Abstract:

How do boys define masculinity? How do they negotiate masculinity with their peers in the school setting? Participants’ responses during a year-long ethnography in a single-sex secondary school created a four-layered model of boys’ engagement of masculinity. They allowed the researcher to describe and analyse a complex hierarchy of forms of such engagement that ranged from a superficial level comprising a predictable picture of stereotypes, to an almost inaccessible layer of individual masculinities. The study found that many boys owned the impetus to explore egalitarian masculinities, but in terms of schooling, they required curricular support for this to occur.

Paper:

A “boy-turn” has become apparent within both gender research (Weaver-Hightower, 2000) and government policy (Thompson, Imms & Godinho, 2004). The Australian Federal Government has recently spent, exclusively on boys, sums of money unprecedented in educational gender research. The Department of Education, Science and Training’s (DEST) $8m Boys Education Lighthouse Schools project (2003 - 2005), and their $19m Success for Boys program (2006 - 2007), have been clear indications that boys’ issues in education dominate thinking at the federal level in preference to broader gender agendas. A review of the significant gender-related reports commissioned by the Howard government over the past six years has illustrated a continual move towards isolating boys as a bona fide, stand alone educational issue.

Trent and Slade (2001) identified the schooling environment, teaching practices, “irrelevant” curriculum, and antiquated school structures as four areas that impact on boys’ retention and academic achievement. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (2002) gathered significant evidence to support the view that, in general, boys were performing poorly in Australian schools when compared to girls. Lingard, Martine, Mills and Bahr (2002) also identified significant problems confronting boys in contemporary schools, and advocated long-term changes to address these needs. Cresswell, Rowe and Withers (2002) linked boys’ academic performance to their attitudes to school, and advocated greater attention to literacy and improved support mechanisms for boys in schools. DEST’s Meeting the Challenge report (2003) provided evidence of effective teaching strategies for boys. Consistent with these reports was the finding that many boys were becoming disengaged with schooling, were exhibiting poor levels of academic achievement, were exhibiting lower expectations of success in schooling, and were impacting on girls’ experiences in school in negative ways. While these reports consistently argued that not all boys were in trouble, and that girls’ needs should remain a critical focus of federally sponsored educational intervention, collectively they have served to validate boys as an educational priority.

Gender research in education has contributed to this ‘boy-turn’ through a long history of identifying boys as by and large ‘problems’ in schools. This research has had various foci. The
identifying of many boys as major contributors to the oppression of girls (Kenway & Willis, 1997) through chauvinistic practices that maintained a violent masculine hegemony in schools (Jordan, 1995; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Skelton, 2001) led to strategies aimed at changing the masculine values that purportedly caused such behaviours (Martino, 1995; Nilan, 1995; Segal, 1990). Another focus was to view boys’ problems as a product of educational neglect. This trend in research identified boys’ under-performance in academic tests (MacCann, 1995; Pascal and Bertram, 1995), poor literacy skills (McVittle, 1999; Razey, 2002; Young, 2002), and their susceptibility to being held back a grade (Lee and Bryck, 1986). It described how boys were four times more likely to be diagnosed with learning disorders (Bushweller, 1995), less likely than girls to go to university (Duffy, 1996), and were less likely to have meaningful careers (Pascal and Bertram, 1995). These factors combined to construct social problems for boys. The research argued that boys had low self-esteem, lower career expectations than girls, were more likely than girls to be unemployed, and they formed the majority of behaviour disorders (Soderman and Phillips, 1986). Boys were many times more likely to commit suicide (Bushweller, 1995), to have a car accident, to be incarcerated, and to be victims of violence (Bushweller, 1995).

While identifying this litany of boy-specific problems was reasonably straightforward, what to do about them remains one of the most perplexing puzzles for contemporary education researchers. Should boys be separated from girls (Riordan, 1990; Rowe, 2000), subjected to remedial programs to ‘fix’ their aberrant behaviour (Reay, 1990), or rescued from a supposedly rapidly feminised schooling system (Hawkes, 2001; Hawley, 1990; Podles, 1995)? These approaches have, to date, proved largely ineffectual (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998); boys continue to exhibit behaviours and attitudes that make them somehow toxic to both girls and also marginalised males (Kenway & Willis, 1997). However, from this discussion has emerged one common agreement; boys’ problems appear to be deeply rooted in their perceptions of masculinity (Connell, 1996). Their failure to perform academically, their tendency towards self-harm, their disrespect for the feminine, are all somehow linked to their ideas about ‘manly behaviour’. While commendable effort has been made to define masculinity from a theoretical perspective, until only recently have attempts been made to unearth how boys themselves perceive their gender. What is masculinity to boys? How is this concept of gender negotiated within their culture? How can the schooling system help boys to develop socially healthy versions of ‘being a man’?

