

# **Masculinity in a New Zealand Boys' School: The Experiences of Year 9 Boys**

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# My Story

# Positioning

Identity development and gender development is about finding out that I'm ok. Am I as a person meeting the mark and being how I am supposed to be being?

# Hegemonic Masculinity

“Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.”

(Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005)

“It is men’s and boys’ practical relationships to collective images or models of masculinity, rather than simple reflections of them, that is central to understanding gendered consequences in violence, health, and education.” (Connell &

Messerschmidt, 2005)

Skywalker: I know some kids in my class when something happens they say, “What is your aggregate?” Because they are probably at the highest of the class.

Chris: So some kind of dispute happens and their response is to ask your aggregate? Can you give me an example of when that happens?

Skywalker: If they said like a wrong answer, they just let the class, I don't know, get it.

Chris: Why do you reckon that is their response? What is it about having a high aggregate that they use that as a defence?

Skywalker: They think they are like smarter, so they can use that as a rebuttal...kind of like to intimidate people I think.”

**Masculinity looks very different  
in different times and spaces  
(multiple masculinities  
perspective).**

Oliver: Definitely the way I acted like back in my hometown, you for yourself, and it is like you got to act tough down there because you don't want to be teased and all that. But up here it is different. You have got to be respectful, head up and all that. I think that has changed me. Like, I have opened my eyes up a lot more and it is real bad how I was to how I am now. So now I like feel better for myself and like back then I didn't. I was just somebody else. I was like them and now I am coming into myself a lot more.

Chris: Kind of living the way you want to live.

Oliver: Yeah.

**Be careful about jumping to assumptions about what aspects contribute to perceptions of masculinity. It's not all about being tough, sports, girls etc.**



# Boys' schools are inherently gendered

As a student at a school for boys, which has the aim of producing good men, being a “good boys’ school boy” is about their identity *as men*.

# My study

- Focusing on the experiences of a group of Year 9 students in their first year at an urban NZ boys' school (Boys' High), analysed in relation to the concept of masculinity.
- 14 Year 9 boys, interviewed multiple times through their first year. The purpose of interviewing them multiple times across a year was to get a feeling for how their perspectives changed over that time.
- Wanted the perspective of a student from the school's Rainbow community represented, so also interviewed a senior student one time.

# My study

- Wanted the perspective of a former student looking back, so also interviewed a former student one time. This student was a former head prefect (student leader).
- Used a walking method called *Go Along* (Kusenbach, 2003), which involved walking together with the students around the school while we talked. Gave a tangible understanding about many of the things they were telling me.
- Interviews took place in 2022. Now in the analysis phase (still early stages so the findings I am sharing today are preliminary). Goal is to write the thesis next year and be finished by the end of 2024.

# The Boys' High Man

- Respect.
- Character over success. Picking up rubbish, being kind/helpful to others, being humble.
- Uniform. A Boys' High Man takes pride in the school and has an awareness that they represent their school at all times when they are visibly connected with the school.
- Maturity and calm/emotional stoicism.

# The Boys' High Man

- Effort and always trying to do better. Success and achievement is closely linked to this and also highly valued, but effort is valued over achievement. Champions do extra. Goal to move up class (highly streamed class placement structure), improve grades etc.
- Success. Academics and sports are both very highly regarded, but academics is viewed as more important than sports. Sports being not super important depends on the boy being good at something else.
- All of this is often exemplified in the school prefects (leaders).

# The Boys' High Man

Ethan Hunt: It's not a really a boy who has an untucked shirt who won't do well. It's more about the attitude you know? The uniform doesn't really tell you anything, but you have an untucked shirt, that's fine. But your attitude I guess it really matters. The untucked shirt kind, and you compare that to the tucked shirt I guess, the tucked shirt it's like you, I don't know, it says more respectable. If you have a tucked in shirt, you're following the rules, uniform. And you're more kind of clean and focussed compared to the untucked shirt. But yeah, like I said, it's more about attitude."

# The Boys' High Man

Skywalker: I don't know how they are so calm and I would be like so happy and excited and they are just so calm like it is nothing.

Chris: Tell me about that. So you feel like they act like it is nothing?

Skywalker: They don't act like it is nothing. Like I see them, but I don't know because I would probably like act like it is good, not act excited on the outside and inside would be absolutely celebrating.

Chris: Why is there this thing that these boys cross calmly? Tell me about that.

Skywalker: Because they celebrate that is showing humility, like modesty...[not] showing it on the outside too much.

# The Boys' High Man

Chris: Because you mentioned about going from a boy to a man. Tell me about that process. Like, what's the difference between a boy and a man?

Oliver: For me it is like just, the respect you get from other people and the way you treat other people, and the way you act with other people and yourself...I know some boys that act like really silly and like why because for me I'm like a straight up person...It is quite different to see, like not the ages, but the body language that people use.

Chris: So body language and the respect thing, and the way they treat people?

