

Teenage boys' perceptions of the influence of teachers and school experiences on their understanding of masculinity.

A paper presented by John R. Lee

Australian Association for Research in Education Conference

The University of Sydney, 6th December 2000

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Abstract:

There is widespread interest in the education of boys in school. Research undertaken by Robert Connell, Mairtin Mac an Ghaill and others suggests that there are a range of masculinities displayed by teenage boys. Some of the multiple masculinities chosen are in conflict with accepted concepts of educational achievement. This paper is a report on a doctoral research project. This study is investigating the perceptions of Year 11 high school boys in two single sex Catholic schools. These adolescents share their understanding of what it means to be a man today. The teenage boys in the study identify aspects of school life that they perceive as influencing their sense of masculinity. QSR NUD.IST is used to assist in the analysis of data from interviews and focus groups. The paper explores the boys' views of the impact of teachers, coaches, sport, discipline and classroom experiences on their understanding of what it means to be a man. Implications of the data for educational leaders and researchers are presented. Recommendations for improving educational outcomes are made that draw on the perceptive comments made by the teenage boys.

Introduction

This paper reports on a current doctoral research project: Teenage boys' perceptions of the influence of teachers and school experiences on their understanding of masculinity.

There is significant community interest in the educational performance of boys. Young people are a part of a society that is undergoing rapid cultural and economic change. Whilst both young men and women are at risk in the evolving social landscape, the education of boys is attracting particular attention in both popular and professional literature.

The research of Lingard and Douglas (1999), Salisbury and Jackson (1996), Connell (2000, 1996) and Mac an Ghaill (1994) have particular relevance to this study. Each of these researchers has addressed how schools contribute to the development of teenage boys' understanding of masculinity.

Connell (1996) proposed that young men displayed multiple masculinities. Connell believed that particular school processes act as 'vortices' that masculinize boys. School processes of subjects, sport and discipline were powerful sources of messages to boys about what it means to be a man. This study investigated what boys perceive as being significant school influences on their understanding of masculinity.

Now is a critical time for all involved in education to consider how the school promotes masculinity. For example, Catholic secondary schools can provide teenage boys with educational experiences that help them develop inclusive understandings of masculinity. An examination of the literature reveals there is a need for research that focuses on the perceptions of teenage boys.

This study is directly linked to the professional needs of the researcher. The researcher is a teacher holding an Executive position in a large Catholic secondary boys' College. This project has grown from a need to evaluate the relationship between the students' sense of masculinity and their experience of school. The researcher is in the process of analysing data and drafting the dissertation.

Purpose of the study

This study has five primary aims. They are to:

1. Investigate teenage boys' understanding of masculinity.
2. Investigate teenage boys' perceptions of the influence of teachers and school experiences on their understanding of masculinity.
3. Analyse and draw meaning from student perceptions of how teachers and school experiences influence their understanding of masculinity.
4. Analyse the literature on masculinity, schooling and teenage boys to provide a context and focus for the study.
5. In the light of the findings to make recommendations for educational leaders, teachers and school communities.

Methodology

This qualitative study focused on the perceptions of the students. The aim was to consider the perceived influence of teachers and school experiences. This study did not aim to research, in any detail, the impact of other important factors such as peer groups, social class, family or cultural background.

The project involved interviews with 38 Year 11 students in two single sex Catholic boys' schools. A series of seventeen semi structured questions was developed. Data was collected from ten individual interviews and from eleven focus groups of two or three participants. All interviews and focus groups were conducted between October 1998 and November 1999. The researcher is a member of staff in one of the schools. No current

students or former students of the researcher were interviewed. Pseudonyms have been used for the schools and the participants.

To enhance the fidelity of this project, all interviews and focus groups were audio taped. Typed transcripts were checked against the tape recordings of the interviews and focus groups. QSR NUD.IST was used to assist with data analysis. On each occasion that a participant's response is quoted it is accompanied by: pseudonym; interview or focus group number; and QSR NUD.IST text unit number.

Presentation of Data:

Question 12: Perceptions of being a man today

Participants in the study were asked (Question 12), "What does it mean to be a man today?"

The responses of the teenage boys are reported according to recurring themes. Table 1 provides a guide to themes of the responses discussed by the 38 students. The responses of 25 participants gave an answer that expressed one theme. Thirteen students (24%) gave responses that included two or three of the recurring themes.