In order to address these types of questions, a year-long ethnographic study in one all-boy school was conducted (Imms, 2003). This project sought to establish what beliefs boys in this school held about the nature and construct of masculinity and how they built and negotiated masculinities. The purpose of this paper is to present some findings from this research, to illustrate that to boys gender is something that forms a significant component of their daily actions in schools. Further, it will make the argument that it is through a better understanding of the processes that boys go through when negotiating masculinities with each other that education can assist in the building of a more egalitarian gender order in our society.

This will be done through three stages. First, the paper will present a synthesis of boys’ responses to two sets of interview questions that focused on the topics of “What is masculinity?” and “How are individual concepts of masculinity negotiated by boys?” Second, in discussing results from these questions, the paper will present a model of how boys in this school engage in the act of exploring masculinity. Third, the paper will briefly describe the barriers that boys identify as restricting their free engagement of the full range of masculinities available to them,
and it will briefly list for future discussion the qualities of curriculum that boys say help them overcome these barriers.

The findings reported in this paper must be considered in the light of certain limitations. However, these responses warrant serious consideration because they constitute a primary source of data, they present seldom-reported attitudes concerning masculinity from boys in an actual school setting, and the resulting model of boys’ layered engagement of masculinity holds great significance for educators intent on developing curriculum beneficial to the schooling of our young men.

The study

Participants were boys from grades 8 to 12, staff and administrators in an academically oriented single-sex boys’ school. A ‘participant-as-observer’ ethnographic design was used, due to its ability to construct theory from participants’ perceptions of reality (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data was collected over a full school year using informal and formal observations and interviews. Observations were conducted in various classrooms, in school public places, in the staff room, and during the activities that constituted the school’s normal yearly routine. They focused on any activity or interchange that could be construed as boys developing relationships, boys addressing issues of social justice, or boys acquiring cultural and academic knowledge; the three features considered typical of boys’ acceptance of “multiple masculinities” (Connell, 1996; Imms, 2000).

Interviews were either informal (occurring during casual conversations, being recorded on tape or annotated into the field diary), or formal in nature. The aim of the study was three-fold; (1) to explore the range of masculinities that existed in this school, (2) to explore how boys negotiated these masculinities with each other, (3) to explore how the structure of the school and specific subject curriculum impacted this process. This paper utilizes data from the first two foci. Within these topics the types of questions asked were; What is your definition of masculinity? Do you think you fit into this definition? What are the groups of boys in this school? What makes them different? What opportunities to explore masculinity exist in this school? In what way does the school, or subject curricular influence this?

Boys discuss “masculinity”

Interviewees’ immediate answers to “What is masculinity” appeared rooted in stereotypes. “It’s being powerful and strong and impressive” (Scott, Grade 10). “It’s being protective, being honourable, having pride” (Randall, Grade 11). “Masculinity is testosterone and being involved in sports and girls and all that” (Bruce, Grade 10). “Masculinity is being tough and strong. When I think about it, it’s like guys not letting their emotions go” (Lachland, Grade 11). “It’s the male ego. How some girls want guys to be strong and brave and all that. Y’know, being a guy. Saying ‘I’m not afraid of this’ or ‘You do that to me and I’ll do such and such to you’” (Arnand, Grade 11).

From these exchanges it was apparent that participants were hesitant to discuss any intimate qualities of masculinity. Initially I suspected this occurred because it was too personal; boys had already told me that expressing opinions on some matters was “dangerous”. Later I found that they open up considerably once we put the topic into some context, although they appeared to have very little vocabulary at their disposal. I asked if they could see that they were providing
very stereotyped answers? Some disagreed. “If these are stereotypes they have been developed over many years, they are in our culture, so for the most part they are true. To be a successful man you need to have some of these characteristics” (Oscar, Grade 10). But most of the boys willingly agreed that they defined masculinity within a stereotype. “Yes, it’s a stereotype but most people will conform because that’s what is comfortable. You see others do it and it’s thought to be cool so you join in because it means you’ll be accepted” (Chris, Grade 11). Another student laughed; “Of course it’s a stereotype. But it’s real too. That’s how it is” (Kurt, Grade 11).

Having come this far in the interviews, I found it possible to encourage the participants to provide more personally relevant definitions by asking them questions like “What attributes of manhood do you see as most important?” Some remained firmly embedded in stereotypes. “Well, my ideal man is being able to beat someone up but you don’t. That’s pretty mature, I think. It’s a step towards manhood” (Stuart, Grade 10). “For me, being a successful man will mean getting a high income job, above average. And a reasonable sized house on this side of the city. That’d be pretty satisfactory for me” (Olaf, Grade 10).

However, the majority of boys gave more sophisticated answers. “The stereotype of masculinity is fading. A more androgynous thing is replacing it. There are guys that are physically male but are guided by the feminine, and the opposite too, with girls” (Peter, Grade 11). Another student, Arnand, was clearly uncomfortable with the topic. He fidgeted in his seat before making an effort to answer the question. “I guess I like to help people, and it’s something I’m good at. So I guess that for me masculinity is the talents that we have”.

