

# Journeys into **MASCULINITY**



Action Research Report 2009

INTERNATIONAL BOYS' SCHOOLS COALITION



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# Introduction

DI LAYCOCK BARKER COLLEGE, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

2008–2009 IBSC Action Research Coordinator

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It is my absolute pleasure to introduce the research reports of the 2008-2009 IBSC action research team. In the twelve months since their first meeting at the IBSC's Toronto conference, I have watched team members give birth to their projects and nurture them into the mature and insightful reflections on learning and teaching presented here.

The reports offer deep insights into the challenges that face boys on their journey into manhood and illustrate the great opportunities that boys' schools have to assist them in coming to grips with complex and sensitive constructs such as masculinity. The findings also highlight the vital role that boys' schools can play in providing safe environments in which boys' voices are recognised and respected.

As this research is offered for your consideration, I would like to thank those who have helped make it possible. For providing a 'kick-start' to the project, thanks are extended to David Booth and Wayne Martino, whose conversations with team members in Toronto ignited the team's ongoing discussions into masculinity. Thanks also go to the IBSC Board of Trustees for its continued support and belief in the action research program. More specifically, I would like to acknowledge the Coalition's Executive Director, Brad Adams, who five years ago planted the seed for the action research program and who has nourished it into the unique and flourishing global community of practitioner researchers we see today.

Finally, on behalf of the IBSC community, I sincerely thank the thirteen members of the 2008-2009 action research team for their commitment to this project. They are to be congratulated for their contribution to their profession's knowledge base and also for their courage in inviting us into their classrooms. I have no doubt that their honest and insightful reflections on their practice will resonate with readers and highlight the value of practitioner research in enhancing the lives of the boys we teach.



# *Lord of the Flies*: A Metaphor and Vehicle for Broadening Boys' Understandings of What it Means to Be a Man

STEVEN COHEN THE ALLEN-STEVENSON SCHOOL, NEW YORK, USA

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## Abstract

Using *Lord of the Flies* with ninth graders, I investigated whether studying its characters could broaden students' ideas about what it means to be male. Through class discussions, writing assignments, and blogging, characters' "masculinity" was analyzed and connected to students' own gender identifications. I administered a version of the *Bem Sex Roles Inventory* and a survey before and after the unit to measure changes in students' definitions of gender categories. While it was difficult to measure the degree and quality of the change in thinking, it was clearly possible to challenge boys' ideas and encourage them to question sex role definitions.

## Introduction

At Allen-Stevenson, it is important for us, as our motto proclaims, to turn out "scholars and gentlemen". Gentleman is defined broadly, as we believe that "there are many ways to be a boy". An important question for us is just how to foster in our boys the same broad definition of boyhood, which leads ultimately to the man he will become. As Wordsworth said, the Child is father of the Man, and so as I approached this project I equated boyhood and manhood. While clearly this goal must be approached through the orchestrated weaving of the various parts of both the hidden and articulated curricula, one area that seems especially called to this effort is the study of literature.

When we say that there are many ways to be a boy, we are consciously espousing a vision of boyhood, and ultimately, manhood, that runs counter to the prevailing hegemonic definition that "is about the winning and holding of power and the formation (and destruction) of social groups in that process" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645). While we want our boys to be leaders, we also value followers. We would like leaders who forge social bonds, not exert dominance. We want our boys to embrace many ways of being, not simply tolerate them.

There is a long history of addressing social and philosophical issues through literature in the context of English classes. Since there is no set English curriculum in the United States, curricular decisions, particularly the choice of which books to teach, are left to individual districts and schools

for the most part. This is even more true in independent schools, which have even fewer restrictions and requirements imposed upon them. Choices, therefore, often reflect the biases and agendas of teachers and individual schools. Often, these choices are based not only on subject requirements (e.g., the general consensus that by high school students should read some Shakespeare and several different genres, etc.) but also on the values and habits of mind a particular school wants to promote.

In fact, it has been a bedrock presumption of the discipline that “issues” are the domain of literature study, and that the study of literature has benefits for students that go beyond merely the academic to include those that affect them personally. As one teacher writing in *The English Journal* as early as 1950 put it:

Instruction in literature today undertakes, in addition to the development of pleasure, appreciation, and discernment in the reading of worthy literature, the cultivation of personal, social, and spiritual insights and such modifications of personality as will result in desirable behavioral changes. (DeBoer, 1950)

The professional literature in subsequent decades has continued to promote the belief that the teaching of literature can have an effect on the thinking of students.

At the same time, the notion that boys are well-served by literature studies that are geared to them as boys has developed momentum. Michael Gurian and Terry Trueman (2008) have written about the need boys have for primal stories: “the parental and communal aids for teaching the lessons of life”; the stories that “teach boys what true manhood is” (pp. 8–9). They start from the presumption that books and films can teach moral values if adults engage boys in moral dialogues around their stories. Cox (2006) writes that literature allows boys access to their “imagination and the important psychological process of projection. Says Donaldson, reading requires boys to construct realities that will inevitably be personal, perhaps even autobiographical, because those realities are formed from the unique experiences that make up each boy’s life” (p. 170).

It does not appear, however, that if reading literature can affect real change in boys’ thinking about issues, including what it means to be a man or boy, reading alone necessarily can help boys broaden their definitions of what it means to be a man. The evidence seems clear that all boys will attempt a definition, either alone or with adult help. If there is no adult involvement, boys will cede to peers and the media. However, with adult role models and adult guidance, boys can achieve a more critical, more nuanced, and broader idea of what it means to be a man. Much of the literature about boys consistently emphasizes this point (Sax 2007; Ashton 2005).

## Statement of Purpose

The purpose of my research was to see whether my students’ conceptions of “manhood” could be broadened through a study of literature, in this case *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. While I did not intend to lead my students to a particular definition, I did hope to lead them to one that was expansive and inclusive of other’s differing definitions. I wanted to see whether by the end of the study each believed that there were “many ways to be a boy” and, ultimately, a man.



## Approach

An action research approach was used to investigate my students' views of what it means "to be a man". This project was part of the International Boys School Coalition's 2008–9 Action Research program. Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used to investigate whether my students' conceptions of "manhood" had been broadened.

## Research Sample

I worked with a group of nine ninth graders at a boys' school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in New York City. The group was diverse in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status. Several of the boys in the class had been together since kindergarten and consequently there was a high level of comfort with each other. While this was a very small group of boys, which makes me cautious about generalizing from what I learned, I do have enough experience teaching ninth grade boys to be reasonably confident that this group, at least in terms of their attitudes towards gender categories, is consistent with other groups of ninth grade students.

While some believe that boys perceive school and success in school as feminizing and not masculine (Renold 2001; Connell 1989), this is not true for our middle and upper class population of students who see academic achievement as the key to getting into a good high school (and later a good college) and a successful life. This situation is exacerbated and brought to a high pitch by the intensity of the competition for independent high school places in New York City. Doing well academically is a status marker.

## Data Collection

I chose *Lord of the Flies* for a number of reasons. First, and not insignificantly, I teach this book often, and I was interested to see whether my students took from the book what I had assumed they had been taking from it. I wanted to research the effects a study of the book actually had and not simply what I assumed it had. Second, since it is a book about boys and about boys exclusively, it would allow us to focus our class discussions on masculinity. The novel presents a variety of models of boyhood, some typical of the hegemonic model as well as others that run counter to that model. Finally, the novel involves the hegemonic model of masculinity at its core. In some ways, the novel can be seen as a laboratory where a particular model of masculinity holds sway and what that might mean for a society. While Golding attributes many of the boys' problems to human nature, the novel can also be read as a commentary on hegemony.

Before proceeding, we needed to be clear about the definitions of the words that we were going to be using. The language for discussing gender and sex can be muddled and confusing. I made clear to my students that when I said "man" that I also meant "boy". We discussed how we were not talking about an issue of maturity, that is boys becoming men, but of maleness and what it means to be a male *vis-a-vis* others. How does a man behave and think? We discussed the difference between the terms male and female, and masculine and feminine, and how psychologists and sociologists use those terms differently.

I administered a version of the *Bem Sex Roles Inventory* (BSRI) as a pre-survey and again at the end. The BSRI was developed by Dr. Sandra Bem to measure the degree to which a respondent defines

him or herself as masculine, feminine, or androgynous (there is also an undifferentiated category). Respondents rate the degree to which certain adjectives or phrases describe themselves. I did not use the survey for this purpose for two reasons. First, some debate exists about the validity of the BSRI. Second, I worried that if my students felt the survey measured their masculinity they would be strategic in their choices to achieve the results they wanted. Instead, I used the sixty adjectives from the survey and asked the boys to indicate whether the trait was masculine, feminine or both, not whether the trait applied to them. I expected that if there had been any change in their views of maleness by the end the unit that they would select more adjectives as “both” (or perhaps fewer if the change had gone in the opposite direction). I included a brief description of Allen-Stevenson on the survey to “prime” the boys. I wanted them to take the survey thinking of themselves as boys and as students of a school with a particular ethos.

One other survey was also used. This was a survey developed by the International Boys School Coalition’s 2008-2009 Action Research team. Unlike the BSRI, which only allowed the boys to choose one of three answers and did not offer any chance to explain one’s choice, this survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions that did allow the boys to expand upon their answers.

Finally, boys were asked to respond to teacher-written profiles of several key characters from the novel. Boys were asked to respond to each of the profiles and give their impressions of the boy described in each. Particularly, they were asked how they thought they would respond to the boy described if he were a student in the school. My goal was to try to re-contextualize the characters as classmates. These profiles were revisited throughout the literature study to see if boys’ attitudes had changed about them.

Throughout the study, numerous discussions and writing assignments engaged the students in thinking about the novel’s characters from the perspective of gender and attempted to lead the boys to an appreciation of other qualities as acceptable and valid for men. Taking my cue from Sax (2001, p. 42), I often asked boys about what they would do if they were various characters as opposed to how they would feel if they were these characters. I asked how they would react to characters as a way to get at how they valued and ranked various boys from the novel. Boys were encouraged to use the descriptors from the BSRI to talk about the different boys and to relate these descriptors to how masculine they felt a character was. This was coupled with discussions and questions. One structure, a blog, was a critical part of the course.

## Results

The initial surveys showed that a number of the boys already had a relatively broad view of masculinity even before the unit began. In answering questions about what a man should wear, or look like, or communicate, or believe, several boys gave answers such as “whatever he wants,” or “it depends on the man”. At the same time, boys were clear that as they filled out the questionnaires, they were sensitive to appearing sexist. So, for example, one boy assigned all the BSRI characteristics to the category “both”. (However, by the end of the unit this same boy felt comfortable assigning characteristics among the three categories. His explanation was that he became more thoughtful about the question and more comfortable publicly revealing what he thought as a result of our reading of the novel.)

Comparing post and pre-administrations of the BSRI, there was movement on almost all descriptors. Of the 60 items, there was movement on whether 38 of them were “masculine.” Twenty-two items saw fewer boys identify them as “masculine” at the end of the unit, and 16 items saw more boys view the characteristic as “masculine.” In addition, every boy showed some change in thinking. No boy rated all the items consistently the same at the beginning and end of the unit. Each boy showed some change in whether he considered a characteristic “masculine”, “feminine”, or “both”; however, it was hard to discern a pattern. For some boys, there was a clear movement from seeing some qualities as either “masculine” or “feminine” to seeing it as “both”. For others, a quality that originally seemed to belong to neither gender was ultimately assigned to one or the other. For seven of the characteristics from the BSRI—*athletic, forceful, masculine, friendly, acts like a leader, competitive, and gentle*—there was no movement whatsoever. Whether identified as “masculine”, “feminine”, or “both”, at the beginning, they were identified identically by the same number of boys at the end. Interestingly, while *masculine* saw no change, *feminine* was identified by one boy as “masculine”.

## Discussion

From the first day of the unit it became clear that the boys themselves drew a distinction between maleness and masculinity. What was particularly striking to me was that while a hegemonic view of masculinity did exist, acknowledged by the students, it did not exist under the surface. The boys were keenly aware that there was a stereotype of masculinity and that it had great influence. While they were not in complete agreement on which characteristics comprised masculine and feminine, they were in agreement that the categories existed and could be defined. Often during unit discussions the boys asked me and each other whether we were talking about what “they” thought about being a man or were talking about the stereotype. This comment also revealed that their own views were not always identical to the hegemonic definition. So, already, we were starting from a place of uncertainty about the definition of masculinity.

Perhaps more importantly, they seemed to be aware that masculine and feminine were not the same as male and female. Several of the students had been aware of this from the beginning; others were not. However, by the end, based on class discussions, the results of the different surveys administered to the boys, and direct interviews, some of the boys demonstrated a more critical awareness of gender categories than were exhibited before the unit.

In talking to boys who changed their assignments of the descriptors between the initial and final BSRI, I discovered that they were all hard-pressed to describe why they changed them. What they did articulate was that they were often not wedded to any of the characteristics as being associated exclusively with one category. In many of the cases where the assignment changed, it went from either “masculine” or “feminine” to “both”. However, this was not always the case. Sometimes a descriptor went from “masculine” to “feminine” and at other times from “feminine” to “masculine”. Did the boys see these categories as fluid and permeable? Were they very much in flux about them? They seemed to express as much in direct interviews as well as in the IBSC survey, which was more open-ended and allowed for some explanation. Typical comments made reference to the fact that “masculine” and “feminine” varied from person to person and from context to context. They were torn. They understood that there was a hegemonic definition. They had also internalized that this was a “bad thing,” a “stereotype”. While they often felt the pull of the

hegemonic definition, they claimed to be lax about imposing it on others. It was okay for others to break from the stereotype, though they did not always do so themselves. It would be interesting to explore this in another project.

Interestingly, masculine was not always identified as a positive characteristic. For example, many of the boys highlighted qualities such as aggression, leadership, self-confidence, and taking charge as masculine qualities. These they associated with the two major characters of *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph and Jack. At the same time, they noted the flaws in these characters' approaches to their situation and understood the need for the "less masculine" characters of Simon and Piggy. A number of times boys described a character as more masculine because he acted in ways that was considered by the class undesirable. For example, one boy criticized Ralph as having "a more cavalier, reckless approach to searching the island than Piggy, who is very careful and scared. Ralph acts more masculine than Piggy". Another boy, one who was vehement in his dislike of Jack, described Jack on the final survey as the character from a book that most represents manhood.

Were students' conceptions broadened? While I have no evidence that they arrived at new, more expansive definitions of masculinity and manhood, there was evidence that their definitions, as shaky as they were, did seem to become even more destabilized. By the end of the unit they seemed even less sure of what constituted masculine and feminine. The changes in their BSRI attributions, the comments on their IBSC survey, and direct interviews indicated that they were more open to the question of whether a trait was masculine or feminine or androgynous. One boy, for example, when answering questions about "typical men", wrote that the attributes of such men "may have been specified before [*Lord of the Flies*] but [*Lord of the Flies*] showed all different ways each boy expressed himself with his clothes, behavior, etc." Another wrote, "no one represents manhood. All men are different". A third, when asked directly in the IBSC survey whether his views had been broadened, wrote, "Kind of. *Lord of the Flies* had different types of boys. Man varies. That is why today there are many types of 'man,' so there is no clear cut definition".

Most importantly, being masculine was not necessarily seen as the same as being a man. Masculinity was always a desirable quality for a man, whom many of the boys defined as being nurturing, caring, and understanding. While they recognized the hegemonic masculine construction, they saw it as to some degree separate from being a 'man'. Some men are more masculine than others but that is not always a good thing to be.

Was this the result of a literature study or was it the result of my focus? I think it was a combination of the two. One without the other, based on this study, would have been insufficient. Conversations about masculinity and femininity can be threatening and highly abstract for ninth grade boys. Grounding the discussion in a story about other boys and talking, in an almost voyeuristic way, about how various characters behaved and thought and their acceptance by other boys was distant and therefore safe. Also a study of literature can occur without any of these issues coming up. There is nothing about stories that necessarily will invoke a questioning of gender categories unless the teacher sets things up and foregrounds the issues in discussions and activities.

In the final survey, when the boys were asked “Do you think reading books affects the way you might think about an issue?” some said “yes” but others said “no”. However, when directly interviewed all the boys agreed that class discussions about literature do affect how they think about issues. They were quite clear and articulate on the point that class discussion, and class discussion led by a teacher, was effective, while simply reading was not seen universally as equally effective.

It was clear throughout that left on their own boys often did not challenge themselves and each other. This was for a variety of reasons. Because there is a very real hegemonic masculinity that is enforced by the total social context in which boys define themselves, even if the school works against it, there is a pull toward conformity. Sometimes boys are confused or unsure about the definition they are trying to construct. One boy revealed to the class during a later unit that he had been influenced to conform to the group’s views. After each boy had initially identified each descriptor as “masculine” or “feminine” on his own, the group was insistent on hearing what others had put. This student said that as we went through the list, there came a descriptor that everyone had put as “feminine” but he as “masculine,” and he publicly went with the group’s categorization. It wasn’t, he said, that he felt pressured to avoid seeming deviant, but that he felt he was wrong and the group must be right.

Another boy stated in a direct interview that he felt the presence of a teacher helped him say things that he would not necessarily say in a group, not because he was uncomfortable with the other boys knowing what he thought, but because he did not feel verbally adept enough to hold his own if challenged by other boys. He felt emboldened by the presence of a teacher who could help him articulate his thoughts and encourage the group to consider complications to their thinking.

This same boy, and another, shared with me that the blogging assignments were especially helpful in discussing issues where they felt that they would take positions that other boys might challenge. The blogs allowed these boys to share their thoughts without interruption or the pressures of having their classmates present. They were able to carefully think out their ideas and plan how to phrase them. This exchange, initiated by a boy who is usually very quiet in class, is representative:

**Student One:** I believe that Piggy is more masculine than Ralph. Piggy seems like someone who is mature and level-headed and would rather think through something than just attack it without strategy.

**Student Two:** I disagree; Ralph is more masculine than Piggy. Though Piggy may come across as acting more mature than Ralph, his younger age makes him more hesitant, resulting in him thinking through his actions. In class, we spoke about masculine and feminine traits. Piggy’s sensitive side would show him as a feminine character. Ralph’s loud, and boisterous attitude shows him as a masculine character.

Even if a challenge did come through a comment on what they had written, they could respond with the same deliberate thoughtfulness. The structure provided a more manageable and secure vehicle for expression than face-to-face discussion did.

Leonard Sax (2007) in *Boys Adrift* recounts a visit to the Avon Old Farms School in Connecticut, where girls from neighbouring schools like to congregate because they feel the boys at Avon are “gentlemen”. Sax concludes that this is because adults model for the boys appropriate behaviour, noting that at some other boys’ schools, where adult supervision and role modelling is noticeably

absent, a much darker culture holds sway. He notes, “*Lord of the Flies*... illustrates the same underlying idea: Teenage boys without strong leadership can easily become barbarians” (p. 165). That is how literature can be used to broaden boys’ conceptions of manhood and masculinity. The act of reading and discussing together, with the guidance of an adult to keep things safe and nuanced, encouraged and enabled boys, at least the ones in my class, to wrestle with the process of sex role definition.

## Conclusions

Did this unit of study broaden the boys’ perceptions of what it means to be a man? It definitely caused the boys to grapple with the question of what it does mean to be a man. While some began the course with a relatively broad conception, others developed a broader, or at least a less definitive, conception. All the boys seemed to have their conceptions altered to some degree. At the end, no boy had a clear, solid definition of what it meant to be a man, but they all were engaged in the defining. “To travel hopefully is better than to arrive”, Stevenson said.

