situated, several areas have been identified as crucial in addressing educational and social/emotional outcomes and provide many opportunities for developing positive relationships between schools, local communities and services.

These include:

- investigating the role of adult males, particularly fathers and father figures (Fletcher, 2000)
- exploring dominant views of masculinity and how they impact on boys (Connell 2000)
- incorporating boys’ interests and activities into the curriculum (Blair and Sanford 2002; Smith and Wilhelm, 2002)
- utilizing the cultural capital of boys, family and community (Kalantzis, Cope, and Harvey, 2003; Curriculum Corp, 2003)
- recognizing the significance of teachers and the pedagogies they use (Slade and Trent, 2002; Rowe and Rowe, 2000)
- rethinking approaches to boys and literacy (Alloway, et al, 2002; Rowe and Rowe, 2000; Wheldall and Beaman 2003; Clay and Hartman 2004).

A practical example of services combining

A project that drew on the concepts of identity formation, developing positive relationships and improving learning outcomes was conducted at Hunter Sports High School in collaboration with the Boys in Schools team. The school had a large intake of Year 7 boys from diverse backgrounds which was having behavioural and social ramifications.

Additionally a significant number of the boys were not achieving grade appropriate learning outcomes.

Surveys of four boys-only Year 7 classes undertaken at the beginning of the year indicated that forming good relationships with their families, peers and teachers was a high priority for a significant number of the boys. By incorporating the boys learning styles and interests into their classroom practices the teachers created classroom environments in which every boy had the opportunity to utilize his strengths as well as explore other areas of his cognitive, emotional and social functioning. As classroom relationships developed so too did opportunities to practice and improve other important social skills such as conflict resolution, negotiation skills and the ability to work in a team.

At the same time a field worker was working with the local community to engage fathers in the learning lives of their boys. Events such as a Dads' breakfast and a Dads and Boys sports afternoon encouraged men to come into the school and to share activities with the boys. This culminated in the fathers helping with a project that involved teachers from the English, Science and Design and Technology faculties. A presentation at the conclusion of the project had a large audience boys, mothers and fathers.

Evaluations from the teachers were very positive and showed a higher level of engagement in classroom activities by the boys; more positive classroom environments, including an increase in prosocial behaviours, the development of affirmative relationships between peers. The importance of boys' relationships with adult males and their sense of belonging has been acknowledged and indeed enhanced. The boys and fathers were enthusiastic about the opportunities to work together and the benefits they had noticed both in the school and home settings.

The project team concluded that by focusing on identity, relationships and learning through developing partnerships between the school and the community, increasing connections for the boys in the school and community, increasing their successes at school and providing opportunities to observe positive male role models will collectively contribute to the boys' capacity to develop resilient behaviours and thus promote positive mental health outcomes.

Practical implications

A boy friendly service

- Ensures that boys have access to a range of male mentors & models
- Is democratic
- Offers many ways to gain recognition
- Involves fathers and father figures
- Staff really try with boys and don't settle for 'getting by'.

What do boys need from women?

- A positive attitude to their developing male identity
- Active support for what they are trying to do (ie become a fine man)
- Empathy for their situation
- Clear guidelines about what women find acceptable in male behaviour

What do boys need from men?

- Real information about growing up male
- Active support for their efforts to become a fine man
- Recognition of their situation
- Modelling acceptable behaviour

What do boys need from everybody?

- Acceptance of who they are
- Support to stretch their boundaries
- Modelling of good relationships

Resources from the Boys in Schools team that promote Identity, Learning and Relationships:

- Being a Man photopak
- Boys and Families: Literacy Strengths Surveys
- Resilience Identification Resources
- 6 Pack of Strengths