Such responses were typical. I mentioned to the boys that these personal values of masculinity mostly contradicted the definitions made only a minute ago. Does this mean these boys didn’t see themselves as “manly”? This often brought a laugh and a quick denial. “I’m not saying that! (Laughter.) No, I guess my original answer about masculinity was the first thing that came to mind” (Bruce); and “(laughing) Of course I’m a man! It’s all about being true to yourself. Not being confined to simple categories by society, to a stereotype” (Neil, Grade 11). Others, like Lachland, became defensive and a little angry. “Why do I have to follow those guidelines? Why can’t I set my own? Who’s to say that being tough or whatever is right for me? Just because I’m not strong and tough that doesn’t mean I’m not a man!”

I asked boys which it was to them? Was masculinity acting out these stereotypes, or was it following their own values? Randall replied; “It’s trying to act out your own values. I know I said ‘stereotypes’ before, because that’s what we see in our mind as the ideal person to be. If we are going to achieve that ideal to one degree or another we need to go by our own beliefs.” Andre agreed. “It’s pretty well up to yourself to judge how you must act. You can’t let others determine what you should be. You need to set your own goals.”

When I asked what seemed to be the next logical question; “So you are telling me that masculinity is not the same for all boys?” they often began to articulate what could be described as plural masculinities in operation. “Masculinity is probably the special traits you have. Our talents are our masculinity. And everyone has different sorts of talents and different ideas about masculinity” (Armand). Oscar agreed; “People out there have different ideas on what it is to be a man. Everyone is so incredibly different you can’t come up with general ways to see how boys work with their stereotypes and deal with their masculinity.” And Peter (Grade 11) noted that their masculinities were not static; they were in a process of continual change:

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[Masculinities] are different for everybody. Because each person’s perception of the world is different. So I think that what we have inside of ourselves that are construed as masculinities and femininities, they progress through time and through experience. They can’t stay the same.

My aim with these questions was to have boys explain if their concepts of masculinity were dissimilar to the powerful cultural stereotypes that exist in society. There existed a number of trends in participant responses. Consistently, boys’ immediate responses were significantly different to what they later articulated as their actual beliefs about masculinity. They went from the removed, third-party descriptions that utilised limited stereotypes, to first-person descriptions describing quite individual masculinities. For most, the stereotypes of masculinity the boys described bore little resemblance to what they later expressed as the reality of their own beliefs. These individual interpretations often conflicted with images of manhood sponsored by their culture, suggesting that many boys unwittingly led a double life; they outwardly portrayed characteristics that were harmonious with cultural stereotypes, while developing personal, often contradictory, beliefs. My discussions with the boys suggested that this occurred for a number of reasons.

First, such conversations were not commonplace. These passages indicated that boys did not spontaneously articulate any sophisticated knowledge about masculinity’s construct or representation in their culture, beyond the stereotypical. However, they could, within the safety of the one-on-one interview situation, be quite impressive in their insights about masculinity. Second, boys did not appear to have the tools (that is, concepts and a vocabulary) to articulate their thoughts about masculinity beyond the stereotypical, a hypothesis supported in passages where boys were very forthcoming when given some avenues to discuss masculinity.

The following extract from my field diary provides one example of this phenomenon. One day I met Ishmael (Grade 12) between classes. He wanted to finish a comment that had been interrupted the day before.

“I don’t have much time for masculinity… because it is not very important to me. It’s an unnecessary characteristic we feel we must have. Obsession with sport, disrespect for women. I don’t have much time for that.” Eventually I ask, “What would you say if I suggested there is an unlimited range of masculinities?”… “Yeah, I’d like that. There are so many people who don’t fit in. If you could choose the parts you wanted - that’d be great.”…“Do you think you are building your own version of masculinity right now?” Ishmael responds with enthusiasm. “Let me get what you’re saying straight. My ideas are my masculinity and by sticking to them I’m asking others to be more tolerant of a different masculinity? Jeez, I’d dig that!”

I ask a third possibility why many boys seemed to instinctively disassociate personal values from their concepts of “masculinity” was that they experience considerable pressure from their boy-culture to conform to safe stereotypes of gender. As one teacher, Janet, explained;

Boys’ notion of being men is linked to their concepts of self. And this concept of self is influenced by their physiognomy, by their family, and it’s a product of their maturity. But mostly, mostly, it is linked to their culture.
Boys discuss masculinity and their school culture

On consideration of the comments provided to me by the boys, it seemed possible that the face, or image that boys wanted to portray to their peers motivated how they behaved and what they presented to others as their beliefs. The katagelophobic influence of their culture was such that boys seemed to automatically align themselves to accepted stereotypes of masculinity, and choose to down-play their more individual beliefs. It was also apparent that this act of conformity came at a cost. As Janet mentioned:

The issue for boys in this school is their culture, and their masculinity is simply a symptom of that culture. I see masculinity being part of a bigger picture. Based on what boys talk to me about, not in school though. They don’t bring up masculinity here, never, never. It’s far too touchy. It’s all based in their culture and that culture is all about autonomy and choice.