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## Reflection

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*Conducting action research under the auspices of the International Boys' School Coalition has powerfully affected my teaching, in particular the way in which I assess my students. I have been very interested in bolstering the ways in which I assess my students for learning and have looked closely and seriously at how I use formative assessment to monitor my students' learning. I have looked just as closely, but less rigorously and formally, at assessing my own teaching. Action research has given me new tools to examine my teaching and to plan my curriculum. By establishing clear outcomes for my students in this project and planning for procedures to teach and then to assess my success, I have been able to make more sensible and effective curricular decisions.*

*Since the process vitally involves participation by students as they give feedback and share their thinking and experiences, I have realized that preparing students for the process is as important as the process itself. Students are not always clear or comfortable giving feedback to teachers. They may not know how. They may be afraid of upsetting the teacher. They may be afraid that they will not say the right things. It is important to train students for their roles in action research and to establish procedures for eliciting responses from students that students find accessible, comfortable, and manageable.*

*In general, I have found that action research creates a much more meaningful learning environment in the classroom, transforming even more the relationships between students and teachers. The classroom becomes a place where everyone is constantly learning and honing their skills, both teacher and students; a true learning environment.*

Steven Cohen





# Distant Voices, Different Voices: How Reading and Discussing Various Genres Promotes a Fuller Sense of What 'Masculine' Means

MICHAEL DESCHENES ST SEBASTIAN'S SCHOOL, NEEDHAM, USA

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## Abstract

The ninth grade (age 14–15) English curriculum at St. Sebastian's School in Needham, Massachusetts (USA), a grade 7–12 Catholic independent boys' school, consists of a year-long literature course and a year-long writing course. The literature course allows the students to read and discuss literary works of different genres, from Homer's *Odyssey* to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to Wilson's *Fences*, while the writing course encourages the development of skills associated with various writing styles. Through a pre-survey, discussions with small student groups and a post-survey, the researcher examines whether the two courses advance a boy's individual voice, while each student also discovers what "masculinity" means. The result of this action research project is that analysing the different voices of others, and developing one's own voice, provides a broader, fuller sense of masculinity than otherwise possible.

## Introduction

What students read, discuss and write allows them to re-evaluate their perceptions of the world around them. In encouraging, even requiring, specific works to be explored, we as teachers push our students towards a deeper, broader definition of both masculinity and their sense of identity. The selection of texts in our freshman (ages 14 to 15) English curriculum, called Eng 9 and Eng 9H, provide for the discovery of different voices in different genres. The added English course, *Freshman Writing*, allows for further defining and retooling of an individual's own voice. In evaluating both the literature and writing courses each year, the English department must determine whether each text provides suitable academic stimulation and opportunities for intellectual growth. Such assessment at the conclusion of the 2007-08 academic year led the department to exchange one text, Dickens' *Great Expectations*, for Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Sufficient research exists to show that young males are typically reluctant readers, preferring to read selectively in order to glean information, and not solely for leisure (Booth, 2002; Brozo, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Smith and Wilhelm, 2002). However, the same authors attest that because a

young male is a reluctant reader, educators can select materials that grab their attention and promote active literacy. Brozo (2002) argues:

Positive male archetypes starkly contrast with the mass media's spurious and injurious conceptions of masculinity... Archetypal literature that resonates in the male psyche has the power to reveal the delight and necessity of reading... Teachers who use books with positive male archetypes may improve their chances of reaching boys, of helping boys find entry points in to active literacy, and of getting boys to think critically about text and about what it means to be a man (pp. 24, 46–47).

The archetypes he offers are Pilgrim, Patriarch, King, Warrior, Magician, Wildman, Healer, Prophet, Trickster and Lover. Each archetype represents a Jungian view of the male psyche, and thus each archetype resonates with the young male's own search for identity, his own voice.

In working with young males, we recognize the importance that media has on shaping their perception of the world and their place in it. To 'fit' the expectation of society, they need to fulfill certain stereotypes: the Sylvester Stallone/Sean Connery model. As educators, we are in an excellent position to present a different model for our students, one that often runs counter to what they see on television and movies or hear in popular music today. Zambro and Brozo (2009) observe:

Children's books of all genres can imbue young boys with images and models of positive male values while simultaneously capturing their imaginations with print and engaging them as readers. Books with positive male values can help boys envision ways of being male that are different from the stereotypical images of masculinity saturating popular media and culture (p. 11).

Thus, the selection of texts, if conducted appropriately, accomplishes two feats: it promotes reading, and offers non-stereotypical models of masculinity. We must select texts that tie into the notion of masculinity, as our students are looking for alternatives to the traditional Stallone/Connery model.

In surveying and discussing students' response to the selected texts, as well as inquiring how creative and analytical writing can best serve students, we can begin to unravel the thread of inquiry, "*How can boys' understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through literature in the language arts curriculum?*"

## Research Context

The project was conducted at St. Sebastian's School, a Catholic independent grade 7–12 boys' school near Boston, Massachusetts. The English Department separates the freshmen (ages 14/15) into standard (Eng 9) and honors (Eng 9H) levels, based on previous academic work. Students in the two levels read the same texts, though the level of discussion and the academic expectation will vary based on the course level. All freshmen also take a second English course, *Freshman Writing*, which allows students opportunities to attain solid writing skills. In the literature course, students read texts from various genres: Gwynn, *A Longman Pocket Anthology of Poetry*; Homer, *Odyssey* (trans. E. V. Rieu); May, *Fiction's Many Worlds*; Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale Volume 1*; Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*; Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1*; *Vocabulary Workshop, Level E*; Wiesel, *Night*; and

Wilson, *Fences*. Most of these works deal with how individuals respond to adversity. The *Freshman Writing* course consists primarily of creative writing and peer review, discussing the mechanics of writing and how to pen an effective essay. In the final quarter students select their best work and the School publishes them in the annual journal *Freshman Voices*.

## Research Approach and Plan

Initial discussions during the summer 2008 (July and August) with the English department chair and an Eng 9H teacher allowed me to gain a better understanding of the freshman English curriculum. Discussions with the full English department at the start of the academic year (September 2008) allowed for opportunities to ask questions, both them of me and me of them. I was also able in this meeting to present the questions in the pre-survey and discuss the methodology for this project. To match the age and background of the students, we re-phrased a question, from “what does a man value” to “what does a man want”.

The importance of conveying the anonymity of students and the non-judgmental nature of the project were assured. Initial group discussion with the English teachers was notable, in that one teacher said that what he values as a man is not always how he acts, when responding to adversity. The same may hold true of students’ values versus behavior.

While students read, wrote and discussed the selected texts, I would meet with small groups to posit specific questions on how the texts address issues of masculinity. A pre-survey and a post-survey were designed to indicate overall change in perceptions of masculinity over the year. It would be interesting in the survey to see how students respond to the “behave” versus the “want” question. Also, I was very excited that the boys would read *Pride and Prejudice* this year, as the book was not previously part of the curriculum; it replaced *Great Expectations* by Dickens from previous years.

## Data Collection

The students’ involvement in the project began with the pre-survey early in the academic year (September 2008). It was administered during a regular weekly class meeting, at which time I explained the purpose of the project and how essential their involvement would be. The timing of the pre-survey was not optimal, as the class meeting was on a Friday, the day before Homecoming, and there was an air of frivolity in the room. One student of sixty-eight was absent due to illness. In reviewing the pre-survey results (Appendix A), some students did not take the pre-survey seriously, instead responding with attempts at humour.

In addition to the pre-survey and post-survey, I requested volunteers for small group discussions. My error was in thinking that students at this age level would voluntarily, and without incentive offered by me or their teachers, seek me out to express interest in becoming involved with the project. The small discussion groups did not form for more than a month after I made repeated requests for student involvement.

I again met with English teachers and we drafted a list of potential recruits, based on our determination of their willingness to offer candid input during group discussions. I asked those students individually to join a group and aided them in finding a time in their schedule to meet. The entire group met to discuss the process and to learn the results of the pre-survey, so the

students could better comprehend how vital their input was. One concern I made clear in all discussion groups was the importance of this project to our school and other schools, and that in any instance where the data is presented or published, their names would not appear; they would instead be referred to as ‘student B in group 2’, for example.

The focus groups met every six to eight weeks, with each session focusing on a different aspect of the curriculum. Two groups consisted of four students, and the third, initially four students, quickly became three because one student never came to the sessions. Each group had at least one Eng 9 student and one Eng 9H student. In grade 9 English there were three sections of Eng 9 and three sections of Eng 9H. Members of each group may have read different texts prior to each session, as they had different teachers in different sections. I deliberately sought variety in each small group, allowing for a broader discussion of male literary characters, rather than a dissection of a specific text.

In the first session, we began by discussing which texts the students had read in the first quarter, and followed up by asking each student to provide their top two male characters from these stories, as being ‘good men’. Students in the different sections had read short stories and then moved into *Fences*, *The Odyssey* or *Pride and Prejudice*. We then discussed what makes a ‘good’ man versus a ‘bad’ man, delving into characters’ motivations and behaviours. For the students in the class who were reading *Pride and Prejudice*, I asked their initial thoughts on the book.

The second session inquired of the boys’ experiences writing for the literature course and for the *Freshman Writing* course. The majority of the discussion was on creativity versus analysis. Students appreciated the opportunity to engage in creative writing, developing their own voices, rather than merely analysing the work of an author and seeking to understand the author’s voice. Each session concluded with an update on students’ responses to *Pride and Prejudice*.

The third session asked students to define masculinity in their own terms, including whether there are advantages and/or disadvantages to being masculine, and if there can be a ‘range’ of masculinity. Students discussed the male characters in stories they read throughout the year and we examined how the various texts, movies seen and music heard had changed their perception of masculinity.

The post-survey was administered on another frivolous day (March 2009), the day before Spring Break began, and a few students were absent due to illness or departing for vacation early. Fifty-nine of sixty-eight students provided responses on the post-survey.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the pre-survey were interesting, in that the students valued humor and kindness amongst their friends’ qualities. While a number of students noted a television/movie star or athlete as their idea of the best representation of manhood, a surprising number of students pointed to a literary character or personal connection in their responses. Physical characteristics were deemed indicators of masculinity, such as facial hair or muscles. In responses to the questions “what makes a good man” and “what does a man want”, the words “honor”, “courage”, “sensitivity” and “respect” appeared often. The pre-survey gave a strong impression that young males are in a conflict between visual and intrinsic: the strong, athletic, hairy male must also be a respectful family man, with money, wife and children. Success is measured by those standards for these young men.

The selection of students and the formation of small groups took more time than anticipated. Once the groups met, the students and I became more confident that the process would be helpful to us, the school and the larger community of boys' schools. The students displayed a solid grasp of the material, showing not only that the selection of texts was appropriate, but also that the classroom experience allowed and encouraged them to delve into the characters' motivations and actions. A student, who initially considered the character Troy Maxson of *Fences* the "ideal man", ultimately deemed the same character a less masculine character due to infidelity and lack of commitment to family. The students expressed masculinity as a response, rather than a trait. A person is more masculine, they said, if he takes care of his responsibilities, notably providing for his family. The surveys at the beginning and conclusion of the year revealed that while some students may perceive an imposed change such as bar mitzvah or turning 18 as the point where one becomes a man, many students understood the shift as an internal one. For them, being a man means having the ability to make good decisions and a willingness to assume responsibilities.

In our second session, the focus turned to the importance of writing for critical literacy. Using as a stimulus for discussion an article by one of our English teachers on the importance of writing, the boys posited that "*Freshman Writing* is your own perception, how you feel, while in Lit, you are trying to figure out someone else's work". The difference is identifying one's own voice rather than analysing someone else's voice. According to the boys, having an opportunity to discover their voices was a vital part of their search for identity.

The third session brought the groups back to the original topic of the project, namely how the curriculum enhances and broadens their perceptions of masculinity. As with the pre-survey responses, and later with the post-survey to the entire freshman class, I was impressed by the maturity and candour of the students' insight. The notion of masculinity and manhood are interconnected for these young men. Masculinity is defined as steps toward becoming a man, while manhood is what you possess as a male adult, capable of making correct, often difficult, decisions. They fall back into the traditional model of masculinity, the Stallone/Connery model, while at the same time rejecting it. The Odysseus or Troy Maxson character is at once deemed the ideal male and then rejected for his flaws. As one student commented:

In reading *Fences*, I changed my view, as I thought the stereotypical man got all the girls. Troy cheats on his wife, doesn't admit it. The stereotypical male is not right, as one has to admit his faults. That's not a true man. He couldn't admit to his family. A man is someone strong enough, has integrity, honor.

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is notable in that the style and approach of the writing can be considered unusual for young males. I do not believe it is typical of a 15 year-old to decide on his own to read such a text. Yet, being required to read it and having teachers who can convey the value of the text, aid our young men greatly. They experience yet another voice and they encounter male characters from the viewpoint of a female author. As revealed in the discussions, a male character initially deemed good (Wickham) or bad (Darcy) ultimately becomes reversed. The perception of what is masculinity is further reflected in the behaviour of Austen's characters. Some students noted that a female character can take on a masculine role, in that Mrs. Bennett assumes the position of head of the family when her husband does not. Students at times conflicted over the masculinity of a character, such as Mr. Bennett; some considered him most masculine ("he takes care of his daughters"); others, least masculine ("he sits by the sidelines, doesn't pay attention to his wife").

The opportunity to discuss such perceptions and compare male characters in various texts suggests a range of masculinity, one would think. However, when asked about a range of masculinity, the students did not believe a range exists. They associate masculinity with how one responds to adversity. The decision Telemachus (*The Odyssey*), Troy (*Fences*) or Wickham (*Pride and Prejudice*) chooses, determines whether he possesses masculinity or not. An added note is that for those students living in difficult neighbourhoods, there is a presumed need to put on an air of heightened masculinity, a toughness they do not feel they have to exhibit in school. Brozo discusses a similar outcome in his own study of African American and Hispanic boys in their neighbourhoods, and how their environment poses challenges to literacy (Brozo, Walter and Placker 2002, p. 530).

The post-survey indicated that while freshmen are introduced to positive male characters in the English curriculum, many still look to celebrities, particularly athletes, as models of behaviour. They are attracted to the power, money and physical attributes of these celebrities and students' responses to the question "what does a man want" reveal that for these young men, success means money, cars and women. However, they still recognize their peers' humour and compassion as admirable qualities, and the words "honour" and "respect" continued to appear in response to the question "how should a man behave". The shift in response to "when do you become a man" to physical characteristics rather than decision-making abilities, is interesting in that it shows the desire of these young males to "grow up" and become men, which one cannot identify at first glance as an internal development, but an external one. When someone looks at them, do they see a boy or a man? These are the concerns they have, and the desire to assume physical manly attributes is strong. At the same time, however, they continue to realize that part of being a man is the ability and the courage to possess honour and integrity, whether that be in a family, in a business setting, or on the field or rink.

The opportunity to discuss their concerns with these young males gives me a fuller sense of how their development into men is a challenge, yet also an important process. They are given so many different models of masculinity, from television to movies to books to friends and family. As an educator I recognize that the reading, discussing and writing about selected texts provide positive male models, counter to the stereotypes afforded by mass media.

## Conclusions

Having completed the project I am now firmly of the belief that boys' schools allow for safer, deeper exploration of one's "self" than available at a co-ed school. My experience had already taught me this, but it was important to have students recognize it as well. Some boys expressed that they would not do as well academically, others socially, if they had females in their classes. They would not be as open, they said, because they would worry what the girls would say or think. So, they are more accepting of the range of masculinity... if there even is a 'range'.

The boys seemed to think that the guy on the stage and the guy on the football field are equal. Neither is more masculine than the other. However, at the same time, there exists the notion of physical strength or facial hair as evidence of becoming a man. They still buy into the old Sly Stallone/Sean Connery model of masculinity, while also rejecting that model to some extent. Opportunities to read, discuss and write about male literary characters in light of their own values allow for a fuller sense of the many shades of masculinity.



## Implications for Practice

As stated at the onset of this paper, what students read, discuss and write allow them to re-evaluate their perceptions of the world around them. In selecting materials from different genres and with different voices, educators encourage the development of each student's own voice, modelling the archetypes presented in the text. According to Zambo and Brozo (2009):

Boys learn core values from models. Unfortunately, close bonding and attachment with positive male models is often weak or nonexistent for many boys today. For far too many boys, opportunities to participate in positive rituals and rites of passage have been replaced by negative ones like bullying and joining gangs (p. 10).

Therefore we require not only the selection of suitable texts, but also the creation of *further* texts. We should be advocating to publishers and producers of other resources for the development of materials that posit a variety of positive male models, in line with Brozo's suggestion of male archetypes. In so doing, we make available texts that interest young male students, promoting active literacy while presenting positive male models for them to utilize in developing their own voice.

While reading and discussing these texts are important, reading and discussion are not enough. Young male students, as noted in my discussions with small groups, require opportunities to engage in writing; not only analytical writing, but creative writing. Students must be given the time and resources to engage in creative writing, so they can hone their writing skills while discovering their own voice. In reviewing the *Freshman Writing* program, a course taken in conjunction with a regular literature course, I ascertained that students get the best of both worlds: they are presented with male archetypes to model, while developing their own voice. We could not ask for more for our students than to have them reading, discussing, thinking and writing so as to gain their own understanding of what it means to be masculine. It is my fervent hope that we advocate for more undertakings in our schools, as boys' schools have such marvellous opportunities to truly aid our students.

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## Appendix A

### IBSC SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. If I could be any man in the world I would be \_\_\_\_\_?
2. Which male character best represents manhood in something you have read, heard, or seen (*not limited to books*)?
3. List 5 words to describe him.
4. Name three qualities that you admire in your male friends?
5. What makes a good man?
6. When do you become a man?
7. What does a man look like?
8. What does a man want?
9. How should a man behave?



## Reflection

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*As a teacher in a boys' school for eleven years, I have believed that the environment in which our students learn and grow is a healthy one, where they can feel comfortable figuring out who they are and their unique role in society. Each boy undergoes physical, emotional and intellectual maturation during his years at St. Sebastian's, and having solid faculty and a curriculum that meets the students' needs while challenging them in various ways, creates superb graduates that will be successful in college and in life. This belief encourages me, and other teachers, to do the best they can each day to help our students on this road of discovery.*

*I was further encouraged during the project by my fellow IBSC action researchers, from before we even met in person. We arranged to meet in Toronto in late June 2008, during the IBSC annual conference. During the two months prior, we communicated via a wiki and emails. To be certain we were on the same page, we read several texts relevant to our project, notably Newkirk's *Misreading Masculinity* and Booth's *Even Hockey Players Read*. I was excited to learn that we would have the opportunity to speak with David Booth, as well as Wayne Martino, at the Toronto conference. The IBSC researchers are interesting people, all passionate about teaching and learning, even though we are from different climates and time zones.*

*As I am not an English teacher with a set class and course, I determined to look at how the grade nine literature course coupled with the writing course serves our students well. I was particularly intrigued by how the students would respond to reading literature like *The Odyssey* and *Pride and Prejudice*, both of which might seem foreign to them, due to the language and the subject matter.*

*I fell behind a few times early in the year, as I had planned to start earlier, and I thought the students would be jumping at the opportunity to be involved in this project. I asked several times in class meetings for participants in the small groups, and I finally had to ask the English teachers to recommend students. The time spent with these students, however, was enlightening and encouraging. I enjoyed listening to the students reflect on their perception of masculinity and how their courses have aided them in framing their own understanding of their place in the school and in the world outside our campus. The chance to speak with these students at all is beneficial to me, to the students, the school, and the IBSC. I also have to note how grateful I am to my colleagues at other schools, who aimed at excellence and were willing to share their thoughts when time permitted. I wish I had more time to speak with and learn from these wonderful teachers at our boys' schools around the globe.*

*Michael Deschenes*



# Boys Speak About Masculinity: Exploring the Influence of Literature on the Gender Perceptions of 11- and 12-Year-old Boys

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## Abstract

This report summarizes an action research project conducted with seven 11- and 12-year-old boys in Grades 5 and 6 at The Sterling Hall School, Toronto, Canada. The project focused on exploring how boys viewed masculinity and how literature can affect their understanding of it. We discovered that regardless of our experience and knowledge, we may not know what is best for boys without consulting them first as they live in a literature world that is different from the one that we grew up in.

## Introduction

Almost everything we purchase screams its multiple messages at us through words and images... Today's children live in a world saturated with texts of this kind. Teachers can help them read these worlds of words critically (*Comber & Simpson, p. 44*).

Our primary mission as educators is to prepare our students for the future. To do so, we must teach literature in all its forms and provide our students with the tools they need to become critical consumers of literature in the broadest sense.