Table 1: Responses to Question 12 : What does it mean to be a man today?		
	Frequency	Percentage
Visions of Ideal Men	13	24
Visions of Responsible Men	13	24
Visions of Traditional Men	8	15
Changing Identity of Men	7	13
Changing Attitudes about Emotional Expression	7	13
Changing Attitudes to Work, Women and Society	4	7
Other responses	2	4
Total	54	100

Visions of Today's Men: Ideal, Responsible and Traditional

In the largest group of responses (63%), participants described visions of different types of men. This group of responses is divided into three separate sub groups: ideal, responsible and traditional men.

In thirteen (24%) responses, teenage boys described their ideal man. These images may have been a product of their experience of men and their aspirations for themselves as adults.

Someone who is himself. He can't be persuaded by other people. He can make up his own mind. He relates with other people well. (Sean, Gp 4, 88)

Society would see it as being a SNAG sensitive new age guy. I would see it as being a nice person, friendly, funny, a soft person in a way, they rise to the occasion when they need some authority and they are really powerful in putting that through, that is it no more. I admire that sort of person. (Dale, Int 1, 32)

To be a man. ... Someone who can fit into things that change quickly. Adapt to new things. Polite, be up front with people, and don't worry what they will say back to you. Keep it in a nice way. Be happy with yourself. Don't let others influence you, or tell you what you should be looking like or you should loose weight or something like that. Mainly just listen to yourself. (Nicholas, Int 4, 30)

There are notable combinations of images in the young men's statements. The idealised man is both decisive and relational. He is his "own man basically"(Fritz), "more individual...own decisions and choices"(Kane). As Sean noted: he is "someone who is himself" and Dale believed he is more than a SNAG because: "they rise to the occasion when they need some authority". Frequently, the men described in these word portraits have the ability and confidence to be inner directed. As Nicholas stated: "Be happy with yourself.... Mainly just listen to yourself".

Thirteen (24%) answers described men in terms of responsibility.

Greater responsibilities. You are more individual, not relying on your parents or anyone to help you along ... like your own decisions and choices. (Kane, Gp 11, 89)

I'd say a decent human being, by decent I mean, you follow the laws society sets ...the best person you can possibly be ... to be your own man basically. (Fritz, Int 10, 37)

Responsibility. Taking care of your actions. (Samuel, Int 2, 30)

One facet of these visionary images of male identity was awareness and responsibility. This type of man is one who "conforms to society's ideals"(Fritz) undertakes "greater responsibilities"(Kane) and "relates with other people well"(Sean). Dale encapsulated the appeal of his vision of the ideal man: "I admire that sort of person".

Traditional images of men featured in eight (15%) responses.

Some people see a man as ... being tough and showing they can hurt people ...I probably see a man as just being friendly. If something goes wrong he can handle the situation, take action, quick thinker. (Peter, Gp 4, 86)

There's still a strong presence of the old type of truism the man like the breadwinner, ... (It) is still very present. (Will, Gp 7, 91)

Being a man is more family orientated that what it used to be. You don't just work, come home, go to work the next day. It is much more family. Sport, to be a man you play some sort of sport. Most of them are contact sports. Macho sort of thing still. (Kevin, Int 5, 30)

A lot of ethnic groups have their own perception of it, which isn't always right. Especially with the ethnic groups, like the man and boy. They grow up a lot quicker, because the man is the one that runs the family and they're the ones who are going to take charge. (Thomas, Gp 3, 209)

The teenage boys' involved in this study were conscious that new identities are emerging for men. They were aware of the multiple layers of expectations that were influencing their choices about being a young man. As Thomas said: "A lot of ethnic groups have their own perception of it". Whilst Kevin believed that being a man is "more family orientated that what it used to be," he still echoed the view that "you play some sort of sport... contact sports. Macho sort of thing still." Kevin's statements highlighted that there are both traditional and emerging values facing men. They needed to be involved with their family as well as playing a traditional male contact sport.

Changing Identity of Men

Change was a re-occurring theme within the perceptions of the boys about being a man today. The perception expressed by the students in eighteen (33%) responses is that men today require a different outlook if they are to survive in a shifting world.

Seven (13%) responses indicated that the identity of men was changing. Three of the teenage boys interviewed believed that the traditional stereotyped Australian man was endangered.