Janet’s comment struck a chord with me; wanting autonomy and choice typified what I had already heard from boys. I had seen in glimpses, that beneath a façade of lassitude about gender lay some wonderful concepts of masculinity; “helping others”, “acting out your own values”, “understanding others’ situations”. These were theoretical values that were based on the assumption that boys were free to pursue such goals. Many of the boys that I spoke to appeared to want to be free agents, to have autonomy and choice, but in their culture they had to face the reality of ostracism if they deviated too far from the norm. They wanted to be free to decide for themselves what to believe and how to act, but this had to happen within the fluid and indecipherable limitations of their culture. How boys pursued autonomy and choice while showing allegiance to a seemingly limiting boy-culture is baffling, and led me into another set of questions.

I felt a need to explore how boys manipulated the mores of their culture to pursue their private agendas about masculinity. More often than not these discussions began with a conversation like this.

“You are telling me your culture is an important thing to you. Tell me what it is like.”...“Well I can’t really.”...“Why? Is it too difficult?”...“Well, it’s just hard to put your finger on something that is so”... (Silence).

I would often then try a different tack.

“Tell me about the boys then, and how they get along.”...“Oh, that’s easy. I am a ‘skid’, that’s the type of person I am. So that means...” and off the conversation would go.

Typing boys and the allocation of these types into groups, was the most immediate and obvious manifestation of boys’ culture in this school. Boys readily categorised themselves. “I’m more artsy than English’y, y’know. I’m more that type” (Al, Grade 12). They categorised each other; a table of grade eight boys introduced themselves to me in this way; “He’s a scientist, and those two are artists, and we are swimmers. And he’s basketball and he’s hockey”. And they categorised whole elements of the student body within the school. “We have all types here, from the ‘jocks’ to the ‘nerds’ to the ‘skids’” (Kurt). Within their culture, groups went beyond superficial categories such as academics and jocks, to include sub-categories within each, and sub-sub-categories within each of those. As Peter described:
Well there are the jocks, the sports crowd and basketball players. I guess that’s seen as the popular crowd. There are the academics. And there are the parachutes, mostly Asian, who don’t actually live here [in this country], they just come to study. Then there are ‘geeks’, guys who don’t fit in anywhere. They really don’t have very good social skills, they work hard and may get good grades but they don’t have a life. Then there are ‘skids’. They are people who associate themselves with alternative culture. It’s quite confusing.

This division of boys into types, and then types into groups, was so widely accepted as a practice throughout the school that it became a recurring theme. This was not a practice that was exclusive to the boys; when boys first entered this school the administration allocated them to home groups according to sporting prowess. Dilbert, the head of Physical Education, told me that this created “a yellow group that tends to be the academic kids, and blue and green groups that tend to be the ‘jocks’, and so on”. Teachers also acknowledged that typing boys was useful when manipulating teaching approaches for maximum effect. For example, an art teacher (Victor) observed:

We may get a course where we get all the ‘jocks’. They have a certain way of looking at things, certain interests, and certain fears. So you look at that group and you say “we are certainly not going to paint flowers in the first period!” Whereas someone might come in who are (sic) from the humanist side of things, the writers and the linguists, and they might say “Wow I love that bouquet of flowers, can we paint that?”

This practice of typing and grouping had considerable ramifications for boys. The most immediate impact was that it appeared to legitimise a certain (limited) range of masculinities. According to the culture, “your group defines you” (Samuel). However, I was particularly interested in the manoeuvrings that occurred between and within these groups. This was the site where boys negotiated or reinforced differences. I felt this would be my focus because participants were suggesting that a second ramification of the typing and grouping phenomenon was that it gave them chances (admittedly very limited) to define themselves. Because their culture was a difficult world for them to comprehend (“Our culture is a very ephemeral thing, it’s always changing” [Oscar]), the capacity to understand how it operated created a sort of cultural currency for boys. Their ability to navigate within it provided them with “identity status, power and protection; “Learning the rules is part of being cool. No-one messes with you if you are cool” (Olaf). Being cool appeared to be an important issue. In earlier conversations, Olaf appeared to be a connoisseur of coolness, so I sought him out for more information.

Being cool means being popular and being accepted by other people who are viewed as cool. There are different kinds of cool people. Some are more silent, not very easy to approach. Others call out names and make fun of people all the time. Part of being cool is if you can get enough back up. Say, there’d be two groups of cool people and they’d dislike each other. And then they’d try to “out back” each other up.

The purpose of these machinations, I was told, was to create an ‘identity’ for yourself. Apparently, ‘identity’ was created through complex negotiations within their culture; in essence, by showing difference while remaining within the constraints of the culture. The identity that was created did not necessarily have anything to do with personal values or beliefs. Being ‘cool’ was one facet of this phenomenon. As Oscar noted:

Being cool means being able to project an image of superiority and being able to uphold it. It’s about being in on the trends of the time. It’s having a style. Coolness is about style, whether you can project an image of being different from others. Having an identity. But
you can’t set yourself up as different in a way that totally conflicts the trends (sic). The truth is you are just projecting an image. That doesn’t necessarily mean that you actually think that way. It just means you have mastered the ability to have an identity. (My emphasis.)