*"How can boys' understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through literature in the language arts curriculum?"* As we set out to examine our question, we realized two things: first, it is critically important to recognize the distinction between traditional definitions of masculinity and the ways boys actually consume literature; and second, it is vital to come up with a working definition of literature. As teachers, we tend to cling to traditional definitions. Invariably, these definitions reflect a bias in favour of the written word and against the perspective of the generation of 'digital natives' that learn and inhabit our schools every day. For example, among the definitions of literature provided by the *Macmillan Contemporary Dictionary* one finds: "printed matter of any kind" and "writings that have artistic merit..." The inherent problem with

such narrow definitions is that they do not take into account the ways in which boys today find, consume and appreciate information in the world around them.

David Booth (2002), who has spent many years researching boys' literacy and what books are appropriate for boys, speaks to the notion of defining literature in the broadest sense. He encourages educators to rethink the definition of literature and expand this definition beyond their comfort zones. In undertaking this project, we made a conscious decision to assume a broader definition of literature. Daley (2003) writes, "Those who are truly literate in the twenty-first century will be those who learn to both read and write the multimedia language of the screen" (p. 34). After a discussion the IBSC group had with David Booth, we settled on a very broad definition of literature as 'any consumable media'.

In today's world, the critical thinking skills we use to analyze traditional literature are equally necessary to understand a range of media including books, television, movies, and the vast range of print, audio, video and pictorial material available on the internet. We soon realized, in assessing our students' media consumption, that they inhabit a 'literary world' much larger than our own. They consume literature both in and out of school, and they engage literature in many different forms: on an LCD screen and through media, interactive and mixed in nature.

To assist our students to become critical consumers of literature, we must help them to question prevailing views of society associated with the notion of masculinity. Davies notes that the division of people into male and female categories is key to our understanding of identity (Davies, 1993, as cited in Young, 2000). Young (2001) points out that

This division is far too simplistic as the literature on masculinities suggests. The practices of masculinity differ within and between social contexts and throughout history. In other words, there are multiple identities or ways of doing and thinking about masculinity (p. 323).

At the onset of our study we wondered how our boys perceived differences of gender. Do they understand that gender is a spectrum? Kidd (as cited in Chudacoff, 2004) describes the traditional idea of masculinity as 'boyology', or understanding boyhood. This has been society's way of defining boys; by naturalizing their wildness, limiting any unique characteristics, all as part of a normal process of transforming fragile boyhood into manhood. For Kidd, this process is both "deeply embedded within our systems of boy work (our society and schools) and perversely resilient" (p. 314). Both Young and Kidd seem to suggest that the notion of masculinity portrayed by Western societies is too narrow.

If most literature is saturated with traditional views of masculinity, what do we do as educators? For Wayne Martino (2005), "any approach to dealing with boys' education that fails to address the effects of dominant masculinity and the range of valued skills required to participate in the broader society is socially irresponsible" (p. 17). Therefore, it is submitted that our responsibility is to help our students become critical consumers of literature and media in order to make sure that they look beyond the singular notion of masculinity that is widely presented.

Defining masculinity more broadly and, in a sense, as a fluid concept, is challenging yet doing so opens the doors to many possibilities. The goal of our study was to broaden the boys' definition of masculinity; however, our age, our background and our gender made this a challenging task. The question had to be investigated through the eyes of the boys. We attempted to search for the 'boy

definition' of masculinity in our pre-survey, cognizant of the fact that a survey written and conducted by adults could shape the responses it would elicit.

After working on this project for a couple of months we realized that we needed to develop our own story and that our project needed our voice to run through it. One of the premises of action research is that the research is meaningful and applicable to our own environment. We do action research so we can make informed decisions. Collecting data, our research question, our story and the boys' feedback began to inform us about our school curriculum and about our students' understanding of masculinity.

## **Literature Review**

We undertook a literature review to study what others have concluded in the field of boys' reading and masculinity. We used these findings to inform our surveys, activities and topics for our focus groups.

Young (2000, 2001) worked with a small focus group, which examined stereotypes in literature. She found that her students were able to identify stereotypes portrayed in text, but tended to accept rather than question them. Young examined the construction of masculinity in text and tried to understand how it informed her students' perspectives on the nature of gender. Young's work guided us to choose literature in our own study which presented both male and female protagonists. It gave us some of our survey and focus group questions, such as "Who do you want to be when you grow up?" and "What would happen tomorrow if you woke up as a girl?" Finally, it led us to decide that we should ask the boys to bring in pictures of what they thought a man should look like, as a way of seeing how the boys construct their idea of masculinity.

We were also interested in the prevailing ideas of masculinity in our society, specifically as manifested in our schools. Martino tries to determine why boys underachieve in schools, especially in subjects emphasizing literacy. He examines many aspects of this problem from over-feminisation of the curriculum to the lack of male role models, but observes that "what it means to be a normal male or a proper boy becomes entrenched in many school cultures and is often not questioned except perhaps within the English classroom" (p. 17). If the classroom becomes one of our only outlets to explore masculinity, we must ensure we are doing it properly and effectively. Martino concludes by saying that, contrary to what some may think, the answer to this is not to import texts into classrooms that have a dominant masculinity as a way of promoting manhood (p. 31); rather a balanced portrayal seems important.

Booth (2002) considers how boys sometimes view themselves as non-readers (as they assume reading means picking up a book), but notes that this impression is false: there is a whole generation of boys today reading and writing, albeit in a non-traditional text formats. Booth reminds us that we still have a long way to go if we want to modernize the approach we take to literacy in the classroom. Moreover, to do so is critical because if boys feel distance from traditional forms of literature they may be cut off from exposure to a broad representation of masculinity.

## Research Context

Our research was conducted at The Sterling Hall School located in Toronto, Canada. Sterling Hall is an independent boys' school with a population of 303 from JK–8. There are no more than eighteen boys in any class, and, on average, the school has an even balance of male and female teachers.

The school has specialty teachers for Science, French, Art, Resource, Music and Physical Education. The curriculum focuses on learning not teaching, values co-curricular programming and promotes academic excellence. The school has a stimulating parent education programme and an open-door policy, which creates a welcoming and vibrant community.

The seven boys who participated in our research project were drawn from the Grade 5 and 6 classes (ages 11–12). They participated in the project on a voluntary basis and represented the whole spectrum of ability.

## Research Approach

We used the principles of action research in planning our project. Action research is an approach that emphasizes analysis of and reflection on data, with the objective of improving practice. It can be done by individuals or by teams of colleagues. We took the team approach, 'collaborative inquiry'. Many teachers have used action research to help improve student achievement.

## Research Plan

Our research was conducted during weekly Literature Club (Lit Club) meetings from October, 2008 through March, 2009. The meetings were held once a week from 7:15 a.m. to 8:15 a.m. The boys were provided with breakfast in order to accommodate their busy schedules and to give them a good start to the day. The boys read novels: *The Righteous Smuggler* by Debbie Spring and *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen. In addition, they watched the movie, *Billy Elliot* and also considered material from *YouTube*, the Internet, magazines and video games.

## Data Collection

As the size of our research group was so small, consisting of seven boys, we decided that it was best to use qualitative data. During the Lit Club sessions, data was collected using focus groups, surveys and general discussion led by both us and by the boys. The boys' parents were also very supportive and willing to help their sons complete reading logs at home.

As neither of us had homeroom classes at our school the club served as our 'data conduit', facilitating necessary access to the boys on an ongoing basis. Small focus groups allowed us to videotape our sessions and scribe some of our conversations. This gave us the opportunity to analyze the discussions at a later date. We used pre-surveys and post-surveys, which were similar to the ones used by the larger IBSC group. These surveys included ranking questions, open-ended questions and a shoe experiment (see Appendix A). We added some of our own items to the generic surveys that were used by other members of the IBSC action research team. For example, we asked the boys to circle attributes on a worksheet which they identified as being either male or female (see Appendix B). We also had the boys interview each other, and sometimes we interviewed them about their perceptions of gender in the novels and movie. We had the boys track their 'at home'

literacy consumption through a log that they brought in each week. Many of the boys worked with a parent to produce this. Parents communicated with us via emails about what their boys were reading at home, watching on TV or on *YouTube*. We also asked the boys to bring in artifacts from home during some of our meetings. These included pictures of what they thought a man looked like, books they read, and *YouTube* sites they visited.

## Results and Discussion

Based on our identical pre-surveys and post-surveys, the boys' understanding of masculinity showed some evidence of broadening. In the post-survey an average of four out of seven boys per question reflected a more sophisticated understanding of masculinity.

In the pre-survey the boys' vocabulary suggested a focus on athleticism and appearance. Words such as "sporty" or "clean shaven" came up when asked questions about things men do and what men look like. In the post-survey the boys focused more upon their understanding of the character attributes they would use to describe men. They used words such as "kind", "giving", and "respectful". In some cases, the boys went so far as to make a strong statement that there was no difference between masculinity and femininity. One boy said, "I have not changed my answers very much from the beginning to the end; I haven't learned anything except you guys have tried to make masculinity and femininity different, but they are really the same thing." Another commented about what a man should wear saying, "Well, it depends on the kind of man. If he is a business man he should wear a shirt, tie, flannel pants and a belt. If he is a tennis player he should wear a polo shirt and shorts. If he is a surfer he should wear a bathing suit and body suit." Another student, when asked what kind of man he would want to be if he could be anyone said, "Nobody, because I want to be myself." These responses seem to indicate a growing awareness of the many different aspects of masculinity and a shift away from more narrow definitions.

A logical and organic shift occurred when we encouraged the boys to bring in literature that they were interested in sharing. Up until that point the study had focused on influencing the boys' perceptions of masculinity through our deliberate selection of reading material. The boys, however, were eager to share their own perceptions of masculinity through their independent selection of literature.

We quickly realized how important choice was in the language arts curriculum. Upon reflection, we were pleased with our boys' demonstration of initiative. Our school encourages and expects boys to play active roles in their own inquiry-based learning, and to take on age appropriate responsibilities and leadership roles at many levels. This change in direction led us into their world of literature and it helped us understand how their choices may broaden their understanding of masculinity. It became clear that to truly broaden their understanding of masculinity, we had to allow the boys to select literature based on their own criteria for identifying representations of masculinity. As Carol Ann Tomlinson states, "when students become the engines that drive the teacher-learning cycle, they become students of their learning" (2008, p. 66).

A distinct theme emerged from our research. We noticed that the boys were more interested in the context of the stories (*The Righteous Smuggler*, *Nightjohn* and *Billy Elliot*) than identifying with the protagonists. All three stories had protagonists that were the same age as the boys in our study; however, *Nightjohn* also had a female protagonist.



The *Righteous Smuggler* modelled a very traditional but positive relationship between a father and son during WWII in Holland. We opened discussions about how fathers and sons should act and asked the boys to make comparisons to their own lives. The majority of our boys' questions revealed a fascination with WWII and the Holocaust. They made comments such as, "I didn't know they killed pregnant mothers during the war" or "Why would Hendrik go out in the boat alone?" Even at the conclusion of our Lit Club the boys recalled this as a story about Holocaust, showing little interest in the characteristics of Hendrik and his father.

Our group discussions involved the war and morality. All our boys identified with Hendrik because he went to war and made good decisions. Each of our boys knew that Hendrik was good and the Nazis were bad. They easily understood the role that men play in society, but did not identify with the characters in such a way that they compared their own perceptions of gender with them.

It is possible that because the details of WWII were so prevalent, to question the masculinity of the characters would have involved very directed questions, such as: "What kind of man would kill a pregnant woman?" Instead, and perhaps due to the age of our group, the boys explored the larger theme of masculinity—why men go to war. They identified war as being a responsibility of sorts that men have, and because of this, their fascination with the details of war are justified and provided a forum to discuss gender perceptions.

When discussing *Nightjohn*, a book about a young and female slave during the American Civil War, we focused our questions around how men and women should treat each other, and how each should be held accountable for doing the 'right' thing. We were also interested in whether the boys would be less interested in reading a book with a female protagonist. The boys, however, redirected the conversation to talk about slavery and the challenges of the South during that time. They could not understand why the slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write, and why slaves were beaten so savagely.

Nightjohn was a character that our boys definitely defended as being a 'good male.' They gave examples of how Nightjohn was kind to Sarny, the female protagonist. When Nightjohn taught Sarny how to write or took the blame when she was caught writing letters in the dirt, the boys said this was the right thing to do. We had discussions about doing the right thing in difficult situations and the boys gave many examples of how they would have felt the need to protect and take care of a younger female slave. Again, the boys identified with a larger idea of masculinity—to protect.

The boys described Nightjohn as "rebellious, courageous, brave, kind, and selfless". Some of the boys said they could understand why Nightjohn felt responsible to protect the other slaves. Again, the context of the story reflects the 'masculine' quality of ownership or the responsibility to protect that our boys clearly identified with as being a male characteristic. They spoke strongly about issues of fairness and equality. When we asked the boys why it was important that we read this book, one boy said, "So we treat all people and all religions the same way we treat ourselves." While another said, "Some people think that because he is black that he is going to be bad. I don't think he will be. Back in the 1930's it mattered more if you were black or white, or a boy or a girl. Now it only matters if you are a child or an adult." This boy was equating being a man with adulthood. This is another reason that the boys' age may interfere with their ability to understand themselves as men. They are able to reasonably understand the roles that they may have to take on as men later on in life, but at the moment, they attribute it to adulthood as well as manhood.



We made our final and most intriguing observation while the boys watched *Billy Elliot*, a movie about a young boy who turns from a boxer to a ballet dancer in England during the coal mine closures. Interestingly, they never commented on the fact that Billy was a ballet dancer. Instead, the boys interrupted the movie many times to ask questions about the coal miners and why they had to travel on buses with caged windows and why they were on strike.

As the average age of our group was eleven years-old, when we discussed homosexuality with them, we had to be sensitive about their age. They could define what a homosexual was, however, when watching the movie; Billy's semi-homosexual experience was insignificant to their understanding of the film. The boys identified with the masculine theme of work that prevailed in the movie, instead of identifying with the gender difficulties that Billy Elliot was struggling with.

In all three cases, context was more important than the characters' portrayal of masculinity. This led us to consider the developmental readiness of our boys. We observed that the boys detected themes of masculinity as they commented on war, ownership and work. These themes are traditionally presented in literature as masculine roles. Our discussions were not about what men do in stories; rather they were about the boys questioning the larger responsibility of men in society. Perhaps the boys were detecting themes related to masculinity, but have not yet reached a maturity level or ability to integrate their thinking in such a way as to ask questions: "If I kill a woman in war, what kind of man does that make me?", "If I beat a slave, what kind of man does that make me?" or "If I go to work in a coal mine, what kind of man does that make me?" The boys definitely saw all the things that men do, but may not have been ready to connect these observations to the idea of what it means to be a man.

Upon the realization that our boys connected so readily with context, we began questioning the boys about the language arts curriculum at our school. They began to talk about wanting to have choice in what they read in class, and how they wanted to bring their own books to our Lit Club meetings. The boys also indicated that they wanted to have more choice in their language arts programme at school.

This importance of context continued to be evident as we encouraged the boys to introduce us to the literature they consume at home. The boys were more concerned with what was funny (the context) than they were in identifying with the characters. Possibly the most popular piece of literature was the (apparently) infamous *YouTube* character Fred Figglehorn. Interestingly, we found out that Fred wasn't only common literature to the Grade 5s and 6s, but also to the Grade 2s. After watching a couple of videos we were shocked at what the boys consumed. Often these videos were violent and sometimes insulting; however, the boys seemed able to separate the funny from the inappropriate, and they explained to us that they could. Our conversations involved the humorous actions that males play in movies to make themselves look cool. An example of this was when Fred Figglehorn sits in a kiddie pool and pretends to drown. The entire group of boys laughed while watching this and explained that what Fred was saying did not make much sense, but they identified with his sense of humour and his sense of masculinity.

Upon learning the above, we showed the boys a *You Tube* video about how masculinity is portrayed in Disney movies called *Sexism, Strength and Dominance: Masculinity in Disney Films* (Newton, n.d.). This film tries to exemplify the dominant and traditional roles of males in children's films. The boys first reacted to the video by saying that they didn't really watch Disney movies; however, they were able to sing many of the theme songs and they could name several of the main characters. They also laughed aloud when watching some of the sexist parts, such as when the main character in *The Emperor's New Groove* is commenting on women and points to a less attractive one saying, "Let me guess? You have a great personality." When we brought up the word 'sexist' the boys commented, "We don't look at it like that," and "We see it as just funny, it doesn't mean anything." They tried to convince us that they knew the difference between the traditional view of masculinity and a broader view.

At this point we talked extensively about whether male chauvinistic behaviour was right or wrong. The boys said the when they watched male chauvinistic acts on *You Tube* or video that they knew it was wrong and that they could differentiate between what is morally accepted and what is not.

One of the boys brought up James Bond as another example of a character they liked, but knew that he did not always do what was morally right. We wanted to dig deeper in this conversation and asked them if their fathers treated their mothers like James Bond treats his woman, what would happen? They enthusiastically offered several examples of what would happen. One student commented that we all know that James Bond has sex for breakfast and death for dinner. Another explained that if his father treated his mother like James Bond treated his women, his father would be out running on the back forty.

After this lengthy discussion about how males are portrayed in literature, the boys noted that discussing these issues helped them become more aware of how to be a good man. Although the boys identified this difference there is no evidence at this time that can conclude the boys' mature understanding is valid or that it will remain this way as they grow up.

## Implications for Practice

The main conclusion to be drawn from our research is that the language arts curriculum at the Sterling Hall School should include a wider array of literature. Boys want and need choice. When given choice, they are excited and eager to engage in discussion that relates to literature and how it portrays masculinity. One of the benefits of using a younger focus group in our study is that we now have the opportunity to follow the students for two to three more years until their graduation. We are committed to giving the boys the survey and re-opening discussion about our question in their final year at our school.

Finally, this study suggests that we must do further research about how and when we should talk to our students about masculinity. As elementary school teachers, we must be aware that each of our boys will be ready for these discussions at different times. Our research notes that boys understand different concepts of masculinity as they develop. Doing more research in this area will allow us to target these conversations appropriately at each grade level to ensure that we are able to broaden their understanding of masculinity effectively.

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## Appendix A

### SHOE ACTIVITY

Using the photographs of shoes, order them from 'most masculine' to 'least masculine'.  
It is okay if some of your shoes tie.

#### Most Masculine


#### Least Masculine

Describe your most masculine shoe and tell us why it is masculine:

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## Appendix B

### SURVEY

1. What 4 things make a good man?

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2. When do you become a man?

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3. Write 2 things about what a man looks like:

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4. What does a man talk about? (communicate?)

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5. What should a man wear?

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6. How should a man behave?

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7. Circle 5 words that best indicate what a man values: (What is important to a man)

Food	Friends	Looking Good	Cooking
House	Sports	Being kind	Baking
Wife	Cars	Reading	Blackberry
Money	Children	His parents	TV
Partner	Clothes	Gardening	Grades

8. Circle 5 words that best indicate what a woman values: (What is important to a woman)

Food	Friends	Looking Good	Cooking
House	Sports	Being kind	Baking
Husband	Cars	Reading	Blackberry
Money	Children	Her parents	TV
Partner	Clothes	Gardening	Grades

9. What 3 qualities (words) do you admire in your male friends:

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10. If you could be any man in the world who would be?