The image of the guy with the beer at the barbie. It's dying out. (Thomas, Gp 3, 231).

Things have changed from the 'yobbo' thing now. It's about responsibility now. (Ben, Gp 3, 233).

It has changed from when you had the woman at home and the man working. (Lance, Gp 11, 91).

Whilst these students were small in number, their perceptions indicated the view that acceptable behaviour for men was changing.

Changing Attitudes about Emotional Expression

The young men who detected a change in the identity of men explained that new skills are required. Dimensions of change needed to involve both attitudes and behaviour. The way men deal with their emotional life received comment in seven (13%) responses. The rules for the expression of emotion seemed to be shifting.

But at least it has changed - the stereotypes.

(JL: How has it changed?)

People want men to be more sensitive, doesn't mean that you have to break down and cry every five minutes but you need to be a bit more sensitive to be able to see things that previously you may have ignored. (Lance, Gp 11, 91)

Lance was aware that there is a new level of expectation upon men. In the past, they may have been able to ignore situations that demanded empathy and skills in communicating emotions. The boys in this study were aware that there are conflicting expectations regarding the ways that men and boys expressed feelings.

I think traditional views are still present, like man works and woman stays home and takes care of the kids, washes the dishes and men aren't seen really as about to be showing emotions. If you are hurt inside or somebody dies you not really allowed to cry, you're meant to be strong, you know the breadwinner, to be strongest one and has to protect the family. (Alex, Gp 7, 89)

That pretty much said at all, it's the same, the traditional views of husband and wife, but I think now it's moving more to the husband can stay home and look after the children, they're moving more to equality and you know, you can show your emotions but in some cases, to be a man it's just not enough. (Will, Gp 7, 90)

If you go on what men say to be the big tough sort of person, a big football star, if you go on what the woman say it is to be more emotional like softer sort of people, you can be both, you can be the big tough sort of guy in the home, to your girl friend you can be softer, more emotional sort of person, do things around the house, clean for her, cook for her. (Patrick, Gp 6, 84)

It's changed a lot over the years, I think, like the stereotypical man, the big macho guy would have been more evident in fifty years or so, especially like the war that went on ... Whereas today you get different sides of the story, like the women, ... the men they bring across the macho sort of thing, whereas the women they show you the more loving, caring supportive sort of man. (Keith, Gp 6, 85)

Patrick and Keith identified that women were pushing for greater emotional expression from men. Others viewed this change as associated with a more broad movement of both men and women within society. The statement by Will, "you can show your emotions but in some cases, to be a man it's just not enough" illustrates the depth of the challenge the young men face. They are confronted by the stereotype of the Australian, breadwinning man with his feelings under control. Thomas stated that the traditional man is "dying out" but as Alex and Will reported that "the traditional view is still present". Regardless of the different perspectives on the stereotypical unemotional man, the boys in the study recognised the

power of this Australian image. Will implied that boys are supposed to be able to express sensitivity, as well as display traditional male characteristics like being decisive and dominant.

Alex, Will and Gavin (Gp7, 92-93) reported a discussion with a sympathetic teacher on the rules governing emotional expression.

My English teacher asked us like why men aren't allowed to cry. Wherever you notice something like you sort of know but you can't explain it as to why we aren't allowed to cry or show any emotions, it is like an unwritten law that everyone knows. (Alex)

The men who do show their emotions are seen as gay or sissies. (Will)

(JL: Do you feel happy with that unwritten rule?)

It doesn't really affect me, it's just something you get used to and just something you, ... I know in my family if someone dies we will all be mourning like fine if you're all crying but if you go outside you not going to be crying in the public or nothing, it's more of society view that influences you. (Alex)

This is followed directly by Gavin (Gp7, 94) who challenged this view put by Alex and Will.

I don't really agree with that. We're moving toward the new millennium and people's equal rights and everything, I believe that some of the things that we are rarely allowed to do, should eventually be allowed to do them because if someone doesn't show their emotions then they bottle up all their fears and they eventually like explode into rage or anger, so if they don't really talk about their problems they will probably end up with a relationship where the woman doesn't know the problems that her husband's going through, and he won't be able to speak, what he is thinking. (Gavin)

I think you should talk about things, otherwise it turns violence, I know from past experiences, if you don't talk things out it just bottles up ... anger. (Alex)

Teenage boys are maturing at a time when more facility with emotional expression is expected of men. However, the boys themselves showed that they were acutely aware that they are caught between conflicting demands regarding how they express their feelings. It appears that whilst men have more latitude regarding the expression of emotion, teenage boys do not seem to be accorded much freedom to demonstrate many of their feelings.