It was a confusing statement. Having ‘style’ or ‘identity’ seemed to be the act of simultaneously attempting to be different, while not “conflicting the trends”, a difficult path to tread, I was told. Oscar’s last sentence particularly interested me. “So your image is not really ‘you’?”...“Yes. It’s often not true.” This was a very important point, and other boys confirmed much of Oscar’s opinion. Some boys pursued an ‘identity’ by being ‘alternative’, others showed allegiance to a group showing that they met the complex criteria of that group, such as being ‘cool’. Whichever, the boys’ concept of ‘identity’ was acknowledged as being a façade, it was all ‘image’ or ‘attitude’ or ‘style’ or ‘character’, that in the long term bore little relevance to ‘the real you’.

What this emphasised was that developing an identity was achieved through mastering the complex nuances of their culture. While on the surface typing and grouping appeared to offer protection, a part of what Pollock (1998) described as boys’ “tribal” mentality, it was in actuality an act of significant and complex negotiations by boys. What was more, these machinations had a transparency that allowed boys a high degree of autonomy and choice. Oscar’s description of ‘coolness’ suggested he could see through its superficial and transitory construct to use it to negotiate a position with his peers, without impinging on his own values.

Boys layered engagement of masculinities

It became apparent that boys in this school used four labels to organise their responses to “What is masculinity?” Each of these labels represented a quite different way of engaging masculinity.

Types of masculinity were applied to boys from without (society and the school), as well as from within their own boy-culture. This was done to the boys, and they also did it to themselves and to each other. They would describe themselves as a ‘jock’ or an ‘academic’, or were sometimes more discriminating and would say they were a “thinking kind of man”, or someone who was “physical and active”. These were descriptions of themselves founded on other people’s interpretations of ‘manliness’, and were also a method of categorisation that was based on certain inherent traits that seem unchangeable; after all, “You are what you are”. (Samuel)

The school validated typing by being an active participant. The institution was considered by virtually all the participants interviewed, to advocate a specific type of masculinity (the perfect graduate). Types of boys were dictated from very early in their association with the institution. Boys saw typing happen as they entered the school when they were streamed into homogeneous home-groups based on physical prowess. There was evidence that teachers ‘typed’ boys as a pedagogical tool; a way of predicting reactions to curriculum, or to help teachers plan an approach that would be most effective for a particular project.

Typing by the school continued throughout the boys’ high school lives with the spectre of perfect graduate looming over their heads. He was an all-rounder, a sportsman, a poet, a musician, an artist, an academic, a courageous being, and a gentleman. The boys described this ideal as the pinnacle of masculinity, one that met the school’s expectation of the perfect graduate, the ideal man. Typing may have had its uses, but it also had significant shortcomings, in that it created a simplistic view of masculinity that restricted any further exploration of it as a
Boys Engaging Masculinities

concept. Boys acknowledged that their immediate responses to “What is masculinity?” were dictated by the qualities of manliness pushed by their culture, their school and their society. Boys felt pressure to conform to these types, (see for instance Brannon, 1976), and were rewarded because these stereotypes provided safety; to challenge boundaries brought the risk of ostracism.

It is on this point that some divergence of opinion occurred. While many staff and administrators say they wanted to produce men who were individuals, who were creative and were questioners of authority, they admitted this was unlikely in a school that subliminally, and at times quite overtly, promoted conformity. Students viewed the ideal in a different light; the ideal represented a perfection of masculinity that boys viewed as impossible to achieve. Thus this supposedly motivational ideal became, in itself, a stereotype and an unreachable gender expectation. Typing, as shown in Figure 1, represented the most superficial range of masculinities evident in the school.

To me, it was not surprising to find that participants instinctively organised masculinity by types. ‘Jocks’ and ‘nerds’ were terms commonly known and used, and in some ways they made common sense. After all, we all own inbuilt characteristics that could be used to categorise us. However, using these as categories to define something as personal as a boy’s masculinity seemed a limiting interpretation of the concept. Therefore, I also expected to hear participants articulating the existence of a range of more descriptive masculinities in operation beneath these superficial types, or stereotypes.

I found these more intimate versions of masculinity evident when boys described how they ‘grouped’ themselves, a phenomenon that surprised me with its complexity. Not only did these groups harbour a more sophisticated range of masculinities, they also constituted a central component or structural element of their boy-culture. The sorts of groups I encountered often had strange names. ‘Jocks’ again appeared, but with it came ‘cools’, ‘parachute kids’4, ‘skids’5,
‘bohemians’, ‘metal heads’, ‘populars’, ‘grunges’, ‘whiggers’ and so on. Staff and administrators admitted they knew little of this manifestation of the boys’ culture, which was surprising because these groups were a symptom of the society boys created for themselves, and are one of their culture’s most visible features. Through investigating these groups, I was introduced into the complexity of a boy-culture that dominated much of boys negotiation of masculinities.