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11. Number professions in order from least masculine to most masculine:

**Least   1   2   3   4   Most**

\_\_\_\_\_ Doctor

\_\_\_\_\_ Teacher

\_\_\_\_\_ Professional Soccer Player

\_\_\_\_\_ Chef

## Reflection

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*This project has offered a wonderful opportunity for both of us. Working with dedicated researchers from around the world and learning from Di, our leader, has been a fabulous journey. We both want to thank each of the members of our team and thank Di for her guidance and dedication that she gave to the project throughout the year. She steered us using a compass that pointed us carefully toward boy learning and toward our destination of New Zealand.*

*The Wiki site gave us a focus and it was a place that offered a central point keeping us connected and grounded. The site allowed us a place where we could check in with each other, read on-going research, and learn from others during different points of the project.*

*Working as a partnership on this project has been excellent. We both found that being able to talk through ideas, read articles and books together, and discuss data that we collected, made our journey exciting and full of learning opportunities that only a partnership could offer. The discussions that we both were able to have during the project were meaningful and insightful. Whether these discussions happened during our research group meetings, or whether they happened when we met spontaneously, they were rich with learning, and have promoted further research on the topic.*

*We faced many challenges while conducting this research and we welcomed all hurdles. One of our challenges included the notion that we were female educators conducting research with boys about masculinity and manhood. The other challenge was that our project involved 11- and 12-year-old boys, who, we found, were very young and not completely understanding and aware of the terms masculinity and manhood.*

*Action research is all about reflecting on teaching and learning and taking your findings to improve what is best practice. Both of us sincerely learned from our global colleagues and each other.*

*Leslie Anne Dexter and Kate Taylor*





# How Can Boys' Understanding of Masculinity and Manhood be Enhanced and Broadened through Literature in the Language Arts Curriculum?

AMY FOSTER TRINITY-PAWLING SCHOOL, NEW YORK, USA

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## Abstract

An action research project was undertaken to determine the validity of studying literature as a method to broaden boys' understanding of masculinity. The objective was to investigate any difference in the boys' perceptions of masculinity before and after the study, and, as with any action research project, to suggest practices to "make particular educational activities more productive" (Vockell and Asher cited in Mills, 2007, p. 96). Using a year 10 and a year 11 English class, we surveyed boys with regard to their views on what masculinity and manhood meant to them, prior to their reading and discussion of several short stories whose characters portrayed distinct gender characteristics. The use of critical literacy exercises with the classes was intended to encourage a broader understanding of the written word, which is sometimes problematic with a population that does not enjoy reading, and historically does not find much success with it. Comparing post-surveys of these two classes to a third that was surveyed, but not involved with the critical reading of the stories, it was found that the boys' former perceptions did indeed broaden to include less stereotypical definitions of what masculinity meant to them.

## Introduction

Single-sex education is the topic of a good amount of research these days. In the US, and indeed across the globe, boys' schools are enjoying a resurgence in popularity, for a distinct advantage:

Schools that educate only boys enjoy some powerful advantages over schools that serve both boys and girls. Boys' schools are able to develop their resources, choose their teachers, and design their programs with only one goal in mind—to meet the educational and developmental needs of young men. (*International Boys' Schools Coalition*).

The number of American independent boys' schools (as members of the National Association of Independent Schools) has increased from 75 in 1999 to 83 in 2009 (NAIS, 2009), an encouraging statistic indeed. Giving boys the opportunity to explore their emerging masculinity is surely one of

the most productive uses of the single-sex environment, and our action research project sought to find ways to best facilitate this.

Current research on the subject of boys' literacy also abounds. It has been well documented that boys' reading habits are tenuous at best. In a recent study by the National Endowment for the Arts between the years 1992 to 2002, traditional reading of paper text by young men plummeted from 55 to 43 *percent*, while a similar drop for young women was just 63 to 59 *percent* (Buerlein & Stotsky, 2005). Reading purposefully seems especially problematic. Although plenty of evidence exists that boys read plenty of newspaper and website accounts of a sporting event, for example, many educators today lament the loss of reading books as a true skill, much less part of a greater quest for knowledge. Not only are boys not reading as much as girls, but they are not experiencing success in the reading world, as measured by standardized testing. This is evidenced by many studies which illustrate reading scores broken down by gender—most notably the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which in 1992 showed a 10 point gap between girls and boys, which widened to 15 points by 1998 (Galley, 2002). Internationally, according to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), also referred to in Galley, girls were also shown to score significantly higher than boys on reading tests.

Many boys simply do not enjoy reading or studying literature; adolescents especially. There are myriad reasons for this. From an early age boys' brains are shown to work differently than those of girls due to the amount of serotonin secreted, which affects their ability to sit still (Gurian, 2001). This is certainly a handicap in the classroom at best and sometimes a severe disadvantage that can set them up for a lifetime of disappointment in the world of education. Also attributable to biological differences, boys see girls in their classrooms reading earlier, better and more prolifically, and it is in their inherently competitive nature not to enjoy 'losing'. Therefore, many will simply stop trying, especially when the subject matter is also unappealing, as can be the case with much traditional literature that is studied in schools. Boys are also taught from an early age to suppress their feelings, and therefore they "aren't practiced and often don't feel comfortable exploring the emotions and feelings found in fiction" (Scieszka, n.d.). A challenge for our research, therefore, was to get our subjects, who don't read as much or as well, to use this skill as a means to better understand masculinity.

Critical thinking skills are central to this project. In the US, the American Association of School Libraries' new *Standards for the 21st Century* includes the following traits:

Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge. Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge. Share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society. Pursue personal and aesthetic growth (2007).

Using a type of critical discourse analysis technique, which "aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships between discursive practices, texts, and events and wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes" (McGregor, 2004), we sought to lead the boys to a greater understanding of the written word before them, strengthen their critical literacy skills, and broaden their perceptions of masculinity.

Dr. Wayne Martino, a leading researcher in the area of boys, masculinities and schooling, has concluded that “failure to promote [such] critical thinking in schools for boys is to abnegate our social and ethical responsibilities as educators” (2005). Consequently, while encouraging the boys to question the author’s perspective and use of character gender could bring a greater understanding of the work itself, this was not where our work with the boys ended. It was our objective, through facilitating the boys’ exploration of masculinity through literature, to encourage critical literacy that would take education from the classroom to the real world—a vital path for life-long learning.

To this end, our action research project focused on the question: *“How can boys’ understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through literature in the language arts curriculum?”*

## Research Context

Trinity-Pawling is a boys’ school of 300, located seventy miles north of New York City. Our boys, the majority of whom are boarding students, range from seventh through post graduate grades (roughly ages 12–19) from twenty states in the U.S. and fourteen foreign countries.

## Research Sample

Two English classes were chosen for this study: one was an English 10 Honors class (ages 15–16) and the other a ‘regular’ English 11 (ages 16–17). Surveys were also given to a class with whom we would not be working, as a control group, bringing the total survey sample to 40 students.

## Data Collection

Data collected included narrative forms such as written work, surveys, interview and classroom notes and transcripts, as well as quantitative evaluations that included the results of ranking activities focused on written statements and images.

A preliminary survey was given to the three sample groups. The questions ranged from listing three admirable qualities of male friends to “What does manhood mean to you?” In addition, photos of twelve pairs of shoes were presented: boys were asked to rank the shoes in order of manliness and to include adjectives to describe men who would wear them.

In the classes participating in the research, the boys then read a series of six short stories: *Shooting an Elephant* by George Orwell; *Great Falls* by Richard Ford; *Tommy Baton* by Joseph Goldman; *I Hate Pink* by Chenoa Honjo; *On Being Written In* by Jamie McEwan; and *Two Left Feet, Two Left Hands, and Too Left on the Bench* by David Lubar. These stories presented a variety of characters ranging from the stereotypical to some who stretched the boundaries.

The boys were then interviewed about the stories and their characters, using some of David Booth’s prompts (2001, pp. 158–162), and classroom discussions were held in conjunction with the completion of written assignments. A cartoon, “Every Girl, Every Boy” which linked boys and girls with certain ‘descriptors’ was also given to the boys, who were then asked how relevant its message was to them in today’s world. Finally, they were re-surveyed, using the same questions as in the pre-survey.

## Results

### PRELIMINARY SURVEY

The initial survey results were fairly predictable: the boys admired athletics, good sportsmanship, and strength as traits in their friends, and chose an almost exact split of sports figures and business tycoons as men they would most want to be. There was also a distinct group who were happy being themselves, an encouraging trait. The most influential men in their lives were overwhelmingly family members—with fathers, uncles and grandfathers making up all but five of the responses.

The difference in the boys' definition of masculinity and of manhood was intriguing. The boys used the former as a group of qualities such as strong, confident, powerful, responsible, and superior; they used the latter as a passage to adulthood or maturity with phrases like "age where you're expected to act like a man", "able to take care of yourself", and "being able to make decisions on your own".

In order to further define our population, we gauged our boys' interests in activities with which they are involved on a daily basis, by including a ranking of many of them. They were shown to be like many boys of the 21st century, and similar to the boys described by Gurian (2001) and Scieszka (n.d.). Their favorite activities were, in descending order: hanging out with friends; playing sports; listening to music; playing video games; working on a hobby; watching television or going to the movies; watching a favorite sports team on TV or at the stadium; surfing the Net; learning something new about a topic that interests me; reading a good book; doing something mechanical, like fixing an engine; going to school; and drawing, painting or cartooning. "Reading a good book" and "going to school" were almost at the bottom of the ranking; our boys were showing that they were already resistant to education (there apparently weren't many artists in the pool). The 'other' category allowed the students to list their own pursuits, and these consisted of mostly outdoor activities—skiing, boating, flying, model rocket launching. These were low on the list, reflecting a trend toward inactivity that here in the U.S., at least, contributes to the fact that teens are twice as obese as they were twenty-five years ago: "Many observers point to reliance on fat-laden convenience and fast foods along with time spent watching television, playing video games, and surfing the Internet instead of outdoor, physical activities" (Wexler, 2007). Although this phenomenon is not favorable, our students reflect a greater societal ill of the 21st century.

The shoe survey brought to light the fact that the boys indeed had preconceived notions of what was a more masculine type of shoe for a man to wear. Of the twelve pairs surveyed, the top two were a construction boot and a businessman's Oxford shoe, akin to the pre-survey's descriptions of what masculinity meant to the boys. The adjectives used to describe people who wore these included: "labor intensive", "hard working", "excessively assertive", "huge", and "powerful" for the former; and "rich and confident", "serious", "sophisticated", "strict" for the latter. At the other end of the spectrum were croc sandals and white loafers, with some descriptions such as: "retired old guy who gardens", "creative", "goofy", "fag"; and "softy guy that's not very masculine", "dance shoes", "feminine", "weak", "timid", and "lazy" respectively.

### LITERATURE EXAMINATION

The discussion of the stories was enlightening indeed. Many boys thought the characters in *Great Falls* lent themselves best to the study of gender roles: the father was a stereotypical guy who

“... when [he] wasn’t working on airplanes, he was going hunting or fishing, two things he could do as well as anyone” (Ford, 2004, p. 134). When the boy and his father returned home from one of these hunting expeditions to find a male visitor in the kitchen, the boy was intrigued, but not angered. The visitor’s sense of bravado (coined ‘chillosity’ by one of the boys) at being caught with another man’s wife seemed to appeal to the boy in the story, as well as the boys in the class. Despite being responsible for tearing a family apart, he showed no emotion. The boys did not entertain an alternative hypothesis that since the mom was just discovered to have been married previously, this young man could have also been her son.

Using some of Booth’s prompts, the gender of the boy in *Great Falls* was flipped to female and the boys were asked what her reaction would have been. Almost universally, and immediately, they quipped: “she’d fall apart”, “start crying and everything”, “run to her mother and hug her, beg her not to leave”. When asked why the boy wouldn’t be upset, they admitted: “boys don’t do that”, “boys are taught not to cry”, “boys bottle up their emotions”. They even discussed that most tragic acts of violence, such as school shootings, are done by males, perhaps because of the boiling-over of emotions that haven’t been expressed.

In the Orwell story, *Shooting an Elephant*, there was just one main character, a man who was described by the boys as “weak”, “compassionate”, “cowardly”, “insecure”, “self-conscious”. He did not fulfill their idea of what masculinity meant, despite the fact that he shot an elephant single-handedly. The boys felt the man acted against his will, and indeed, was pressured to act by the crowd, indeed somewhat akin to the peer-pressure the boys feel in their lives. They discussed the protagonist’s situation, and identified with the peer pressure placed on him, admitting themselves to doing things they knew were not right because someone else was doing them; an important admission on the road to overcoming it.

*Tommy Baton* by Joseph Goldman included a father who was incensed by the fact that his son wanted to baton-twirl rather than play more ‘masculine’ sports. He was a rodeo rider himself, though disabled and unemployed, and the boys believed he wanted to continue to live an active life vicariously through his son. *Billy Elliot* and *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* were introduced as contemporary stories with similar story lines that have recently enjoyed popularity onstage or in the movies. In *Tommy Baton* the son’s dedication to his sport was thought to make him more ‘masculine’ than his father, who was not even providing for his family; an important part of the boys’ collective definition of masculinity provided during the preliminary survey. The boys thought that if the dad’s motivation was to help the boy from being hurt more, he would be more masculine. However, he admitted to not being able to look at the other fathers anymore, therefore admitting that his own ego was the reason he was so upset. The boys even said if he could teach his son to use the baton as a weapon, then he’d be happy.

When talking about switching this character in *Tommy Baton* to a female one, the boys reported that it’s OK for a girl to like boys’ things, but if a boy likes girls’ activities, “he’s gay”. When asked why this would be a problem, they said they “weren’t homophobic”, “just wouldn’t want a child to be gay—[their] legacy would end”. This interesting discussion of the history of our culture’s negative notion of homosexuality brought about a useful inter-cultural understanding, as there were a couple of Korean students who brought a unique, non-American perspective to the topic. Indeed, the discussion turned to the fact that many Greco/Roman figures were and still are thought of as very masculine, despite the fact that they engaged in homosexual behaviors.

*On Being Written In* by Jamie McEwan, focused on a boy who lived in his brother's shadow and who derived much of his self-worth from sports—a very prevalent condition in a school like Trinity-Pawling. The book highlights that taking one's identity primarily from one source, in this case sports, can be a big gamble. When this young man finds that he's not going to be as successful as his undefeated brother was in wrestling, he feels worthless. He ultimately finds his own style, different from that of his brother, but still most successful as is evidenced when he wins the National competition. The boys readily identified with this character, many having older brothers themselves. A similar storyline in *Two Left Feet, Two Left Hands, and Too Left on the Bench* by David Lubar showed a man who was not good at any sports as a child until he found karate. Many of the less-athletic boys identified with this character, and one said that "at least he found something he's good at".

*I Hate Pink* by Chenoa Honjo used a very obtuse set of clues to the gender of one character, causing the boys to label the character a "shim". The reason, most said, that they made the final decision that the character was female was because she/he loved sushi—and they didn't think that was very masculine. Here they launched into very stereotypical (tongue in cheek) "rather have a double cheeseburger and fries" discourse. We joked at the end that the story itself didn't have much 'meat' to it and therefore moved on.

The "Every Boy, Every Girl" cartoon brought stimulating responses as well. The boys were skeptical that this type of stereotypical mindset existed anymore, a very encouraging thought indeed! Regarding the cartoon comment "For every girl who is tired of being called over-sensitive, there is a boy who fears to be gentle, to weep", the boys were reminded that they said a hypothetical female character in *Great Falls* would break down and cry if her family were breaking up, and a boy character would not. After acknowledging this, they said it was just because the story was set in a more traditional time, not because she was a female. Clearly we had broken ground, but still had some tilling to do! The cartoon comment, "For every girl who throws out her E-Z Bake Oven, there is a boy who wishes to find one", brought identification, but because several boys actually had one! They saw the purpose of the cartoon as disputing real feelings versus those we are supposed to feel. Said one boy, "It took the label off of being a boy or a girl, you can do whatever you want". The class was somewhat influenced by a particular boy they described as "emo" to describe the fact that he was a mature, self-confident boy, in touch with his emotions and who didn't feel the pressure suggested in the cartoon.

## POST-SURVEY

From the first question onward, the post-survey showed some marked change in attitudes from the first. In the original survey, twelve responses to "What three qualities do you admire in your male friends?" included the words "athletic" or "strong", with just one mention of "loyalty". In the post survey, there were nine mentions of "loyalty" itself, and several more mentioning "fidelity", "dedication" or "brotherhood", and just five "athletic". Although the stories themselves didn't specifically mention loyalty as an individual characteristic, it seems the discussion of what masculinity meant had broadened the boys' definition to include it along with similar characteristics, such as honesty and intelligence.

Responses to a request for "three difficulties being faced by a man in today's society" were overwhelmingly economic in the post-survey, indicating that providing for families in today's world



is on their mind, for sure. The survey questions about occupations showed that almost one-third of the boys thought there aren't any jobs that are unsuitable for a man, yet several still listed traditionally feminine jobs such as babysitter, kindergarten teacher, secretary, and nurse. Advantages of being a man in today's society had many references to "better job opportunities" and "more pay for the same job"—reality, yes, but disheartening. The "men they'd most want to be" question had an equal number in each survey wanting to stay themselves, as one boy said: "because one day I'll be successful and not want to be anyone else but me because I am my greatest influence". In the post-survey, even more boys said their fathers, uncles, brothers or grandfathers were the most influential. Only two chose outside influences, compared with five in the pre-survey. When asked what they thought were the differences between masculinity and manhood, the boys described manhood as a phase in a man's life, the "realization of new responsibilities", and masculinity as a compilation of traits, when one is "comfortable enough in your own skin to be confident".

The post-survey included an additional question: "Did the study and reflection upon the stories we read together have any impact on your perception of gender roles? If so, what?" Only five boys outwardly agreed that the study did help in this way, a representative answer being: "yes, it made me realize that people try to fulfill what they are told they should be like and that it is a problem." However, when the boys were asked to describe the ideal man in the post-survey, twenty-three used words like "kind", "honest", "sensitive" or "loyal", compared with just fourteen in the pre-survey. This suggested strongly that the boys had been reached, yet weren't entirely able or ready to admit that their viewpoints had changed.

Using the class of tenth grade boys who did not participate in the critical literacy exercises brought several things to light indeed. Although the vast majority (seven out of nine) also used their father or grandfather as people who influence them the most, none described the ideal man with the sensitive adjectives used by participants in the study. Instead, they used words like: "strong, successful LeBron James" (American basketball star). In the absence of any other known factors, analyzing the characters and their roles appears to have significantly helped the boys in the research group identify a broader definition of what being a man means to them, even if they were not yet able to admit it!

## Conclusion

Action Research gives us an opportunity to "gain insight, develop reflective practice and effect positive changes in the school environment, improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved" (Mills, 2007, p. 5). In this project, through the analysis of a variety of short stories, a broadening of boys' perceptions of what a man can be in today's society was evident. In the safety of an all-boys' learning environment, with careful and respectful prompting, the boys were able to vocalize their feelings about what they had read. They related personal stories, anecdotes and vulnerabilities while exploring each others' thoughts and opinions about a variety of topics, not just what it meant to be masculine. The teachers involved found that the exercise, combined with the fact that our single-sex environment is particularly well-suited to guide boys in their growth process, did indeed broaden their perception of masculinity, and very likely will serve to enhance their lives.



## Implications for Practice

In response to this research, teachers across the grade levels at Trinity-Pawling will be encouraged to use more of the critical discourse analysis techniques to engage their students in meaningful discussion and character analysis. English department meetings and more general in-service training will be planned to include discussion and training in these techniques. In an educational era when learning how and what to question is becoming more important than memorizing answers, this is a big step toward giving our 21st century students what they need to succeed in life. Perhaps through becoming more critically literate, our students can live their interest in reading and become the life-long learners, of books *and* people, we want them to be!