In another point in the study there is a description of the Captain of the First Grade Rugby League team, crying at the end of his Graduation. Several students discussed the significance of this very public event. Aidan's account includes this observation:

Because if the captain of the First Grade footballers can display emotions, and he would be seen as the most masculine of all the students, if he can display his emotions, like then anyone could! (Aidan, Int 3, 17)

Aidan described something of the power of the prohibition on emotional expression that has had a subtle influence on the young men in the study. Aidan's statement also illustrated the status of football within the hierarchy of these students' masculinities. Rules governing the expression of emotion are mediated through ways including the behaviour of peer leaders.

Changing Attitudes to Work, Women and Society

Participants in the study reported that men need changed attitudes towards work, women and society. Comments of Anthony, Lance, Ben, Kane and Gavin demonstrated the belief of participants that men need new attitudes to be effective members of the community.

Anthony described a detailed set of attitudes required by men. He was convinced that men needed a different approach to work if they are to survive in the contemporary workplace.

I think being a man is much more about attitude today. You need a good attitude if you want to survive in the workplace. Especially as we are competing with girls now as well, and they have different attitudes and different work ethics and ideas. We don't dominate any more. You always used to hear that the boys were smart, and now the girls are really smart. And that's what you hear all the time. And you think, "How am I going to compete against these girls. They are some kind of super race!"

(JL: What sort of attitude do you think boys need to survive in this new society?)

They need to want to achieve. Sometimes you just need to know what you want to do and you need to work for it. If you want it, you have to put in the hard yards. It's hard if you don't know what you want to do. Especially coming into Years 11 and 12, because you have to decide. And a decision has to be made, but then you have basically got four or six years of Uni ahead of you. If you stuff up, then you're stuck in a job you hate for the rest of your life. Not necessarily, but you haven't all the skills and you need to earn money.
(Anthony, Gp 3, 235-242)

Whilst Anthony was the only boy in the study to voice this perception in such detail, others like Lance were alert to the role of work in forging male identity.

But you still feel you want to work because if you didn't work, if I left school and didn't work I'd definitely feel inferior. I want to work. (Lance, Gp 11, 91)

Ben seemed to share the view that hard work, vision and responsibilities were qualities required by men.

Things have changed from the 'jobbo' thing now. It's about responsibility now. You have to work hard. You have those kind of responsibilities. Make sure you are going somewhere in life from now on. (Ben, Gp 3, 233)

None of the set questions in the semi structured interviews or focus groups asked about the participants' perceptions of women. However, the boys' attitudes to women did feature in several responses. In particular, Kane commented:

I would have to say that apart from the obvious, men and women are virtually equal now. Like no one is seen as stronger, or no one is seen as weaker, virtually is the same. (Kane, Gp 11, 93)

This connected with Owen's view that men could no longer act as if they dominated the social landscape.

A man these days is more down to earth I suppose. I think. I am not quite sure?

(JL: More down to earth?)

I am thinking that men are not thinking that they are above everyone else. They want respect. They want to respect others. (Owen, Int 6, 30)

Fritz's discussion of his role as an altar server in the celebration of Mass provided an interesting insight into the gender stratification of the workforce.

Oh, I think it is more of a service job. It's really the typical stereotype. Women are supposed to be serving and whatever else like that, cleaning or whatever else like that. They probably see it as someone else's duty, not a bloke's duty. (Fritz, Int 10, 28)

Ben stated that being a man today was more than size, muscles and physical power. He proposed that there is a new and emerging criterion for being a man:

I think it has changed. Before it used to be your muscular stance, your physical aspect. But now I think it's more how you carry yourself amongst the community. (Ben, Gp 3, 227)

Ben indicated a common thread amongst the perceptions of the students in the study. They believed that men confronted a social and cultural environment that required new skills and attitudes. Women cannot be viewed as having a lower status. Men needed to become more communicative and more able to accommodate new expectations within the workforce. Anthony's comment about girls as "some kind of super race", illustrated that at least some boys were thinking about participating in life with a new style of gender relationships.