The groups were characterised by boys creating associations with other boys according to attitudes rather than innate physical dispositions, as happened with typing. These attitudes included tastes in music, dress, activities, and other likes and dislikes. They occasionally encompassed attitudes concerning moral or ethical issues, but were predominantly concerned with organising their social structure according to commonalities that existed between boys. These groups were not static but were in a continual state of change. Boys continually manipulated the parameters under which they operated. They called this “going with the flow”, making changes according to what was perceived to be ‘in’ at the time. The groups could be polarized, with a range of often quite emotional opinions separating them, but they did allow boys a degree of freedom to gravitate towards cliques with which they had some affinity due to shared tastes.

Boys appeared as united in their descriptions of the phenomenon of groups as staff and administrators appeared uninformed of their purpose and importance. This was a critical gap in communication. By understanding something of the characteristics of the groups, an observer could begin to see how boys perceived themselves as different to others; ‘skids’ were non-conformists, ‘cools’ were in tune with popular culture and “had a life”, etc. While typing was immediate, imposed from without, and seemingly genetic (or at least, virtually unchallengeable), the action of associating with a group was to express something of how a boy perceived himself. This was done by making alliances with like-minded boys, and by rejecting associations with others. What was important was that boys chose their own group, an action that was perhaps their first meaningful exploration, within their society, of what made them different. These were their early attempts to self-define, and in the process, because they wished to refine their own wishes to be in tune with those of the group, they were developing the important cultural skill of being able to negotiate the acceptance of their own individuality. Groups, as shown in Figure 1, represented the second range of masculinities evident in the school, the layer where boys began to define themselves to their peers according to personal tastes.

I encountered a third range of masculinities when boys described to me their attempts to create ‘identity’. These masculinities were characterised by a need to be unique, while conforming to rules that governed the specific group to which a boy belonged. What constituted identities could not be easily defined. Boys readily acknowledged that getting ‘identity’, or ‘style’, or ‘character’ could not be scripted. The cultural rules that governed this process fluctuated as boys continually refined what was ‘in’. Thus, for boys, the move from the comfort of a group into the development of an identity within that group was not an easy transition, and was made difficult by the illogicality of the requirement to create an image or a personalised ‘character’ that was unique, while at the same time not too different from others.

This was illustrated to me by the phenomenon of ‘being cool’, a non-static concept with few clear rules. Being cool was to walk a tightrope between the desire for uniqueness and the need to subscribe to the mores of the group. The codes of conduct of ‘coolness’ were so ill defined, that to be able to engage them was an act of ‘coolness’ in itself. The boys who could successfully
redefine the code, who could push its parameters to its limits (but not beyond) were, in fact, the coolest.

I did come across other methods that boys used to negotiate a position with their peers, other than to pursue ‘coolness’. One was the manipulation of the dress code, another was the choice of music to which they would listen. While these were acts of self-definition, and they began the task of creating an ‘identity’ within their group, all the choices I encountered were similar in that they had limited options, they were sanitised, and they pre-existed. The range of music groups, and the styles of dress that boys chose, the ways of being ‘cool’, all came within the acceptable parameters of the culture (although this could accommodate some quite polarised tastes), meaning that boys rarely took risks and adopted ‘attitudes’ that they had actually constructed themselves.

While it represented boys’ continued desire to define themselves, to negotiate an acceptable position within their culture, these ‘characters’ or ‘styles’ had little substance. They were acknowledged as transitory, important as a developmental stepping stone, but not a reflection of the ‘true-self’. An important purpose of this activity was its role in furthering the boys’ skills of safe negotiation with their peers. The skill of exploring individual beliefs with others began with boys choosing and being accepted by a group (and a sub-group within these groups). This skill was refined and extended further, and as a result more and more of ‘the true self’ became visible. However, in order to remain within the security of the culture, it was a characteristic of these identities that they often lacked meaningful significance to boys’ true values and beliefs.

‘Identities’, as shown in Figure 1, represented the third range of masculinities evident in the school, one where boys practised how to negotiate a position that defined them as unique in some way, but that remained within the parameters of their culture. ‘Individualities’, the fourth range of masculinities that boys described, was constructed when boys publicly explored and expressed the personal beliefs and values that made them an individual. It was a phenomenon that carried the potential cost of ostracism and ridicule.

The nature of the boy-culture I encountered discouraged true individualism. To be different was admired, but to be too different was a threat to the status quo. Pressure (through mocking and stirring) was exerted to keep boys from displaying too much individuality. For this reason, ‘individualities’ came as a stage beyond whole-hearted participation in the boy-culture. Only a courageous boy would abandon the security of the culture, to ‘go out on a limb’ and expound individual opinions. However, this action was also admired by boys (and staff), because of the bravery it displayed, and also because the opinions and actions that made this boy so different and individual were often rooted in the strongly personal, and spoke to issues of social justice.