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## Reflection

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*One year ago, shortly after being selected to participate on the 2009 IBSC Action Research Team, I was full of ideas, the most notable of them ‘skyping’ with classes in Australia, London, South Africa and of course, New Zealand. Giving our boys the cross-cultural immersion that the IBSC represents so well was going to enrich their world immensely. Undertaking the project in the fall term, our first round of surveys went flawlessly, the boys read the stories we had selected, and we were well on our way to an interesting winter term project, something to pass the sometimes long hours between vacations.*

*Then the unimaginable occurred: a senior boy died just before Christmas. Our world turned upside down and inside out as we attempted to cope with this tragedy. The boy was so well-loved; a seemingly well-adjusted and talented boy whom no one would have suspected was under any type of stress. Being strong for our boys was tough; they saw countless teachers, male and female, immersed in grief, with tears streaming down our faces. We bonded—talked together, were counseled together, cried and prayed together—the advantages of a boarding community, for sure. Although we recognized the benefit of a regular, structured day to help the boys through this, most lesson plans and curricular ideals were scrapped in favor of letting the boys’ needs guide our way.*

*Needless to say, our research took a back seat as well. Returning to it a couple of months later in a hastily scheduled series of classes, we were amazed that the boys remembered as many details about the stories, and were as forthcoming with their opinions about them as they were. The second set of surveys clearly showed distinct improvement in their attitudes about masculinity. Could they have been affected by our tragedy, where we openly talked about the need to bring our feelings out constructively, rather than letting them steep into toxicity? Absolutely. We are all different people than we were before December 14th; the lessons that we learned together only making us stronger.*

*In May, the last full week of our school year, the English classes with which we worked took on an interesting assignment: writing a reflection of a New York Times article regarding bullying and name calling, specifically with gay epithets (‘Dude, You’ve Got Problems’, Judith Warner, April 18, 2009). The article states: “being called a ‘fag’, you see, actually has almost nothing to do with being gay. It’s really about showing any perceived weakness or femininity—by being emotional, seeming incompetent, caring too much about clothing, liking to dance or even having an interest in literature.” Bang, right to the heart of what we’d talked about. The boys eloquently presented viewpoints that resonated with the vocabulary of our research, as one boy wrote: “Masculinity is not about the occupation someone has or the hobbies they participate in. Masculinity is about the hard decisions one has to make and whether or not they believe what they chose was right.”*

*Guess we really did reach them after all! Although our research was not as broad and grand as originally hoped for, we had solid evidence that what we did mattered, a clear measure of success.*

*Amy Foster*



# Bringing the Shadows Together: The Masculine Self

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## Abstract

An action research project was undertaken in the latter part of 2008 at a boys' school in Sydney, Australia, involving a class of year 8 English students. The research question was: How can boys' understanding of masculinities be broadened and enhanced through literature in the English curriculum? The plural of masculine was purposively used to move from an essentialist perception of masculinity to align with recent understandings of masculinity as being not one, but many. Studying Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the boys undertook various tasks that focused on establishing their current perception of masculinities as well as activities that destabilized those understandings through alternative readings of the play. Initially the boys shared similar essentialist views of what it is to be a man, but as they worked through the activities based primarily on *The Merchant of Venice*, their discourse moved toward a broader interpretation and construal of gender, illustrating the potency of literature in enriching and enhancing their world views.

## Literature Review

...the hegemonic power of the idealised manly figure of the early 1900s cast a long shadow forwards over the twentieth century, and strong resonances remain. The macho bravado of the television 'Footy Show' sneers at anything that even hints at effeminacy, and emphasises brawn and bravery over intelligence and sensitivity.

Athletes still demand great prestige in elite secondary schools, much more so than those who distinguish themselves in matters academic or cultural (Crotty, 2001).

Crotty, a lecturer at the University of Newcastle in Australia, in discussing the formation of the prevailing view of masculinity in elite Australian schools, notes that "early twentieth century subscription to the athletic and militarist ideology of manliness was tediously uniform throughout Australia" and that "educational pressures to conform were reinforced by prescriptive juvenile literature and youth groups" (Crotty, 2001). Indeed Beeton, publisher of *The Boy's Own Magazine*, envisioned his magazine as "moulder of empire builders" (Tosh, 2009)!

The culturally idealised masculinity in the 19th century, as Crotty notes, "cast a long shadow forwards over the twentieth century, and strong resonances remain". This idealised form was neatly

packaged by David and Brannon (1976) as the four norms of traditional masculinity ideology: “no sissy stuff” (men should avoid feminine things); the “big wheel” (men should be successful and continually achieve); the “sturdy oak” (men should not show signs of weakness); and “give ‘em hell” (men should seek adventure even at the risk of violence).

Acknowledging that the image of masculinity defaults to the hegemonic ideal of a particular group for a particular time (cultural swings in values), Carrigan and his colleagues agreed, however, that most men are not examples of the prescribed masculine gender role, yet ascribe to it:

The hegemonic model... may only correspond to the actual characters of a small number of men. Yet very large numbers of men are complicit in sustaining the hegemonic model (*cited in Crotty, 2001*).

Why? Kimmel (2004, pp. 184–185) suggests that, coupled with the image of masculinity as the “flight of the feminine”, the established definition of manhood is “man in power, a man with power, and a man of power”. Thus, the socially constructed perspective of masculinity is relative to what is deemed subordinate (including femininities) as well as marginalized (Connell, 2005). Boys indeed heed, for the most part, what the dominating culture depicts, and grow to be men. Assuming that boys’ views on manhood are heavily influenced by what they see, hear and view in the mass media, then it can also be assumed that what they read has an effect on how they interpret masculinity, and indeed, masculinities.

What then of the literature boys are asked to read at school? Does the role of literature in the curriculum have any effect in shaping the attitudes of boys toward their understanding of the broader representation of masculinities? Do texts sanctioned as good literature for boys have any influence in moving them from the conventional understanding of masculinity toward an understanding that puts to rest any need to flee the feminine? Although Nodelman (2002) believes that there is a proliferation of young adult novels focused on young males as thinkers who are sensitive and loving, Bereska (2003) questions young adult literature and its portrayal of boys’ worlds in shaping their broader understanding of masculinities. In her doctoral study based on the construction of masculinity through literature, she notes that the typology of masculinity in young adult novels (heterosexuality, embodiment and no sissy stuff) steers boys toward the patriarchal society. Dutro (2002) supports Bereska and argues that boys are often provided with reading choices that support, in an unconscious manner, a masculinity that devalues femininities and/or subordinate masculinities. She is adamant that literature which supports the unconscious performance of hegemonic masculinity must be challenged. Her research is worthy of consideration as she demonstrates that, even though the boys in her study refuted the “boy/girl dichotomy to express and perform their own subjectivities as both readers and as boys”, their “actions tended to reinforce it” (Dutro, 2002). Such is the strength of the enactment of almost imperceptible performances of masculinities in their lives.

Perhaps Lee (2003) offers the more compelling research through his focus on literary representations of the inferior masculine self. He notes: “The masculine Self, then, constellates both a light side (culturally approved public roles such as hero, warrior, breadwinner) and a dark side (private domesticity, vulnerability, dependence).” He is convinced that thoughtfully chosen stories for boys can raise their “consciousness about pathologies of masculinity that we unwittingly live out, and even serve, in a limited capacity, as mentors”. In short, Lee believes that reading should encourage analysis of responses to stories and help men, and therefore boys, to “reveal a hidden and more

authentic aspect of a man's masculinity that has become darkened by his adaptations to the culture's masculine gender-role paradigms". Within the English curriculum, literature is then placed in a sentinel role for boys to live out what could be interpreted as rites of passage—a way to know what a man is, and what a man is not.

## Rationale for Study

We might dismiss all of the above as a non-essential issue for teachers of English. We might choose to argue that, in light of the perceived crisis in boys' reading (Gurian and Stevens, 2005), any literary text that engages a young man is better than not reading at all (Young, 2001). Improving literacy is one thing; improving boys' understanding of masculinities and their place in today's world is another. However, if we do not present challenges to young men and encourage them to critically assess stereotypes in the literature they read, we could also be assisting them with a skewed perspective of masculinities and indeed be encouraging a flight from the feminine. As Lee (2003) suggests, this would be to deny their shadow *selves*, their darker side; their vulnerable, domestic and dependent side. Certainly, given the stereotypes presented in media and in particular, sport, it is particularly important to engage boys in thoughtful discussion reading.

Hence, this action research asks the question: *How can boys' understanding of masculinities be broadened and enhanced through literature in the English curriculum?*

## Assumptions

It was assumed that engaging boys in reading, viewing and listening to all kinds of stories influences, enriches and enhances their understanding of society, human behaviour and the human heart, giving shape or meaning to their understanding of the masculine self. It was also assumed that, by studying literature which has intriguing male characters, who are heroic yet non-heroic, who are champions yet unassuming classmates, and who are in tune with their emotions, boys would have a broader and richer understanding of masculinities. It was also assumed that planned interventions to disrupt the *status quo* would see a change in the way the boys perceived masculinities.

## Research Approach

Action research was the preferred process in which to enact a systematic inquiry situated in the teaching/learning environment. It was felt that this was the ideal approach through which to gather information about how literature potentially enriches boys' understanding of masculinities. This approach would best assist in gaining insights into teaching and learning effectiveness. It would also develop essential reflective practice within the goal of effecting positive changes in improving student outcomes (Mills, 2002).

## DESIGN

The study was designed to coincide with the commencement of an English unit entitled *Introduction to Shakespeare*. It was deemed appropriate to choose *The Merchant of Venice* for these young adolescent men. Manhood becomes important in their thinking and *The Merchant of Venice* offered much to think about!

The boys were in the last quarter of their academic year and had established a rapport with each other as well as with their teachers, and, importantly, felt they could speak their mind. This safe environment was essential for the success of the study as the boys knew they could be controversial and know that their ideas would be respected. Gibson-Langford and Laycock (2007, p. 3), in respect to developing a safe environment in which to share and create knowledge, note that:

Every single person wants to share their knowledge in some way; yet they also want to protect their ideas... fear of ridicule is often cited as the more pressing. Sensitivity is required ...this requires partnerships steeped in empathy.

Failure to develop an empathetic learning community would mean failure for the project. The teacher librarian and class teacher worked closely with the boys in a co-teaching environment. The class teacher designed class tasks that aligned with the research question, initiated discussions and set homework. The teacher librarian developed and administered data collection instruments, analysed the data and pulled together the findings. Both teachers designed the intervention strategies and engaged in the oft-at-times dynamic discussions that ensued.

## PARTICIPANTS

The boys were a gifted Year 8 English class, 13–14 years-old. All 24 boys volunteered to participate in the eight-week action research project. Both teachers felt that this was the most impressionable age for forming views about manhood, and in particular, that this class would rise to the challenges presented within the selected texts. Thus, the participants were chosen for their strong critical thinking skills, their maturity in expression, as well as their ability to handle higher-order discussions with confidence, even when experiencing cognitive and affective dissonance. Permission to participate, to be recorded or filmed and to have their comments included in this research was given by the participants' carers as well as by each student. Each participant understood that he could at any time withdraw his permission.

## TEXTS

In the first instance, the boys read a simplified narrative of the play (Lamb [1807], 2004). They were then introduced to the graphic novel version of *The Merchant of Venice* (Hinds, 2007). The graphic novel was chosen for its modern interpretation, including a first act that was modified to set the scene, introduce each character in their *typical persona*, and come quickly to the essence of the conflict. The second act reverted to Shakespeare's original text. Once the boys had the opportunity to form their own views about each character, they were presented with alternative readings of the play through film clips. An image was also used for the final reflection.

## Data Collection

Several data collection techniques were used including surveys, researcher/teacher observations, a questionnaire, filming and field notes.

Initially, the boys engaged in intense frontloading activities. They were asked their views on male/female stereotypes. A list of characteristics was recorded and a discussion followed, led by the class teacher, as to why or why not to include particular characteristics. Two surveys were given in which the participants provided their interpretation of what is a man, responding to a hierarchy of



questions as well as one based on images of shoes. The latter was later discarded for not contributing to the issue, other than perhaps engaging them in the idea that this was a *different* kind of research.

The boys then began their study of *The Merchant of Venice*. Familiarising themselves with the storyline offered in Lambs' version, each boy was then given a copy of Hind's *The Merchant of Venice* and asked to read only the visual, providing a 2–3 line character description of how each of the characters conformed or did not conform to the male/female stereotype. Their ideas were presented in a whole class discussion. Each student was then asked to choose a character and read his/her words only. From this activity, they gave a detailed character analysis, supported with specific quotes and page references. The boys then formed small groups and chose one character to critically analyse in terms of how he/she conformed or did not conform to the stereotype. Again they had to provide examples from the text.

The boys were then introduced to several film excerpts from three different versions of *The Merchant of Venice*, each focused on the same scenes: sealing of the deal (Act 1 Scene iii) and the courtroom (Act 4 Scene i), concluding with the more modern version (Brokaw and Cowan, 2004). The discussion that followed was filmed.

As a final activity, an illustration of a person—half boy/half girl—was distributed. The image was surrounded by seven comments from both a female perspective and a male perspective (e.g. for every boy for whom competition is the only way to prove his masculinity, there is a girl who is called unfeminine when she competes). The boys were asked to reflect on the image's message in relation to the text studied. They were asked to decide if the message was relevant to the text and in what way; to consider how their ideas connected or did not connect to their understanding of the text; and to reflect on how *The Merchant of Venice* helped or did not help them understand or question stereotypes.

At this point, the class teacher asked particularly probing questions to determine if there had been a shift in the boys' views. If a boy did not volunteer an answer, he was asked to respond. All were prepared to give their honest views, and all were prepared to defend their views in the face of challenges from other students, as well as their teachers.

## Analysis and Findings

The response to the initial survey illustrated the expansiveness of the participants' perspectives on the advantages of being male in our society, with comments ranging from the hegemonic perspective (leadership positions, sporting prowess, physical strength and status, opinions valued, better employment opportunities and safety ("less chance of mugging")) to a broader view, encompassing labour choices that were once scorned as female only, freedom from expectations of being 'male', and sexuality being less an issue. Twenty-two of the twenty-four participants viewed their father as the most influential male in their lives; the reasons represented strongly feminist social constructivist values. Curiously, though, their definition of masculinities was closer to the hegemonic point of view—cognitive confusion? The majority of the comments represented more of the flight from the feminine syndrome whilst a minority defined masculinities as "approaches to manhood", including being humble and responsible as well as living up to one's own expectations. Several of the participants explained that masculinities were influenced by subsequent stereotypes and were dependent on culture, times and social environment.



When asked to define manhood, the great majority supported the response from one boy who considered it as the “ultimate stage in mental growth when one sees things differently and with maturity”, including a deepening of the psyche toward achieving personal goals; being independent, moral and upholding societal values. However, the participants clearly delineated the difficulties that faced them in the journey towards manhood. They included issues such as the confusion between assertiveness and aggressiveness, pressure to conform to the hegemonic perspective, freeing the emotional self, having unclear moral values and fear of being negatively stereotyped if they pursued activities counter to the hegemonic view.

Part two of this initial survey asked the participants to present their ideal man; including the qualities they admired and what they considered were important traits in being a man. Fifty-six traits were listed of which the majority represented a social feminist perspective, such as “loving”, “empathetic”, having “humility”, “loyal”, “caring for family and community”, “compassionate” and “humane”, although traits such as “buff”, “tall”, “rich”, “handsome”, “powerful”, “following a sport” and “cynical” were included. When asked what they personally valued, the greater majority of the participants were able to articulate attributes and values from the feminist social constructivist perspective. This was counter to the boys’ choice of appropriate and inappropriate jobs for men which strongly upheld the dominant view of masculinities. Interestingly, the caring professions were included but occupations such as “beauticians” and “hairdressers” were shunned. It is worthy of note that one of the participants described as appropriate any job “that helped men maintain a life of honesty”.

The boys’ visual analysis of the characters in the graphic novel of *The Merchant of Venice* drew comment that aligned, to some extent, with David and Brannon’s typology. Their classification supported most of the boys’ individual interpretation of not only what they see, but how they see being male, from their prior understanding and experience. Conformist traits such as “in control”, “unemotional”, “strong mentally and physically”, “commanding”, “rebellious”, and having a “dominant persona” were contrasted with non-conformist qualities. For example, several of the boys saw Antonio as “not viewing himself as superior to females”, and as “being sensitive with a sense of calm (unsuited to the stereotype)”; they felt that “affection towards Bassanio belies stereotype”. Despite the majority of the boys’ feeling that Bassanio’s embracing of Antonio was “strong” and “OK”, many viewed Bassanio as “effeminate”, and felt that he did “not look the male stereotype” as he “loses composure” and is “afraid”. Interestingly, Shylock was, for the minority, an “evil male stereotype”, the “strongest stereotype”, being “like a lion”. However, fifteen of the twenty-four boys saw Shylock as the “total opposite to the male stereotype” as he was “violent”, “sneaky”, “crafty”, “scheming like a woman”, “not honorable”, and, amusingly, “too thin” and “wore glasses”.

The majority of the participants were also prepared to consider some male traits as trans-gender. The visual cues during the courtroom scene drew remarks that aligned with David and Brannon’s (1976) norms, of which notably were the comments about Portia being “powerful”, “a risk taker”, “dominant” and “in control”.

Analysing the characters through their dialogue in the first instance showed little difference from the boys’ overall visual interpretation. The majority of the boys portrayed Shylock in negative terms. They viewed Antonio and Bassanio more positively, although Antonio was assigned several negative

traits such as “prejudiced”, “two-faced”, “fair, yet nasty and vile”. There was general agreement that Shylock’s cunningness was “written all over his face”; that Antonio continued to be a loyal, generous and loving friend; and that Bassanio, “desperate for money and love”, was “emotionally dependent upon Antonio” and “enjoyed a strong relationship” with him—a mateship! Bassanio’s relationship with Antonio was clearly non-contentious in that the boys understood the relationship as “platonic” thereby giving permission for Bassanio to profess his love for both Antonio and Portia. However, one participant refused to accept that Antonio and Bassanio’s relationship was anything less than desire. He felt that both body language and carefully guarded speech and action demonstrated an intimacy beyond the stereotypical image of males today, but added that what is stereotypical today was not stereotypical in the 16th century. He was impressed, though, with Antonio’s “humbleness”, and felt that his sexuality did not change his view of Antonio as a strong male role model. If, however, Antonio had one major flaw, it was his apparent racism. For the majority of the boys, in uproar over Antonio’s perceived racism, this fact alone questioned Antonio as a stereotypical male—for them, a man is not racist! Interestingly, there was considerable agreement that Portia, despite her intelligence and assertiveness, remained a “powerless tool dominated by males notwithstanding her cunning” whilst Nerissa was viewed, almost unanimously, as a stereotypical woman—“kindly”, “nurturing”, and “faithful”.

Three different film excerpts, ranging from traditional to post-modern interpretations, were chosen to include excerpts from the dialogue between Shylock and Antonio (Bassanio in background) and the courtroom scene. Brokaw and Cowan’s production, under Radford’s direction, precipitated a lively debate amongst the boys. For the first time, the boys openly discussed the suggested homosexual relationship between Antonio and Bassanio who, up until this point, had shared “a relationship that was fatherly (Antonio) and caring and supportive of Bassanio.” If David and Brannon’s (1976) four norms of traditional masculinity were being exercised in the debate that followed, then it was well and truly hidden. All but one boy demonstrated their capacity to come to terms with the different perspective on Antonio and Bassanio’s relationship. This did not detract from their previous identified admiration for Antonio as a man. It also demonstrated sensitivity to the complex issues associated with manhood.

The most revealing data came from the boys’ independent reflection, stimulated by the boy/girl illustration. The boys, in general, expressed that Shakespeare unashamedly explores human nature as it should be, unmasked by the conventions of society, freeing readers and viewers, especially males, to show “genuine emotion without it having any relevance to their sense of masculinity”. They saw Shylock in another light and agreed that his behaviour was established because of “revenge and not because he was male”. They expressed that the study of *The Merchant of Venice* helped them to “recognise the flaw in assuming males have to be this way or that way”; that Shakespeare allows men to be men, allowing them to be “fearful and brave” and to be able to “express their love for each other”.

Did the study of *The Merchant of Venice* broaden or enrich the boys’ understanding of masculinities? Teacher observations would say “yes”, based on the energetic final discussion. The boys probed areas of masculinities that went beyond their teachers’ expectations for this age group. Student responses, on the other hand, indicated that their views were not changed, but that they were “more comfortable with the idea that stereotypical maleness is not something they need to ascribe to” and that the hegemonic perspective, as strong as it is in their cultural frame, is not

everything; that the “football hero can also enjoy and love dance”. Several of the boys stated that *The Merchant of Venice* had “provided a number of examples by which to measure their own sense of masculinity”. One participant stated eloquently what the greater majority expressed:

I had not thought about masculinities and conformity. At the start of term, I defined being male as having an income, a family, a business. Shakespeare placed Portia in these roles. Made me think of the different qualities of a person—not as a label!

Another participant summed up that he needs to be wary of “conforming to the prevailing view of maleness” in a bid “to avoid losing my individuality”. Yet another participant noted that “a man is not one who conforms [and] that being different was a hallmark of being masculine or feminine”.