Table 2. Summary of themes emerging from Question 12:

What does it mean to be a man today?

- The traditional stereotypes of the Australian man are still present. The boys acknowledge their power and believe that these stereotypes are under challenge.
- Men need to develop new attitudes if they are to survive in a changing world. Men need to be adaptable, responsible, relational, and friendly. Strength comes not from domination of women but from self knowledge and practical wisdom.
- Men today are expected to be more competent in dealing with emotions.
- Teenage boys have to negotiate conflicting messages about manly behaviour. This is particularly obvious when considering how to respond to their more vulnerable emotions.

Teenage boys are aware that they are becoming men in a society that is redefining what it means to be a man. This section of the paper reported participants' responses to a question on their understanding of being a man today. Responses were grouped in themes of similar comments.

Presentation of Data

Question 15:

Perceptions of Influences on Understanding of Masculinity

Teenage boys' participating in the study were asked (Question 15): "What has influenced your understanding of masculinity? Please try to identify them." This open ended question elicited a large volume of data. This paper will outline samples of some responses.

The teenage boys in the study frequently perceived that many factors influenced their understanding of masculinity. The responses of eight participants are examples of the mix of influences nominated by the students.

Parents. School. Friends. (Samuel, Int 2, 36)

Family, friends, mostly your peers I'd say. Teachers do as well. Majority of time it would be family and close friends. (Kristoff, Gp 9, 100)

Family, males in family, mostly your Dad, as he is a man himself. He tells you what is right and what is wrong and he brings you up to be a man and he disciplines you as well. Parents and families give you responsibilities that toughens you up a bit. (Yunis, Gp 9, 102)

Peers mainly, and people you hang around with, schools, teachers, family - your Dad the way he wants you to grow up and be and act. Movies as well, I'd say. (Mauro, Gp 9, 105)

School definitely, friends, women and a personal sense of pride. (Anthony, Gp 3, 307)

Family, especially my Dad and my older brothers. Also the media. Like they paint the stereo types of the perfect man or something like that: the Fabio. Like women I suppose, you have to be a good body and be smart ... and I suppose give you something to work up to or something. But I think I mostly get my influence off my father and my two older brothers.(Fred, Gp 10, 141)

I think family. Different institutions do, family, school, peers, other people, sporting clubs other men in the club. Even sporting heroes you see on the media and look at them and that why you get into trouble if people say I want to be like him. (Damien, Gp 10, 143)

My family, my father I look up to him a lot. Friends influence you a lot more than you realise. Your heroes, people you respect. (Joshua, Gp 10, 145)

The thirty eight participants were given an opportunity to nominate what they perceived as influencing their understanding of masculinity. One participant responded that he didn't know. The other thirty seven participants nominated from one to seven influences. The data will be analysed in detail the dissertation but is beyond the time available for this presentation. Table 3 represents the frequency with which participants identified factors in their response to the question.

Table 3 Perceived influences on participants understanding of masculinity.

(Question 15): "What has influenced your understanding of masculinity?"

Please try to identify them."

Perceived influence as nominated by participants	Frequency this influence is nominated by participants	Percentage	Frequency of participant responses falling within this influence	Percentage
Family	28	31	49	39
School, Teachers	21	23	21	17
Friends, Peers	15	17	17	13
Media	8	9	12	9
Heroes, Sport & Media Stars	6	7	10	8
Activities, Sport, Experiences	5	5	9	7
People	4	4	5	4
Puberty	3	3	3	2
Don't Know	1	1	1	1
Total	91	100	127	100

The participants in this study stated that they perceived family (31%), school and teachers (23%), as well as friends and peers (17%), as the major influences on their understanding of masculinity. The participants perceptions of each of these influences will be examined in the dissertation.

Conclusion

Teenage boys are aware of many influences on their developing understanding of masculinity. Lingard and Douglas (1999), Salisbury and Jackson (1996), Connell (2000, 1996), Mac an Ghaill (1994) and others have reported the importance of school as influence on student masculinities. The analysis of data emerging from this study highlights the perceptions of teenage boys. The samples of data presented in this paper focuses on the diversity of their understandings of what it means to be a man today. The participants regarded school as one of a number of important influences on their understanding of masculinity. The perceived role of school will be examined in detail in the dissertation currently in preparation.

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