Oliver: Yeah, and the way they treat not themselves, but the way they act within themselves. So like not me running around with my hands flapping around or running down a hill by the pavilion. It is just walking properly. You can have some fun, but a proper way, not just like breaking the rules for fun.



# The Boys' High Man

Chris: [Describe for me the perfect Boy's High Man].

Skywalker: It is kind of like...The Head Boy. Being respectful, because I know that because he once helped me on the way to Maths, and he helped me [when lost]. He actually took me the whole way there...He was really friendly. He talked respectfully. He had like the coat, tie, the badge...It wasn't that far; like just the next block. But when I picture the ideal Boys' High Man, that is who I think.

# The Boys' High Man

Oliver: It is a real cool atmosphere like everyone yelling and supporting their team, but it is full on, like everyone is crowded together in a small area and different for Boys' High because like for me my club team, it was always like booing and all that, but here it is completely different. Like respect is the main thing. Like respect another team and their own players in it. Like I see other teams like [another school] who are like booing them and say wrong things about our team, and we just clap if they score a try. It is real cool to see that. So, we are well respected and a well-respected school for that.

Chris: When you first saw it and that it was like that, what was your impression?

Oliver: When I first saw it, I thought this is really going to change me because I always go for the one team and I don't care about the other...once I got used to it, this is the way you have to do it and this is the right way instead of doing like not the right way...the Boys' High way is the right way to do it.

# Belonging

- General excitement and sense of privilege in getting to attend.
- Awareness of the opportunities that the school provides and that this will set them up for their future. Was a real sense of gratitude for this.
- Closely linked for many of the boys to the sense of history, particularly if they had previous family connections to the school.

# Belonging

- Regular comparisons were made to other schools and that they were so fortunate to be attending this school. This was especially compared with their contributing schools.
- Linked directly to engagement and motivation to make the most of the opportunities. Also the focus to do better, particularly in academics.
- General feeling that being at this school was going to make them a better person.

# Belonging

Luka Smith: [Discussing being a prefect] Like every single Friday and obviously having my formals now like I feel like always representing my school as one of the, like icons I guess, sort of would be amazing. Like even for me just standing in the Town Hall stage in two weeks' time today [for a choir competition], that would just be amazing. Like I would feel like I have actually done something for my school. Like even if I don't make it [prefect], but I feel like I would have represented myself in something.

Chris: You mentioned before that you feel really honoured to be here. Tell me more about that.

Luka Smith: I just think like Governor Grey who was the first governor, it just shows how long we have been around for. Like all of this is like dating back to what, 150 something years ago, and it feels like I want to be a part of that history; to see my name up on the Dux or University Entrance or Head Prefect or whatever. Just seeing my name somewhere, even just on a photo round here, people can go oh yeah, that guy, he was blah blah blah...I am part of all these amazing people who have potentially gone and done amazing things...and for me to be even next to them, or just like being a part of that history for Boys' High, because we are 153 years old.

# Belonging

Oliver: For me a Boys' High boy always gives it a go no matter what and always wants to be in one of the highest classes because they always strive to be there, and just wanting to be a Boys' High Boy at school. That is what I want to be, like a Boy's High Boy. That is what I want to be. Because at Boys' High they got everything I could ask for. Like there are academics that can help me get whatever I want in life, with anything, and sport here is just amazing, like I think there are 15 rugby teams.

Chris: It sounds like you really connect with the idea of being a Boys' High Boy and that it is something you really want to be.

Oliver: Yeah, definitely. It is like something I want to be even past school, always holding to those values. Like no matter where I am, always doing the Boys' High values and always being a Boys' High Man.

# Belonging

Chris: What is your opinion of boys vaping?

Jamal: I don't know, it is just bad for them. I don't know what they are like as people, but it's disgusting to see that especially in a Boys' High Uniform. I came in the weekend to shoot hoops and a group of five boys were on the basketball courts just vaping. They wore Boys' High caps. It's sad.

Chris: Tell me why you said especially in Boys' High uniform. Why does it seem especially bad for them to be doing it?

Jamal: You can see any kid, they are under 18 and vaping in public...but if you recognise them as Boys' High, they have got some slight Boys' High connection, then it's a bit sad that they are vaping, because it's a big opportunity here and people are going to waste it. I think like I said, classes generally towards the lower end, but like I said there are people in higher classes that I know who vape.

**What about the boys who  
don't belong?**



# You've got to be good at something

Chris: So you feel like regardless of the class you are in, you are even, and you are not better or worse than the other person because of your class level?

Luka Smith: Yeah, like this is just an example; Like you could be in A but you are not good at sports, and then someone could be in I but they are insane at sports. Like you are on that level still. You are on the same level, like you are kind of balanced in a way.

Chris: So it like, if you have your place, you are kind of like at the same level?

Luka Smith: Yeah, like everyone is good at something. Not parading about myself or anything, but I'm quite good at sport and my dad is good at yelling at me.