A final comment from the study, a blend of participant voices, is encouraging, as it clearly demonstrates the central role of literature in enriching the boys’ understanding of the masculine Self:

Masculinity includes mercy. Males should embrace their feminine qualities and become better rounded... males do not have to hide their feelings; each of the male characters altered my view of males—we have the right to be vulnerable, to be romantic, to be emotional, to be the non-dominant partner. The stereotype is flawed and unjust.

## Discussion and Implications of the Study

Shakespeare’s genius as a storyteller must be partly attributable to his very real-life experiences ... The examination of the events and emotions that made Shakespeare Shakespeare [sic] not only illuminates his work, but it illuminates ourselves, and that surely is the ultimate goal of both literature and literary criticism (*Winfield, 2008, p. 270*)

Events and emotions in literature illuminate ourselves, and, certainly, in this action research, illuminated our boys’ understanding of the masculine Self that constellates both a light side and a dark side; the shadow *selves* (Lee, 2003). For young boys growing to men in an Australian society, these light and dark *selves* can be influenced by what they read and hear and, as potently, what they view. As Kuhn (cited in Mallan, 2008) notes: “What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see.”

Unfortunately, the cultural *bylaws* for young Australian boys growing to be men are often not addressed in the literature they study. What they are exposed to, according to Khan and Walcholz (2006), are the “traditional ideas of masculinity” which “remain entrenched in our literature, our media, and in our world”. Khan and Walcholz contend, however, that this can also create opportunities to subvert the hegemonic view of masculinity and create a discourse on masculinities. Thus, this research has confirmed that we must continue to create opportunities to subvert the hegemonic view of masculinity through integrating texts such as *The Merchant of Venice*, in all its representations and interpretations, into our English curriculum.

The research has supported our conscious selection of challenging texts for our boys, setting in motion reflection and critical thinking on the issues and images of masculinities. The research has affirmed the integral role that literature has in changing the way our students feel and see events and relationships in their lives. Certainly, we will be exploring *The Merchant of Venice* with our future Year 8 students, incorporating similar activities in our quest to assist our boys in understanding how “constructions of male and female depend on each other” (Khan & Walcholz, 2006).

## A Final Word

Literature is the story told or viewed or read that can tap into our inner core; it is literature explored through alternative readings in a guided environment that can alter, enhance and enrich the lived experience. Writer Tara June Winch (2009) notes: “I believe in literature doing great things. Words illuminate truth in our lives; they have the power to make change.” Thus, if words illuminate truth in our lives and have the power to make change, then literature, a study of words in all its representations, has a role in broadening and enhancing boys’ understanding of masculinities.

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## Reflection

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*Firstly, the opportunity to participate in this international research project has been a valuable experience, both professionally and personally. I acknowledge the support of my school, and in particular Dr. Hawkes, my Headmaster. When your school supports your work, you feel appreciated and hence committed. As well, to work across education sectors with other teachers is incredibly rewarding, and to bring this into a global experience revitalises the passion for my craft.*

*Second, I have really enjoyed the benefits derived from using social networks such as our research wiki, Google groups and Skype to keep in contact with research colleagues, although I felt that the promise that comes from such connectivity was sometimes disappointing. Was it expectation and eagerness on my part that we would be a truly unified research team, exploring ideas and questioning and arguing and sharing, that kept me buoyant? Perhaps! The reality is more that teaching is full-time. For research teams to be fully involved and connected, the action must be recognised not only in permission to be involved and to gain financial support, but it needs to be recognised and provided for within the researchers' work day.*

*Third, from the school-based experience, the action research project was an initial step into something that I feel should be part of the natural discourse of teachers—investigating our intuitive practice. Gratifying was observing another teacher at work—a master teacher, no less—whose ideas, risk-taking, and confidence to challenge the students was inspiring. Rewarding was to combine our ideas, share our knowledge, indulge in ideas around the research, and act on them. No less a stimulating experience was the connecting with students from an entirely different perspective; the teacher-student relationship disappeared as we engaged in heated discussions; working from superficial ideas toward deeply held, and felt, beliefs. And dare I say, the rigour of participating in research and knowing that, in the end, I could manage it, was incredibly encouraging.*

*Finally, thanks must go to Di Laycock, our co-coordinator. Her energy and gentle coaxing of us to communicate, to keep to deadlines, and to offer advice was invaluable. This initiative of the IBSC is unbelievably risk-taking.*

*Linda Gibson-Langford*



# Boys, Literature and Masculinity: Challenging the Stereotypes

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## Abstract

Current research suggests that one of the limiting factors in boys' engagement with literature is their narrow perception of masculinity and what is considered acceptable in a masculine environment. One way of broadening and extending their understanding of masculinity may be through the critical analysis of literature. To test this hypothesis, qualitative data from surveys, interviews and the boys' own writing were used to examine changes that might have taken place in their attitudes to masculinity after a literature study. The data collected indicated that the attitudes to masculinity within the two groups examined were fairly stereotypical and dominated by a sporting ethos. Although the surveys indicated that there were few overt changes in boys' attitudes after the literature study, the data from the interviews and personal writing showed that boys became aware of 'cracks' in the stereotypes when they examined masculinity in a critical way. Existing stereotypical attitudes to masculinity can be challenged if boys are introduced to a critical examination of these concepts through the medium of literature studies.

## Research Question

"How can boys' understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through literature in the language arts curriculum?"

## Introduction

When attempting to define the terms of our research question, even within our action research group, the complexity of the problem became instantly apparent. It is impossible to define masculinity without placing it within a specific context. The concept of masculinity changes over time, with maturity, between cultures and certainly between individuals. For this reason masculinity is undoubtedly a social construct: a "social invitation to define oneself in a certain way" (Newkirk, 2002, p. 23). But as Newkirk and others point out, a social construct is no less influential for being thus constructed and has been shown to have a powerful effect on boys' literacy (Martino, 2008; Young, 2001). Much of the literature on this subject refers to a "hegemonic masculinity". This term indicates "a position of cultural authority and leadership not total dominance: other forms of masculinity persist alongside" (Connell, 2000, p. 3). Hegemonic



masculinity is not necessarily the most common type of masculinity, but it is usually the most powerful. Boys' reading, both what they read and how they interpret it, is affected by their understanding of who they are and what is acceptable in a masculine environment (Dutro, 2003). The obvious development of this argument is that by expanding boys' notions of what is acceptable masculinity, it is possible to help them increase and improve their engagement with literacy.

The current 'problem' of boys' literacy is referred to frequently in the press and is the subject of much academic research. One aspect of the research suggests that the way to improve literacy among boys is to tap into their preferences and provide a more boy-friendly curriculum weighted with the type of texts to which boys can relate (Booth, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). The other approach suggests that boys' literacy will only improve if the stereotypes about boys and their engagement with literature are challenged by critical literacy which examines the gendered representations implicit in texts (Young, 2001; Martino, 2008). It would seem that the interests of our students can best be served by incorporating aspects of both arguments. The essential element lies in the concept of 'critical' literacy which gives boys the skills to examine texts of all kinds in ways that reveal alternative readings and interpretations.

The necessity for debate and discussion rather than the 'essentialising' of gender issues is another recurrent theme in the literature (Hurrell, 2001; Dutro, 2003). Martino (2007a) argues that it is the duty of educators to reconstruct concepts of masculinity rather than reinforce the dominant masculinity which limits acceptable behaviour for boys to a narrow range of experience and rejects reading and the study of English as 'girly'. Not only is a more critical examination of masculinity likely to impact on boys' engagement with literature, but it would also "develop a broader repertoire of skills and capacities that promote emotional literacy" (Martino, 2007a, p. 418). There may be a particular challenge for boys' schools in this regard as they are often perceived as the most likely bastions of a hegemonic masculinity. The counter-argument to this position, however, is that boys' schools provide the safest and least threatening place for boys to do exactly as Martino asks and can challenge the dominant masculinity by interrupting it and encountering "opportunities to hear how others have experienced masculinity and listen to various viewpoints" (Young, 2000, p. 312). By encouraging boys to talk about and examine masculinity through their study of literature, boys' schools can perform a service which will have a positive impact on literacy and boys' development into well-rounded young men.

## Research Context

Lindisfarne College is an independent boys' school in Hastings, New Zealand. It caters for boys in years 7–13 (aged 11 to 18) and has a roll of 485. The school espouses four 'cornerstones' of academic, sporting, cultural and spiritual involvement. While many boys are involved with all aspects of these cornerstones, most perceive that the compulsory nature of sport may elevate its importance in the school (Bednall, 2008).

The school also has a strong culture of promoting literacy and various initiatives over the last few years have had positive and measurable effects on boys' attitudes to reading, as can be seen in an independent report by John Bednall of the Social and Education Research Centre, Western Australia, (2008): "extensive reading for pleasure appears to be a given phenomenon within the common experience of Lindisfarne students." (2008, p. 19)

## RESEARCH SAMPLE: YEAR 12

In Year 12 English students undertake a research project which involves examining several pieces of literature with a common theme. They are required to consider how the theme is treated in the various texts and compare the representations of similar ideas. I thought that this would be an interesting group with which to work for a number of reasons:

- At this age (16–17) the issues of masculinity and concepts of manhood are particularly relevant.
- The boys involved were interesting subjects as several were strong and popular characters within the school, examples of Martino's 'cool boys' (1999). I thought it would be worthwhile to examine their attitudes to masculinity and consider whether they were changed by their investigation of the theme.
- Although assistance is given in the choice of texts for the research project, the ultimate decision is made by the boys themselves, and the examination of the texts is done exclusively by them, presenting a less orthodox approach to the project.

There were limitations in choosing this group:

- The number of boys who were interested in examining a theme of masculinity or related topics was fairly small.
- As the boys undertake the research independently, this meant that there was limited chance for teacher input to the project, except at the beginning.

I was concerned that these limitations would mean that my action research would diverge too radically from that of the rest of the group, but I was reluctant to abandon the project and therefore decided to undertake a second project with a larger group and their teacher.

## RESEARCH SAMPLE: YEAR 7/8

The Year 7/8 class is a composite class of two year levels, made up of boys aged 11 to 13. There are 23 boys in the class and they are of above average ability. After consultation with their English teacher, I decided to use their upcoming novel study as the vehicle for the examination of the concept of masculinity. Two boys were not included in the research as one did not return his permission slip and the second was absent for the post-project survey.

## Data Collection Methods

The emphasis in the data collection methods was on qualitative data which is more closely aligned with the action research process. In order to enhance the validity of the results, the principle of triangulation was applied and data was collected from at least three sources for both of the samples. Data collection methods included surveys, personal written responses, focus groups, descriptive exercises, and extended written reports.

## Data Collection

### YEAR 12

Initially I met with two Year 12 classes and outlined the project to them. There was a brief discussion of what masculinity means to different people and I asked the boys to consider choosing masculinity or a related topic as their theme for the research project they were about to undertake. Not many boys were prepared to do this as it meant choosing several new texts as opposed to including some texts which they had studied previously. Ultimately six boys agreed to choose masculinity or related topics such as gangs or domestic abuse and to examine how men are represented in these texts.

Each boy completed a survey (Appendix A) designed to indicate general attitudes to masculinity. I then met with the boys individually as I did not want them to be influenced by each other's responses. Based on an exercise developed by Martino, I gave the boys printed descriptions of particular characters and asked them to select words from a list to describe the characters. I met informally several times with each boy to discuss their choice of texts and how the project would be approached and made some suggestions about suitable texts. Once they had started their research, I had no further input.

The boys completed their projects over a period of several weeks and once completed, they gave me a copy of their research essays. A post-project survey was also completed and the Martino-devised descriptive exercise was repeated. All of the above data was then analysed and compared. The pre-survey and post-project surveys were summarised in a tabulated form to give a better overview.

### YEAR 7/8

I met with the English teacher of the Year 7/8 class and discussed which book would be the best vehicle for introducing and developing the discussion of masculinity. We selected *Millions* by Frank Cottrell Boyce over several other options as the issues of bereavement, greed and social responsibility are dealt with quite differently by the two brothers who are the central characters in the book. All the boys in the class completed a pre-project survey, which differed slightly from the one used for the Year 12's (Appendix B). I am indebted to Leslie Anne Dexter and Kate Taylor of Sterling Hall School, Toronto for questions 8 and 9, which were devised for their survey and which proved invaluable in mine.

The introductory lesson, which I conducted, involved small groups of boys reaching consensus on what they would do if they found a million dollars (the central premise of the book). The discussion was extended to include what an adult man might do with the money and what a woman might do, whether they would be different and why. The class teacher then continued teaching the novel, discussing in particular the father's character and the contrast between the two brothers. During this time I held two focus group discussions with a smaller group of boys in which we discussed:

- which brother the boys preferred and why
- whether the boy's father was a good man
- which characteristics made someone a good example of manhood and whether the brothers fitted these characteristics

At the completion of the unit, the boys completed a post-project survey, which included two questions about the novel. As part of the summary unit assessment they also completed some pieces of writing based on the novel, and these were included in the data. As with the Year 12's, the pre-project and post-project surveys were summarised in a tabulated form.

## Results and Discussion

### YEAR 12

In response to the question: "If you could be any man in the world who would you be?" the boys identified a very narrow range of personalities, the vast majority of whom were prominent sportsmen. There was very little change between responses in the first and second surveys and none that could be considered broader or enhanced. The range of personalities identified as men who represent manhood was broader and included sportsmen, politicians, musicians and statesmen. Mandela was mentioned four times as was Richie McCaw (captain of the All Blacks—the national rugby team) and Colin Meads (former All Black). Edmund Hillary was listed twice. Again, there was no significant change in answers to this question between the two surveys. The qualities that were identified as being admirable in these men included strength/toughness (mentioned most frequently), determination, responsibility, honesty and putting others first. There was no significant change between the two surveys.

The final questions which asked about characters in literature who represent manhood and other men who have influenced concepts of manhood both showed very little change between the two surveys. The only significant change was the mention of Jake Heke (a troubled and abusive character in the New Zealand film *Once Were Warriors* directed by Lee Tamahori and based on the novel by Alan Duff), as a character who represents manhood and, in another survey, as an influential man. Both these responses were changed in the second survey. An overall theme was the dominance of responses relating to sport or sportsmen in both the pre-project and post-project surveys and the lack of change between the two surveys. The influence of sport on the boys' perceptions and opinions was obvious from the surveys. This finding is supported by several studies, particularly those by Martino (1999, 2003, 2007), that identified the role that sport plays in supporting hegemonic masculinity, while others show the awareness that many boys have that playing sport is linked with being "cool" (Connell, 2000).

The pre-project and post-project responses to the Martino-inspired exercise, in which boys were asked to read short descriptions of characters and evaluate them, were summarised in a tabulated format and examined for trends. There were slightly more instances in which boys' responses had changed than not. Some of the most significant changes were between an initial assessment of a character as "sulky, pussy" to "insecure, boring" and "ashamed, insecure, bored" to "trapped, cool". In general, the changes that occurred seemed to indicate an increased degree of empathy but not necessarily approval. Recent research (Oatley, 2008) indicates that fiction reading results in greater empathy and may work in the same way as a flight simulator, in giving readers opportunities to understand complex emotions in a type of 'trial run'. This effect may have been at work here in giving the boys a greater degree of empathy after examining the texts, many of which were fiction.

The reports written by the six boys on their research of several pieces of literature were examined and analysed for evidence of a critical approach to the theme of masculinity. Each boy examined four or five texts which included; the film *Once Were Warriors* directed by Lee Tamahori; *The God Boy* by Ian Cross; the short story *In a Rubbish Tin*, by Apirana Taylor; *I Am Charlotte Simmons* by Tom Wolfe; the poem *Follower* by Seamus Heaney; the film *Lords of Dogtown* directed by Catherine Hardwicke; *Q&A* by Vikas Swarup; the film *Mississippi Burning* directed by Alan Parker; and *Thugz Mansion*, a rap by Tupac.

The responses were varied and ranged from three pieces that were perceptive and empathetic discussions of the texts and the portrayal of masculinity to two mediocre responses with some discussion of masculinity and one very superficial assessment which did not examine the theme of masculinity in any depth. After the almost complete absence of change in the surveys, I did not expect to see any evidence of critical examination of manhood or any attempt to deconstruct the dominant masculinity in the boys' research, but this was not the case. In several pieces of work there was evidence of these processes which resulted in statements like: "Mr Sullivan is stereotypical of the working class man in that day and age"; "this demonstrates that masculinity is not only evaluated by other males but also by females"; "the main way that these men try to prove their masculinity is through violence"; "he believes it is his responsibility as man of the house to dominate his wife"; and "from this investigation of masculinity it is apparent that that there are as many views on and ways of presenting masculinity as there are men on earth".

The final statement above is, I believe, a very clear example of an understanding of masculinity which has been "enhanced and broadened through literature". I then considered the question of why the post-project surveys (and to a lesser extent, the Martino-inspired exercises) indicated so little change in any of the boys' attitudes. It may be that the survey was an inadequate measure of their conceptions of masculinity. There were certainly several flaws in the survey which became apparent when comparing it with the survey I used for the Year 7/8 group. Despite these shortcomings in measuring their attitudes, however, I think the real answer lies in what Martino has described as the boys' ability to "critique the rules of hegemonic masculinity while still keeping intact an acceptable public performance in the eyes of their peers" (2007b, p. 107). A similar idea is expressed by one of the boys in his research assignment:

Effectively, what is expected of masculine males is not always what is natural or instinctive for masculine males and they must make a conscious effort to act masculine if that is what they want.

It is possible that the boys could see, in their examination of literature, the problems created by a hegemonic masculinity or—as one of the boys expressed it—"a macho mentality" but they still kept their own "public performance" in place in answering the surveys and choosing as, their examples of manhood, men who displayed stereotypical qualities such as strength and determination. Another interesting aspect of the Year 12 research was that the boys worked independently and were not specifically guided in their investigations of the texts. In spite of this and in opposition to the pervasive influence of the dominant masculinity, their examination of the texts showed, in most cases, a much broader interpretation of masculinity than was revealed in either of the surveys.

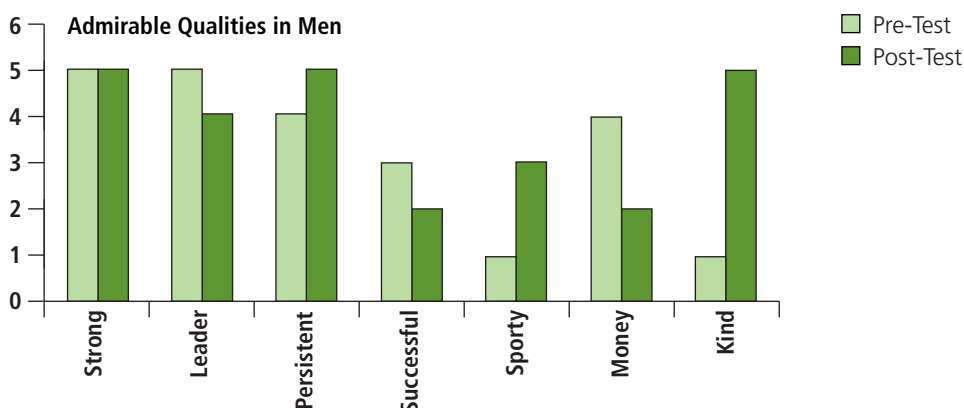
Several boys who took part in the study have considerable status and popularity in the school and are therefore aware of the advantages of being part of the accepted masculine culture. They are, however, also perceptive young men and, like the young men in Martino's study, their ability to look beyond the confines of a narrow masculinity was, I believe, "driven by a desire to search for better alternatives of self-expression which, they believed, would lead to enhancing their lives and relationships with other people" (Martino, 2007b, p. 107).

## YEAR 7/8

The question about which man they would most like to be elicited a relatively wide range of responses from the boys in the pre-survey. The personalities mentioned were dominated by sportsmen (13 responses) but also included Bill Gates (10), Edmund Hillary (2) and Hugh Hefner (2). An interesting aspect of the responses was that several boys (7) nominated themselves in the pre-project or post-project survey as the man they would most like to be. The answers to the second question about men who represent manhood included: a majority of sportsmen (39), Nelson Mandela (11), Bill Gates (11), My Dad (7), Barack Obama (5). There were only three responses that changed significantly between pre-survey and post-survey.