In spite of experiencing what they said was pressure to negate ‘individualism’, boys had a strong affinity for the term. They recognised it in themselves and others. During interviews they used it as a term to encapsulate those versions of masculinity they held that ran counter to the stereotypical. However, individuality was also a carefully guarded concept; such opinions were voiced within the security and the confidentiality of a long one-on-one interview, but they were rarely voiced in public. Boys who did strongly express their own ideas of what was right and wrong were often called, in the boys’ language, “individuals”.

The state of being an ‘individual’ had many characteristics. Of the boys I heard described in this way, they often (but certainly not always) were older boys. They had been associated with a particular group in the past, but had grown beyond its politics. They were in some respects aloof and disdainful of their peers’ behaviours. However, they held the cautious respect of their peers,
although they were also ostracized in subtle ways. They nearly always had “a passion” – something that they did very well and used to communicate and express their values and beliefs, such as visual art or creative writing.

During interviews I often heard comments that emerged from this layer, and I came to realise they expressed the types of gender attitudes that contemporary masculinity research identified as the act of recognising multiple masculinities. “You have to realise that your own actions impact on others… As you get older you see that other opinions, while different to your own, are equally valid” (Neil), “I enjoy watching others work in art – their art challenges my perceptions and makes me see things in a different way” (Oscar); “I get along with X much better now. We have agreed to be different and now learn a lot from each other” (Peter); “I am sick of homophobia. X is called gay and he isn’t, and these guys can’t see that it just doesn’t matter” (Simon). What characterised the individualities layer was that boys operating at this level of exploration not only recognised these valuable qualities in masculinity, they were also active in working out how they could be accommodated in their own lives.

It seemed that seeking ‘individuality’ meant stating opinions on issues of social justice, it meant you had liberal interpretations of what constituted knowledge, and it meant you actively sought meaningful relationships in order to understand how others thought and felt. These qualities were, in essence, what Connell (1996), Mac an Ghaill (1996), and others felt constitutes masculinities that were non-hegemonic. This was not a state that came easily or without cost, and it was the culmination of the acquisition of skills developed during the ‘groups’ and ‘identities’ layers. ‘Individualities’, as shown in Figure 1, represented the fourth range of masculinities evident in the school, a stage where boys actively negotiated with their peers their most closely held values and beliefs, and attempted to come to terms with the values and beliefs of others.

What does this model have to offer education?

The model of boys’ layered engagement of masculinities as represented in Figure 1 recognises that a range of masculinities exists. Such masculinities cannot be given convenient labels (apart from the superficial ‘typing’ layer) because they are specific to each boy and they become increasingly so as boys develop their ideas about being male and negotiate these ideas with their peers. This has significant educational ramifications because knowledge of these layers and how boys use them gives educators opportunities to design and implement curricular strategies that can assist boys to access the important individualities layer. A key component is the recognition of boys’ mobility within this model, represented in Figure 1 by the double-headed arrow. From Scott and Olaf’s descriptions, when boys feel challenged they often revert to a superficial layer of engagement of masculinity where the rules and behaviours are not in dispute. When boys feel the need to assert independence and autonomy, they revert to a mid-level engagement of masculinity where their culture allows a degree of experimentation, and the freedom to stretch the ill-defined rules of their culture. When boys are driven to question themselves, their beliefs and values, and the beliefs and values of those around them, they are engaging their masculinity at its deepest level. In short, the ways these layers operate is intrinsically aligned to the varying degrees that boys wish to express and communicate personal opinions, values, and beliefs that constitute their own masculinity. From what boys in this school told me, there is evidence that boys genuinely want to engage this fourth level (“I have a need to express”), but are restricted for a variety of reasons.

It seems reasonable to consider that what I observed in this school was boys reacting to social, academic, and peer pressures by continually weaving from one layer of masculinity to another.
Under some circumstances, the factors were right for boys to engage their deepest ‘individuality’ layer of masculinity – at other times they felt they should act according to stereotyped behaviours from more superficial layers of masculinity, even though they might not necessarily support those values and beliefs.

The notion that boys are actively engaging in such ‘intra-masculinity mobility’ makes some sense of what teachers like Victor ("They can be all over the place – one minute quite immature, the next minute they surprise you with insightful and sensitive behaviours!") and fellow students like Neil ("There are times I have to get away from them. Depending who they get together with, they can be quite different people") find so frustrating. Some boys’ maturity levels fluctuate or, perhaps more accurately, they access the level of masculinity they feel they should inhabit in order to engage with their peers under certain circumstances. If this is so, it is a notable concept, because it demonstrates that boys have some control over when and how they explore their masculinity – they are not the passive receptors of masculinity that much of the literature assumes.

Opinions from all three categories of participants indicate that boys can be influenced in making the decision to access a deeper layer of engagement with their masculinity, and schools and subjects within schools can play a part in this process. Our aim as educators should be to facilitate, at the boys’ discretion, their journey through this process, and their access to this fourth layer of their engagement with their masculinities. We must design curriculum that allows boys free passage towards engaging the ‘individualities’ layer of masculinity; curriculum that is, in this sense, ‘boy-friendly’.