If boys are “doing boy” well in some areas, they can afford to “do other” in different ways (Renold, 2004).

# Othering

Jamal: Well, I would say, they're not...how would I put this nicely? But the kids around here, are not lower classes. They're...I've seen their bags. The kids that hang around here just want to eat their food and chat. They're not like all the people who they're above school [implying lower stream boys], hang out in the bathrooms or like I'm on, round the back of the field of something."

Chris: You can tell what class a boy is from?

Jamal: I'd reckon from, I reckon from about H, I know. About H up. So top 8. 'Cause we do Latin. There's quite a big difference...Yeah, you can. Yeah, even tell the difference easily. Like easily. Like I could pull two kids out, one that's in 9P and one that's in 9A and I can tell you the difference. Not because of his nationality or anything.

# Othering

Jamal: You can just tell and it's some. And none of those guys hang out there so that's quite good...Yeah yeah, huge difference.

Chris: And that lower stream boys sounds like they'll less, kind of take less pride in their uniforms?

Jamal: They don't take pride in Boys' High at all.

# Seeing Self in the Othered

Chris: Do you feel people say much about what boys are like in each class? Do you hear much about that kind of thing?

Jeremy: Yeah, I feel like people think H or below, they are like dumb or not very smart, and then H up, they are fine.

Chris: What is it like to hear that? *(Note: This student is in 9I)*

Jeremy: It is a bit disappointing maybe. I don't know, but I agree; well I don't really agree, they are not really dumb. I guess I don't agree with being dumb or anything. I guess they have trouble with learning or they are just unlucky with their teachers or something in the past. I don't feel like that is really fair, but that is I guess what other people say.

# Seeing Self in the Othered

*(Intervening section where he is talking about wanting to work hard and move up)*

Chris: Do you think boys get treated differently by either students or even by other staff based on their stream?

Jeremy: Yes, well I think the lower classes, they misbehave. I guess they don't care about school or something...

Chris: You feel like lower classes behaviour is worse you reckon?

Jeremy: I guess that is what people think. I don't know if it is true or not.

# Not Achieving

Chris: This tiredness, what other impact has it had on you?

Boba: It just means every now and then I kind of have an outburst and kind of break down like if I've been away for a weekend and I don't study for tests that I have that week I just kind of lose it.

Chris: What happens when you lose it?

Boba: I just get mad as at anything, like anything. I smashed my phone yesterday.

Chris: Really?

Boba: Yeah, because I had a test today.

# Not Achieving

Chris: Tell me about what happened there? Like what got you to the point of smashing your phone?

Boba: Well I went to [the beach] last weekend and it was like fun, but I didn't really study that much and I had a test. So, Monday night and I was tired from staying up late and I smashed my phone because I was just angry as.

Chris: How did you smash it?

Boba: I chucked it on the ground.

Chris: It broke?

# Not Achieving

Boba: Yeah. I didn't study for something and I got like 20% in that test and knowing I could have done better and now it will affect my exam score. I got it together after I smashed my phone, I just decided I needed to take a break and then I was able to concentrate and study better.

Chris: Would you have got this angry or would this have happened to you last year do you think, at intermediate?

Boba: You kind of need to study because you are in high school. At intermediate you got no exams and no like serious tests. If you got a bad score in something nothing happened, but at Boy's High you get like a bad exam score it affects your aggregate which affects your class placement.



# Disengagement

Chris: Do you feel like you are a Boys' High Boy?

Sam: Probably not.

Chris: Tell me about that.

Sam: Well, because I'm not trying as hard. I don't want to move up a class; that is probably the biggest one. I'm happy that I'm dropping down would definitely be the one because they are always saying like study, get in a high class, all of that. But I don't want to be in a higher class.

Chris: So, you feel like to be a Boys' High Boy, you need to want to climb a class? Is that what it comes down to?

# Disengagement

Sam: Yeah. You want to do well and be better than other people.

Chris: It sounds like you don't connect with the idea of being a Boy's High Boy?

Sam: Not really, because then you kind of become one of the peasants in the feudal system. You are kind of like hypnotised by the fact that you have to be better than anybody else. You know, be the top of the class, be the best at everything, brainwashed. They want everybody to be kind of the same. Like you want to be the best, you know, strive for being the best. Better than anybody else.

**What does this mean  
for us who work in a  
boys' school?**

# Work to our strengths

Boys' schools have a head start in creating cultures of belonging. Make the most of the benefits of fostering a sense of belonging through a clear, strong culture focussed on being men of character.

# Mitigate the unintended

The reality is a school could have the best possible culture, and it would still be commandeered into the positioning of gender, creating hierarchy (think hegemonic masculinity). The trick for us working in boys' schools is to understand how this is happening so we can try and mitigate the unintended negative impacts.

We need to know our boys to be able to do this.

**Shape the narrative.**

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