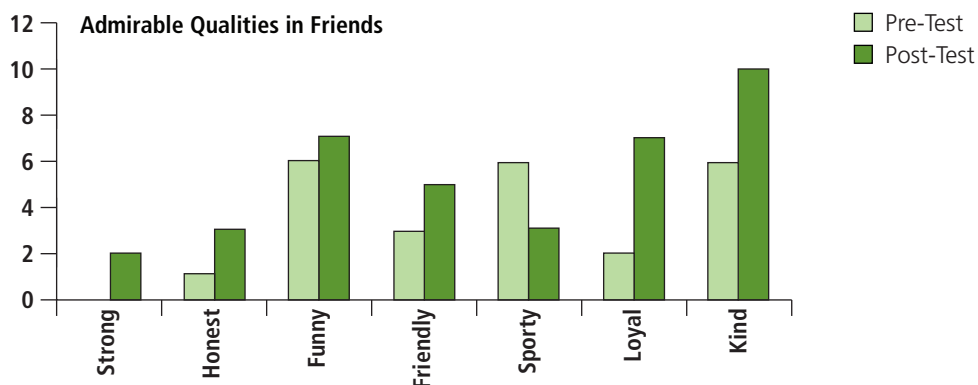
The following graphs indicate the most frequent responses to Questions 4, 10 and 8:

### Q4: Name 3 qualities you think are admirable in these men



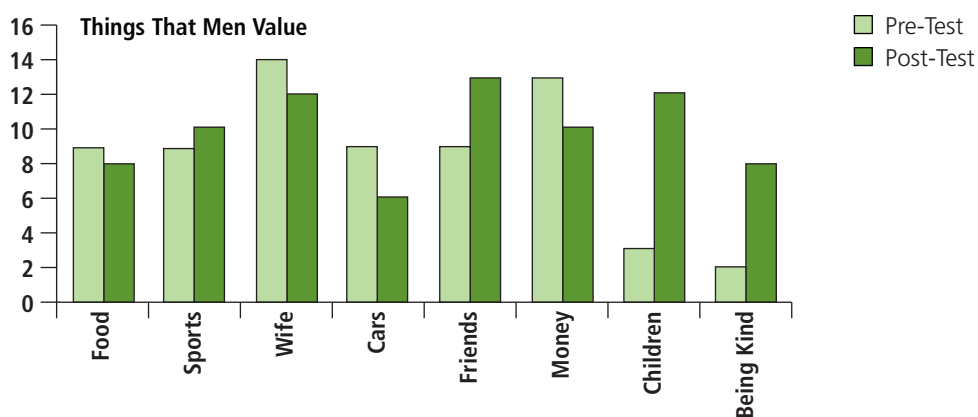
As indicated in the graph, some of the responses remained very consistent between the two surveys. Strength, leadership and persistence were considered admirable qualities both before and after studying *Millions*. Wealth (or money) which the boys identified as an admirable 'quality', declined after studying the book and the quality of kindness increased by the largest margin. Many of the qualities were listed only once or twice and are not shown here.

**Q10: What 3 qualities do you admire in your male friends?**



There was considerable divergence between what the boys considered admirable in men and what they considered admirable in their friends but, as in the previous question, there was a marked increase in the responses for 'kindness' after studying the book. The responses for 'loyalty' also increased significantly. The only quality to show fewer responses was 'sporty'.

**Q8: Circle the top 5 words that best indicate what a man values (What is important to a man)**



This question provided a range of words for the boys to choose from and avoided the problem of a wide range of different responses chosen by one or two boys which appeared in the previous questions. As with Questions 4 and 10, many of the responses remained within a narrow range for the pre-surveys and post-surveys, such as food, sports and wife, but there was a significant increase in the responses indicating men valued 'children' and 'being kind'.

The most significant aspect of the findings is that 'kindness' is the quality that showed the most notable increase. The theme of kindness and concern for others is an important one in *Millions* and the surveys clearly indicate that the boys have been influenced in their attitude to manhood by the examination of these themes. This conclusion is supported by other evidence of change that can be related to *Millions*, such as the increase in the responses indicating that a man values 'children'. The father's concern for his children and his desire to help them deal with the loss of their mother is central to *Millions*. Additionally, the importance of 'money' declined in both graphs in which it featured; once again, the problem that money can create is a theme of the novel.



The two survey questions which asked for examples of manhood in literature and other influential men showed very few changes which could be described as “enhanced” in the post-project survey. The only exception to this was the number of boys (5) who indicated that a character from *Millions* was a good example of manhood. By far the most frequent answer in the question about influential males was “My Dad” who featured prominently in both the pre-survey (10) and post-survey (12).

There is an interesting contrast between the change in responses about qualities associated with manhood after studying *Millions* and the lack of change in the responses about men who are considered good examples of manhood. This seems to indicate that while the boys’ attitudes to masculinity were changed by studying the novel, it is more difficult for them to change their attitudes to personalities who represent manhood. The strength of the media and the power of peer pressure may be two influences which are at work here. Certainly, the effect of the media can be seen in the number of 11 or 12 year old boys who stated they would like to be or had been influenced by Hugh Hefner (3). The sporting culture evident in the surveys is endorsed in all forms of the media and is an influential factor in the lives of most of the boys involved in the project.

In addition to the surveys, the boys’ responses were examined in two focus group sessions and from some pieces of writing that they did after completing the study of the novel. The focus groups revealed that, in general, the boys did not enjoy *Millions* and found the character of Damian who is obsessed with the lives of saints:

Too weird to be likable

He seemed like a really weird kid

They were able to relate more easily to Anthony who they considered to be:

More down to earth

You could understand what he was trying to get at with Anthony

Only four of the boys indicated that Damian was a better example of manhood than Anthony, clearly indicating how their concept of masculinity has affected their interpretation of the character. It is interesting that in spite of the fact that a majority of boys did not enjoy the book and found the main character difficult to relate to, there was still significant change in their responses to the questions about the qualities of manhood.

The focus group discussion about the novel and concepts of masculinity revealed several stereotypical beliefs amongst the boys, but almost every time an opinion of this nature was expressed, it received a response which challenged the stereotype. The following exchanges are just two examples of this:

**Mike:** Crying is not masculine.

**Sam:** It depends why you cry.

**Mike:** If you get hit by a ball you shouldn’t cry.

**Andy:** Even if it would make you cry, you just don’t.

**Sam:** But it’s OK for Anthony to cry, there’s a difference between being emotional and crying if a ball hits you. (general agreement)



In response to the question: “What do you mean when you talk about masculinity?”

**Dan:** It means bringing home the bacon

**Jack:** No, times are changing, women can earn the money too.

Both of these examples show that the boys have an ability to be critical about their own beliefs and concepts of masculinity. Hurrell (2000) refers to the ‘fractures’ in the dominant beliefs and suggests that it is through these ‘fractures’ that boys negotiate and construct their own concepts of masculinity. The important element here lies in the examination and discussion of the concepts which then make the ‘fractures’ or points of departure from the stereotype more obvious. Another example of this emerged in the focus group discussion. Initially the boys expressed the idea that masculinity meant having muscles:

**Mike:** A little wiry, piddly person without any muscles isn’t very manly but a big buff person is.

Towards the end of the session the discussion went on to Damian and Anthony’s father and whether he was a good example of manhood:

**Mike:** You don’t have to have muscles on the outside to be masculine.

It is clear that, given the opportunity, the boys were able to examine conceptions of masculinity even when these challenged the stereotypes. Further evidence of cracks in the boys’ stereotypical concepts of masculinity are an indication that attitudes about masculinity can be broadened through literature.

## Implications for Teachers

Within my research context, it was obvious from the outset that a hegemonic masculinity, supported by a dominant sporting culture and the powerful effects of the media, had created a fairly narrow and stereotypical concept of masculinity for many boys. This was clear from the answers to the initial surveys and the writings and comments of the boys involved in the studies. What was surprising for me was that, despite the dominance of the stereotypes, it was still possible for them to be undermined and challenged by the texts which were studied. Although the boys freely espoused and expressed the stereotypical masculinity, they were prepared to have it challenged and in fact did much of the challenging themselves. This was particularly evident in the Year 12 group where most of the work was done independently. It is outside the range of this study, but it would be interesting to consider whether the boys’ willingness to challenge the stereotypical masculinity is linked to the existing high levels of fiction reading within the school. It may be that, through their own independent reading, boys have already developed greater levels of empathy and preparedness to consider things from other perspectives. This would be supported by the recent research on reading fiction Oatley (2008).

The major implication of this research is that boys should be given greater opportunities to develop critical literacy through engaging in discussion and debate on the topic of masculinity. Without this critical examination of masculinity, boys will not explore the ‘fractures’ in their own understanding and will merely accept and uphold the stereotypes that surround them. Boys’ schools have a particular responsibility in this regard if they are to provide the most favourable circumstances for the development of young men.

The action research cycle undertaken did not dislodge the dominant sporting concept of masculinity or manhood but it did “broaden and enhance” it to include qualities such as ‘kindness’. For this reason, it is obvious that the whole process of developing critical literacy with regard to masculinity should be an ongoing one and this research should be merely the first cycle of a full action research process which is developed and refined continually. In every text that is considered, boys should be made aware of alternate interpretations and readings of the text. Not only would this enhance boys’ attitudes to masculinity and their engagement with literacy, but it would develop a set of critical skills which are applicable to all aspects of their experience.

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## Appendix A

### YEAR 12 PRE-SURVEY

Theme of your Year 12 research:

Texts chosen:

Please answer the following questions:

1. If you could be any man in the world, who would you be?
2. Why would you choose to be this man?
3. Name 3 **well-known** men who best represent your idea of manhood:
4. Name 3 qualities that you think are admirable in these men:
5. In any of the books that you have read or films that you have seen etc. which character best represents manhood?
6. Why?
7. Which other males have influenced your idea of manhood?

## Appendix B

### YEAR 7/8 PRE-SURVEY

1. If you could be any man in the world, who would you be?
2. Why would you choose to be this man?
3. Name 3 **well-known** men who best represent your idea of manhood.
4. Name 3 qualities you think are admirable in these men:
5. In any of the books that you have read or films you have seen etc. which character best represents manhood?
6. Why?
7. Which other males have influenced your idea of manhood?
8. Circle top 5 words that best indicate what a man values: (What is important to a man)
 

Food	Friends	Looking Good	Cooking
House	Sports	Being kind	Baking
Wife	Cars	Reading	Laptop
Money	Children	His parents	TV
Partner	Clothes	Gardening	Grades
9. Circle top 5 words that best indicate what a woman values: (What is important to a woman)
 

Food	Friends	Looking Good	Cooking
House	Sports	Being kind	Baking
Husband	Cars	Reading	Laptop
Money	Children	Her parents	TV
Partner	Clothes	Gardening	Grades
10. What 3 qualities (words) do you admire in your male friends:

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## Reflection

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*I went into the action research project in a state of blithe ignorance with a great deal of enthusiasm and very little understanding of what was involved. Fortunately for me, the whole process was managed very efficiently and carefully by Di and, almost before we knew what the problems were, she had addressed them. The time that we had together in Toronto and the workshops which were organized for us there, were a crucial part of the process and extremely helpful in formulating approaches to the research.*

*One of the highlights for me has been meeting the other people involved in the team and sharing the development of their research. The fact that we were all investigating the same question gave us a lot of common ground even though we were approaching it from different angles. I really appreciated the postings that several of the other participants made of their surveys, discussion group notes and data summaries. I am particularly grateful to Leslie and Kate for one of their survey questions which I used in my own survey and which circumvented the problem of numerous diverse responses which I had encountered in my other survey. I felt that the combination of the wiki and the Google group was a good one and gave us numerous opportunities to explore ideas etc. I regret that time did not allow me to utilize both of these more frequently.*

*I worked with two different groups of boys and although in some ways it made things more complicated, it did have advantages. One of these was that one group started some time before the other one and when I approached the second round of surveys, etc. I was able to fine tune and improve them. I felt that this was similar to engaging in a second round of the action research cycle. I was also pleased that I had collected data from a variety of sources as these contradicted each other and raised some interesting questions.*

*Because of time constraints, I did some fairly superficial reading before the initial workshops and then again before starting with the surveys and discussion groups but did not start to read and research in depth until after I had collected my data and had embarked on my Literature Review. In retrospect, I should have done a lot more research at the beginning of the project, as this would have informed my approach to several aspects of my own research. Although it was always difficult to find enough time, and much midnight oil was burnt, I thoroughly enjoyed examining and analyzing my data and writing up the report.*

*In spite of the amount of work involved and the necessity of juggling other activities constantly to find time, I think the action research process has been a very valuable one, both for me and for my school. I would willingly engage in a similar project in the future but preferably the more distant future!*

Bev Harrison

# Signifying Masculinity: Enhancing Boys' Understanding of Masculinity Through Classroom Texts

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"I dare do all that becomes a man; Who dares do more is none."

*(Macbeth)*

## Abstract

Can selected texts confront, challenge and stimulate perspectives on 'masculinity'? If so, how can curriculum choices impact on the perceptions of boys operating in a traditionally conservative environment? Working initially with 26 Year 10 students at Scotch College and then expanding the study to include another 25 boys, this study utilized three English texts. Starting with William Golding's seminal *Lord of the Flies*, we moved forward to Nick Hornby's contemporary *High Fidelity* and then leapt back into the early seventeenth century with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The purpose of the project was to examine, utilizing a set of criteria provided in questionnaires and work projects, how the study of literature can enhance boys' perceptions of masculinity. The questionnaires were to be completed independently whilst the work projects involved boys working in a group of four. Each text was explored in this way. At the end of the project, a survey was distributed posing a set of simple questions relating to all three texts and the issues raised regarding masculinity. Overall, the evidence was positive in suggesting that thoughtful text choices that provide interesting characters, engaging plots, challenging comparisons and a thoughtful balance between individual and group responses, will assist to enhance, extend and stimulate students' perceptions of the ideas behind 'masculinity' and 'manhood'.

## Research Question

*How can boys' understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through literature in the language arts curriculum?*

## Introduction

Wayne Martino's (2008) work in the area of masculinity and the manner in which school curricula can be inadequate in addressing key emotional issues interested me in two areas. First, was his assertion that school curricula convey a "narrow version of masculinity" and that the English classroom has a capacity to provide a 'safe site' "where students... can be given the opportunity to reflect on the different ways of being male" (2008). Second, were his studies involving classroom pedagogy that help to encourage students to explore these questions relating to expectations, roles, emotional concerns in a supportive manner in which "students are encouraged to take risks in their learning" (Martino & Kehler, 2007 p. 424).

Another writer I found particularly stimulating and relevant was Gary Cross, whose book *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (2008) provides a fascinating discussion on the newly labelled 'species' known as the 'boy-man'. In a highly entertaining and stimulating thesis, Cross argues that our age has systematically rejected old models of maturity (such as Victorian patriarchy) without embracing new ones. According to Cross, this lack of direction has led to the rise of the 'boy-man', now a central character in North American culture—see, for instance the many movies of Adam Sandler. Sandler has made a career, says Cross, citing famed film critic Roger Ebert, of performing characters who are as nice as needy puppies but conceal a masked hostility to society, a passive-aggressive gift for offending others while being ingratiating (Ebert cited in Cross).

The culture of the boy-man, Cross says, is less a transition to adulthood than an implicit decision to live as a teenager forever. "The boy-man stands on the treadmill of endless novelty and passively looks for 'hits' of pleasure while the adult man cultivates, savours and gives back" (2008, p. 112). Avoiding serious emotional commitments, the boy-man exists on the surface of life.

Cross briefly considers blaming feminism for robbing males of the adult roles they once took for granted, but he doesn't want to revive discarded family structures. The causes of chronic immaturity, he says, are not easy to locate, any more than the solution is easy to find.

As the study evolved, the students were both confronted and challenged by the questions posed. Each text generated questions about masculinity, and the majority of students began to open up, pose pertinent questions and respond honestly to the issues covered. There was no doubt that students enjoyed and were very stimulated by the opportunities presented to express their views either privately (through writing) or openly (in debates and class discussions).

## The Research Context

Scotch College is a traditional school with a strong emphasis on academic rigour and discipline. The Senior School is a large campus with roughly 1200 students ranging from Years 7–12. Across the school, the normal class is 26–27 students. Testing and exams are introduced as early as Year 7 which makes the curriculum and teaching approaches quite traditional.

Scotch is also a Uniting Church institution and religious ritual is a powerful force within the school with three assemblies a week, in which a relaxed devotional format is followed, and Christian Education classes which are compulsory until Year 12. Religious tolerance is emphasised and the student body is highly representative of this practice.



The school has a very good reputation and consistently achieves very fine results in the final year. My two sample classes are typical of the general cohort as they are mixed ability students who are well motivated and accustomed to clear directives to complete assignments.

Within this environment, there are assumptions already inscribed in students' minds about what characterises masculinity and masculine behaviour. Despite all the best intentions of the school, certain stereotypes of masculinity are unconsciously promoted. The 'jock' mentality and 'boy's own' view of the world permeates some areas of the school culture from assembly announcements to utterances and behaviour from the students. Sport is a powerful influence in the school and the success of certain teams is celebrated. Alongside this is a House system that is predominantly organised around competition, which most of the boys relish.

In this very busy, demanding and academically driven environment, finding space within the curriculum to explore loosely sociological, cultural and philosophical questions could have been a 'hard sell' to the boys. Luckily, the opposite was true!

## The Research Approach and Plan

### SAMPLE

Initially my sample was 26 boys in my Year 10 English class (Class A). These boys were of mixed intellectual ability.

Later on, in November 2008, I took over another Year 10 English class after a staff member resigned. This was a class of 25 boys (Class B) who had studied *Lord of the Flies* and *Macbeth*. Class B were taken through the same strategies that I used with Class A with the only difference being they did not study *High Fidelity*.

### MATERIALS

For each text study I put together individual questions and group material. It was essential to allow students the medium of 'private' reflection through personal writing and the capacity to share ideas openly with peers through oral work.

The texts chosen were *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Concurrently, we viewed Peter Brook's film treatment of the *Lord of the Flies*, Stephen Frears' version of *High Fidelity* and Roman Polanski's version of *Macbeth*.

## Data Collection

### PROCEDURES

We started with William Golding's novel. The focus on this novel was to explore 'male leadership models' with the counter question under discussion being the provocative proposal as to whether men are aggressive by nature. The novel *Lord of Flies* was supplemented by newspaper articles including the Bolger Case in the United Kingdom and various articles relating to the developing issue of cyber-bullying.

Each student responded to individual questions in which they were asked to rate the central characters in the novel (Ralph, Jack, Piggy and Simon) in terms of their behaviour and male characteristics. We looked at the following characteristics: appearance, intelligence, personality, actions, popularity and respect. At the end of the novel study a group assignment and presentations were given out in which the boys (in teams of four) wrote mock recommendations on the boys in light of their behaviour.

Moving on to *High Fidelity*, I utilized the same process. The individual component asked the boys to consider the central character's influence and role models. The focus on this novel was 'expectations and aspirations of being male'. We then compared the novel (which is set in England) with the film treatment (set in Chicago). In groups, the boys compared and contrasted the way male characters were portrayed and gave possible reasons why. The findings were delivered both orally and textually.

Turning to *Macbeth*, the focus was on social forces that influence male behaviour. The individual assignment asked boys to compare Macbeth with Duncan, Banquo, Macduff and Malcolm. The boys were asked to consider and discuss how the environmental forces within the play impact on the behaviour of various characters. The individual assignments were collected and assessed.

The final procedure involved a survey asking all the 51 boys to consider either the two texts (Class B) or the three texts (Class A). The process above was followed with Class B. There were ten broad questions relating to constructions of masculinity, positive and negative forces, aspects of masculinity that seem typical of all three texts and characteristics that can be seen as unique to particular circumstances or historical conditions. Finally, there were two questions asking the boys what they have discovered in the process of their investigation and whether it was a valuable experience for them. This survey was not assessed and the respondents could choose to be anonymous.