From participants’ comments there emerged six identifiable barriers to boys’ access to the valuable individualities layer. First, boys were not challenged. Stereotypes provided an easy escape for boys who either did not wish to consider how they interpreted masculinity, or who succumbed to the pressure of katagelophobia and conformed to superficial and limiting definitions. Second, the term ‘masculinity’ had been hijacked. Dominant stereotypes of masculinity were so far removed from their own values and beliefs, boys did not associate the term ‘masculinity’ with their own, often quite egalitarian, beliefs concerning gender. Third, current beliefs about masculinity were counterproductive to discussion. The structure of the stereotype was so limited that no room existed within it to allow boys to extrapolate the concept of masculinity further. Fourth, boys owned no concepts with which to work. Masculinity discussion was a vacuum for boys. They had little knowledge of its construct and their culture restricted any development of these constructs as an alternative to the stereotypical. Fifth, boys had no tools with which to work. Boys had virtually no ‘masculinity vocabulary’ with which to explore its nature with each other. Finally, in this school there existed an unsatisfactory climate for exploring masculinity, created by a lack of empathy from the institution for masculinities that differed from its image of the ideal graduate, and by a katagelaphobic boy-culture.

In the larger study, of which this data is only a segment, five features of a ‘boy friendly’ curriculum were identified (Imms, 2003). First, boys required safety within the curriculum in order to explore masculinity. This term had multiple applications; physical safety (for example, small classes that negated katagelophobia), intellectual safety (for example, curriculum that mandated the expression of personal ideas), and safety within pedagogy (for example, subjects that built risk-taking strategies). Second, boys required curricula that facilitated communication. This included the opportunity within curriculum to communicate personal ideas and opinions, the provision of tools and skills with which to communicate, subject epistemologies that mandated expression and communication between boys, and curriculum that was relevant to their culture. Third, boys required curricula that provided them freedom. This included physical
freedom to move between groups and choose situations in which to work. It included curricular freedom; one that allowed boys to choose styles and approaches to set tasks. It included intellectual freedom where boys could interpret and address criteria in a manner relevant to personal strengths, interests, and skills. Fourth, boys required curricula that accommodated their particular ways of learning. This included allowing for problem-based and physically based activities that provided practical outcomes. It also incorporated curriculum that allowed a wide variety of choice, knowledgeable teachers who imparted knowledge with passion, and the concept of ‘disciplined freedom’ – teachers who could simultaneously allow freedom and exert control. Finally, boys required curricula that helped them develop relationships. This occurred when curriculum could ‘level the playing field’ between ‘types’ of boys, when curriculum mandated exploration of ‘the self’, when curriculum provided skills in critical analysis, and when subject epistemologies allowed for alternative truths beyond didactic, binary academic knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper has only provided a brief glimpse of the phenomenon of boys’ active engagement of a myriad of masculinities in one school. However, some interesting points are highlighted. The impetus for the changes to hegemonic masculinity that seem so necessary (Kenway & Willis, 1997; Skelton, 2001) may well pre-exist in many boys’ core attitudes and beliefs. Their willingness to accept that these worthwhile personal beliefs may in fact constitute a personal masculinity, suggests that the most effective changes to masculinity may well come from within its structure, rather than by being imposed on boys by way of remedial programs. Secondly, boys believe that significant barriers stop them from exploring these worthwhile masculinities. A combination of expectations by the family, the school, and most importantly, by their own boy-culture, create barriers that they require help to overcome. Thirdly, boys are able to identify a number of characteristics that they say provides them assistance in overcoming these barriers. They are evident in some school curricula, absent in others. Their identification could lead educators to reassess how some subjects are structured and taught.

These findings must be considered in the light of the significant limitations of this study. The models presented are based on comments from boys in one school and while I believe they accurately reflect what was occurring during my year as a researcher in that institution, they require a great deal more comparison to other types of schools before any claim to accuracy across a population can be made. However, the comments that boys made, and the analysis from these comments, are a beginning point in looking towards a curriculum that does not attempt to isolate boys through collective guilt (Jackson & Salisbury, 1996), rather, attempts to build on the positive and worthwhile beliefs and values many boys hold concerning gender. Far from being a negative and oppressive force that is progressing towards extinction, comments during this study paint masculinity as something that is vibrant, very much alive, and holding the potential to make significant contributions to an equitable and healthy society.

Endnotes

1 The study draws on boys and staff from a private socio-economically privileged, non-denominational, single-sex school in an affluent Western nation. The results are specific to boys in this school.
2 The term “typing” refers to the allocation of boys into categories based on seemingly unchangeable characteristics of their physiology or personality.
3 By denoting “types” as the first layer of masculinity, I am not suggesting a similar structure doesn’t occur within femininity. Girls can also be “cool”, “nerds”, etc. However, I have no data to show how girls use typing when exploring femininity.
Foreign boarding house boys who enter the country only to take advantage of the education system.

Street kids in distress. “We obviously aren’t in distress, but we go along with their alternative culture.”

A derogatory and racist slang term, “white nigger”, identifying boys who “think black is cool, they want to be black”.

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