## Results

### LORD OF THE FLIES

There were broad similarities in the responses from Classes A and B in two main areas.

1. The majority of respondents saw Ralph as the character who had all the typical traits promoted in male leadership (75%). He was described by the students as handsome, tall, athletic, well spoken and authoritative. For the students these attributes amounted to a leader one would 'respect' and 'follow'.
2. The majority of respondents also agreed that the introspective and shy Simon had the least masculine attributes required in leadership (65%), according to the students. He was, according to the respondents, silent, quiet, introspective, sickly and withdrawn.

In the individual responses a number of students (55%) confidentially expressed their view that Piggy typifies a number of the attributes that would see him being ostracised and bullied in a male environment. His size and aversion to physical activity were the two areas that students identified. Comments ranged from "Piggy is a fat smartarse" to more temperate "Piggy's size and asthma would immediately make him unpopular with the kids who want to be cool."

One question was asked early on in the process and then again at the group stage. The question was: 'What group would you like to belong to? Jack's hunters or Ralph's fire observers?' At the first stage, 60% of Class A said they would like to be with Jack's group. This corresponded with Class B who just made it in the majority (55%). At the group level after class presentations and discussions the responses were 40% in Class A and 50% in Class B. The popular justifications for the students' choice of Jack's group was simple—"we need to eat meat". Students responses were typified by statements like: "It would be fun hunting but it would also be achieving something" and "Jack would draw kids to him because he comes across as fearless and tough".

The majority of students (70%) concluded that the key attributes to achieve respect amongst young males are physical strength, humour, intelligence and athleticism. The values of altruism, respect and compassion were rated next on the criteria. Being over-weight, sadistic and shy were seen as great disadvantages. Two comments that typified the majority response state the following: "Kids want to feel secure so strength and power are reassuring" and "Ralph and Jack are cruel but they are funny. Ralph also feels bad about what he does to Piggy and is concerned for others".

## HIGH FIDELITY

Although Class A responded positively to the novel and enjoyed the raunchy humour, after much discussion and debate they did not find Rob an endearing character.

Rob's avoidance of responsibility, evasion of marriage and inability to secure a 'proper job' were the prime reasons for students' antipathy toward him. 90% of the class answered in the negative to the question: "Is Rob a good role model?" "Rob just wants to be a kid forever", wrote one student, and another boy pointed out that "Rob reckons you can just keep going on like life has not changed. He's so selfish and hopeless".

The discussion on the social and cultural reasons for Rob's behaviour was fascinating: 40% of the class blamed the father, 45% of the class blamed Rob and 10% blamed it on his high achieving girlfriend. "Being a bloke can be hard," wrote one student echoing a line from the novel, "but you just have to stand up be honest with yourself, express your emotions and not worry about what is expected of you." Another student stated in a class debate that "after a while you start to behave like other guys and you think it is normal when it just isn't."

The individual responses to this text were very revealing. The final question asked them to consider what the novel was suggesting about masculinity. The general tenor of responses can be summed up in these two comments—"Rob cannot accept the fact that society expects one thing and he does not want to deal with it." Also, "he [Rob] should wake up to himself. Becoming a male adult means being responsible and honest with your self. He is just a selfish kid at 35."

The novel really generated a great deal of discussion about social, familial and cultural pressures and expectations on 'masculinity' and what denotes a 'successful man' in contemporary times.

Certainly in my study, the discussion and responses to the novel *High Fidelity* embraced Gary Cross's observations quite stridently. The boys were simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the central character, Rob, who exemplified all of Cross's observations about the boy-man. The most exciting part of the thesis enacted what Cross and Martino indirectly hope to generate by their work, that is, a vigorous and open discussion of what modern masculinity entails, what forces

contribute to the 'masculine' ideal and finally, what ideas of 'masculinity' have stayed the same over the ages and what characteristics have altered.

## MACBETH

*Macbeth* provided a useful gauge to return to some of the broader fields covered in *Lord of the Flies*, whilst keeping the notion of social influences at the forefront of discussions.

The perennially ubiquitous question regarding who was to blame for Macbeth's degeneration (outside his personal choices) saw the usual suspects rolled out. 50% of both Classes A and B pointed the finger at Lady Macbeth. 40% of Class A and 30% of Class B blamed the Weird Sisters, whilst 10% of Class A and 20% cited social values as the catalyst. "Let's face it," declared one student, "Lady Macbeth really pushed him into it [killing Duncan], Macbeth was a good and loyal soldier before that." Also, "she [Lady Macbeth] blackmailed him, Macbeth had no chance."

What proved a controversial debating point was the warrior mentality that radiates throughout the play. In both classes, there was a division between those who believe that 'self-discipline' and 'clear values' are inherent in soldier training whilst others contended that this same training was concerned with producing one dimensional submissive "robots who obey orders and don't blink", as one boy stated.

The most popular characters in the play were Banquo and Macduff because, as over 90% of students noted, they were "loyal, brave and not selfish in their motives".

## COMPARATIVE SURVEY

The majority of students in Class A found the questions posed more stimulating than the actual study of the texts themselves. As one student put it: "the ideas we were asked to think about were more interesting than the book", but encouragingly he clarified this with "the more I thought about these things made me want to read Hornby again over the holidays."

The overwhelming majority of students found the scope and nature of the questions stimulating and exciting. "English is cool", one respondent wrote, "because we can say things and we aren't worried about being wrong... more importantly we can argue about what being male is and how there are all sorts of expectations and pressures behind it all."

Of the three texts, *High Fidelity* and *Macbeth* came in equal first in terms of popularity. Although students enjoyed *Lord of the Flies*, a vast majority thought it was just too "dark and pessimistic" about human beings.

In terms of the characteristics students felt were characteristic of males and masculinity throughout the three texts, respondents ordered their responses thus. Positive attributes were: loyalty, altruism, courage, respect, attuned to family values, and socially aware. Negative attributes were ordered: selfishness, cowardice, isolation, violence and self-gratification.

As each student was asked to reflect on the three texts and compose a brief reflective paragraph on what they discovered about maleness and masculinity, I was quite overwhelmed with the broad, highly sensitive and penetrating responses. The following three responses typify the range of concerns whilst encapsulating the three broad stands that characterised the 51 responses: the social, personal and cultural.

**Student 1:** "The expectations on placed on males can be scary. I thought it was cool being born a guy but the more I think about it, the more the burdens seem to build. I can see why Rob (in *High Fidelity*) just holds on to his childhood."

**Student 2:** "I would like to think that being honest, concerned for others and trying to do the right thing are keys to being a good guy. There are too many macho fools who think that they can just use their personality and strength to show what a man they are."

**Student 3:** "School pushes a particular line, you hear another at home and then there is TV and advertising. If you just drift through it all and think you will turn out OK at the end you have to be kidding yourself. I reckon being a good man means constantly thinking and reflecting about what responsibilities you have and what values are worth keeping."

## Discussion

The research data clearly showed three distinct patterns.

1. Pre-existing ideas regarding 'leadership' such as 'assertive male behaviour', 'not exhibiting emotions', 'repressing emotions', 'aggression' and 'sensitivity' were challenged and re-considered in line with what is a desirable aspect of 'masculine' behaviour in each of the texts and contemporary social values.
2. The two novels and *Macbeth* provided a highly stimulating conduit for boys to debate the sources of gender constructions and how traits associated with 'masculinity' are forged, generated and perpetuated.
3. By the end of the process a majority of the boys (90%) felt that by studying the three texts, their perceptions of what entails 'masculinity' had been 'developed' and 'enhanced'.

## Conclusion

Within a school curriculum, the English classroom provides a highly encouraging environment to promote discussions of masculinity. By the end of the unit, the results showed a clear development and enhancement of ideas that contribute to social perceptions and constructions of 'masculinity'.

Literature is a fruitful and highly effective site to initiate, challenge and inform boys' ideas of masculinity because of the nature of its pre-occupations and concerns. Each text is powerfully stressing the influence of social forces that shape the behaviour of various protagonists. Shakespeare, Golding and Hornby situate their stories in contexts which heavily influence the values and perceptions of their respective characters. Each of the characters is richly drawn and emerges from his surroundings, echoing or reacting against the customs, expectations and values they are submerged in.

Finally, the nature of assessment and classroom practice in the English classroom—through the study of literature—actively encourages and values discussion, personal expression and an interrogation of ideas and values within texts.

## Implications for Practice

It has to be said that this whole process was highly enjoyable and stimulating for the boys. I was very pleasantly surprised with their enthusiasm, co-operative nature and sheer honesty.

Whilst I am confident that one could explore the same issues through one text or an extended multi-text unit, there would be a number of structures that would need to put into place. First, the students and the curriculum programme must be flexible enough to allow subtle variations and units of work that may not rely on traditional assessment criteria. A good balance between assessed work and non-assessed work will help. In my case the only non-assessed work was the final survey. By that stage the students were completely immersed in the unit and could not wait to fully express their views.

I also agree with Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) list of best practices that assist in involving boys with texts more meaningfully. The use of humour, "exploring topics from multiple vantage points", "the use of visual components" and "controversial points" are very useful. I would also add the ability to link and connect with contemporary issues and creating a relaxed, non-threatening class atmosphere for investigating ideas as essential.

Overall, I would note down the following areas as the cornerstone of a successful unit in which issues involving a discussion of masculinity and manhood can be explored.

1. *Text choice.* I do favour at least two to three texts so students can compare and contrast. A tried and tested text like *Lord of the Flies* should act as a foundation text and then toss in something like *High Fidelity* or something else. Obviously, choose something based on what is front of you. I seemed to get lucky with my one choice. The other two were firmly established within the curriculum. The other option was a classic chestnut—*Of Mice and Men*. Other considerations could be *Siesta* by Ernest Hemingway, *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, the film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* and something like Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*. They have all had successful runs in the classroom.
2. *Support from your English Department.* I am fortunate in that I have a fully supportive Head of Department and new ideas and curriculum initiatives are encouraged. I cannot see why a theme like 'Masculinity and Manhood in Literature' could not run alongside popular topics like 'Conflict and Resolution', 'Relationships', 'War', etc., for boys in Years 9 and 10.
3. *Activities.* It is important to balance individual and group activities. Some boys much prefer the individual and intimate response, whilst others enjoy the group presentation in which they can use their technological and public speaking skills.
4. *Try and integrate you textual study with references to external examples.* Let us get on our knees and sincerely thank search engines like *Google* and *YouTube* here. What essential teaching tools. Fortunately, the instances of high profile men behaving very badly are endless and I had no trouble infusing topical scandals to keep the lads entertained and focussed.

5. *Early on the teacher needs to be controlling and directing the whole process.* You will find once you have established the right atmosphere and protocol, you can ease off, be flexible, and allow the students to direct the trajectory of various discussions.
6. *Boys want to and will discuss issues like masculinity and manhood once they feel comfortable, find the medium that suits them best and find a textual hook and guidelines that will stimulate and provoke them.*

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## Reflection

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*Selfishly, I relished dipping my head and hands in the wondrous world of research again. Every educator must re-immense him/her self in this field every so often as it forces you to reflect on your craft and the impact it has on students. The nature of this project meant that for a protracted period of time I could clearly see how my actions (or indeed 'inactions') were being interpreted and responded to by students outside the formality of assessment procedures. I think my 'academic' palate may have been awoken from an extended slumber!*

*What I enjoyed about this research project was the stimulating observations made by colleagues from all over the world. Sadly, because of various commitments I could not take full advantage of the wiki discussions and interactions that were taking place. As a passive but much interested reader, the comments in the process of the research project were fascinating and enlightening. The capacity to compare practices and approaches is what makes this collaborative effort so rewarding.*

*The other element of this approach is the affirmative and encouraging environment that it is conducted in. Working in a vocation that is not always exalted for its allure, it was pleasure to be surrounded by passionate, intelligent and driven educators who were committed to their profession and dedicated in exploring an area that will benefit their students.*

*I felt very fortunate in being selected by the IBSC and greatly appreciated the support from my school, Scotch College, my Head of Department, Barrie Burton, and of course the co-operative and patient boys who acted as chirpy guinea pigs.*

*Finally, Di Laycock must be thanked and applauded. Her enthusiasm, wisdom and positive leadership was inspiring and reassuring. It was just a delight working and collaborating with Di and I really felt I learnt a great deal from her and my other colleagues in the process.*

*Nick Konstantatos*

# Gender Construction and Boys' Literacy: Revisiting the 'Essentialist' Approach

MIKE PALUCH ST ANDREW'S COLLEGE, AURORA, CANADA

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not texts can be used to enhance boys' understanding of masculinities in the larger context of the debate surrounding best practices in promoting boys' literacy. Through the process of action research, the author reconsiders, and ultimately rejects, a rigidly essentialist point of view for improving boys' literacy in favour of a more balanced, centrist position focused on student learning rather than gender differences. The research conducted has revealed that literature can be used to enhance boys' understanding of masculinities.

## Introduction

Following an exploration of the ways critical literacy activities could be used to sustain or transform boys' awareness of gendered identities and inequities in texts, Josephine Young (2000) concludes:

The boys' ways of doing and thinking about masculinities were shaped by the Discourses to which they had access. These Discourses were located within the white middle-class structures of family and youth sports and aligned themselves with the more hegemonic practices of masculinity—heterosexuality, power, dominance, privilege, and competition (p. 323).

Martino and Kehler (2007) have called upon educators to interrogate such 'hegemonic discourse' for the purposes of broadening boys' understanding of masculinity while simultaneously providing for a more informed approach to improving boys' literacy skills (p. 408).

Martino and Kehler's suggestion that the interrogation of socially constructed notions of masculinity can assist educators in developing a more informed pedagogy is both exciting and appealing, but ultimately complicated by the presence of the essentialist camp that sees boys as fundamentally different from girls. In *Teaching the Male Brain: How Boys Think, Feel, and Learn in School*, Abigail James (2007), a noted teacher, researcher, and proponent of single-sex education writes:

Years ago, I believed that most gender-stereotypical behaviours were learned. When my son was born, I was determined that he would be exposed to a wide variety of peaceful playthings and be given toys associated with both boys and girls... I tried to raise him with both male and female influences. He still crashed his toy cars together and built forts... His boyiness came through in spite of my attempts to androgynize him (p. 114).

James's assertion that boys can benefit from a modified academic program because they have a uniquely "male brain" is supported by many essentialists, including Dr. Leonard Sax, who support same-sex education and see a need for a more boy-friendly curriculum. Indeed, proponents of boys' education are growing in number and strength of conviction as is apparent in the continued expansion of organizations such as the International Boys' School Coalition. In a recent article to the school community, Psychologist Dr. Jonathan Goldberg of Fessenden School, an IBSC school located in West Newton, MA., validates the all-boys' environment in the context of an essentialist framework: "As Dr. Thompson discussed, the 'one-size-fits-all' mentality, often found in our public schools, with its emphasis on literacy development and quiet, contained behaviour, often conflicts with the natural learning style, initiative, and energy of boys" (Goldberg 2008).

Martino and Kehler (2007) are reluctant to accept the essentialists' call for the masculinisation of the classroom:

The problem with essentialist frameworks is that they resort to prescribing quick-fix solutions and one size fits all approaches to gender based reform in schools that are limited in their capacity to deal with complexity, and, hence, the multi-faceted dimension of the boys and literary polemic (p. 411).

Instead, they argue for "an examination of pedagogical practices that are conducive to simultaneously promoting higher-order thinking and engaging students actively in learning" (p. 425). Thus, while essentialists envisage a curriculum driven by the needs of boys, the constructivists urge a more balanced, differentiated approach predicated on preferred practices rather than gender differences.

Those who tend to be more centrist in approach, including Thomas Newkirk, Ralf Fletcher and David Booth, do not discount that there appear to be serious differences between boys and girls and their approach to literacy. These scholars recognize that the unique interests of boys are often unrecognized and even marginalized in the language arts classroom and call upon educators to arm themselves with an awareness of the apparent differences between boys and girls. Newkirk (2002) notes:

Studies of boys' preferences in reading... confirm favour of action over character development and introspection... Boys' traditional favourites—information books, humour, science fiction, and action stories—are often treated as subliterate, something that a reader should move beyond as he moves toward realistic fiction with thematic weight (p. 70).

Fletcher (2006) confirms Newkirk's findings, and identifies the presence of a feminine literacy that is different from the masculine: "... female students wrote more about relationships and emotions in their stories, and males wrote more about violence and action" (p. 22). A troubling perception appears to emerge when the distinction between apparent feminine and masculine literacies is considered. In reflecting on the work of Ontario Institute for Studies in Education professor Shelley Peterson, who asked students to identify the gender of anonymous student writing samples, Fletcher notes: "...Peterson... found that students guessed the author was female when the stories were descriptive and well written, and guessed the author was male when the stories contained spelling errors and poor grammar" (p. 22). The feminization of literary endeavours, according to David Booth (2002), carries over to texts that might be considered as having masculine themes and protagonists:

Even though many English programs centre on masculine texts that reinforce traditional gender patterns, many boys become alienated from material in these resources. They see literacy endeavours as 'feminized,' valuing female knowledge and behaviours over their interests" (p. 14).

This latter statement is particularly problematic for the language arts teacher who, in fighting an uphill battle to engage boys with various texts, must also contend with the notion that reading, writing and speaking well stands are typically 'girlish' traits and therefore to be avoided. As Pollack (1998) notes: "...our sons are unwittingly mirroring back to us our own adult ambivalence about masculinity and trying in vain to accept and internalize two diametrically opposed views of manhood" (p. 148). It would appear that regardless of whether or not gender differences are biological or socially constructed, by the time boys are ready to read, both gender differences and perceptions about gender practices abound.

From this debate emerge significant questions and concerns for educators, and in particular those who teach boys in the field of language arts in boys' schools:

- What definitions of masculinity are we prepared to accept? What definitions are we reluctant to accept? (And, as a corollary: What definitions of femininity are we prepared to accept? What definitions are we reluctant to accept?)
- To what extent are perceptions of masculinity and femininity tied to the 'Discourse' we use on a daily basis?
- How do we ensure that the 'Discourse' that we do use does not engender a hegemonic practice and understanding of masculinity, and/or the distancing of the boy from literacy?
- How might our 'Discourse' be inadvertently causing the 'boy crisis' as it pertains to literacy?
- How might our pedagogical beliefs and instructional practices be best modified to facilitate the improvement of boys' literacy? How might we be failing boys in this area?
- How might we ensure that reading, writing and speaking are recognized as 'human' endeavours, rather than feminine ones?
- How do we select texts that will simultaneously appeal to boys and broaden their understanding of gender constructs?

In short, this research project was undertaken to explore the question: "How can texts be used to extend boys' understanding of masculinities?"

## The Research Context

The research was conducted in Aurora, Ontario, in an independent boys' school with a student population of 572, ranging from grades 6 through 12. Three grade 11 English classes, comprising 60 students, were involved. The classes were considered to be of similar ability.

I was particularly interested in two aspects of the study. First, I was interested in determining whether or not boys' understanding of masculinity could be broadened through the use of specific texts. Second, I was interested in determining whether or not the selected course texts were engaging for the boys, and if the selection of such texts, which contained predominantly male

themes and characters, was meaningful for them. I came to the research question with the mindset identified in the following passage from Brozo and Zambo's (2009) *Bright Beginnings for Boys: Engaging Young Boys in Active Literacy*: "Boys want stories with grit and glory. Comprehending the rules of masculinity and trying to live up to them is part of every boy's search for self. Using literature that contains positive male characters can help boys gain this insight" (p. 10).

## The Research Approach and Plan

The research was conducted over the course of our study of the novella *Legends of the Fall* by Jim Harrison. This particular text was selected because of the presence of five significant male characters. I was particularly interested in determining if the boys could come to accept and understand that each of the traits attributed to variety of characters in the text is valid.

This was the fourth text that we had studied in the course. Prior to the study of *Legends of the Fall*, we had studied Stephen King's *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, Ethan Canin's *The Palace Thief*, and Alistair MacLeod's *The Boat*.

## Data Collection

The collected data was predominantly qualitative in nature and in line with the interpretive nature of action research. The boys were required to submit printed versions of their responses, and I subsequently entered the bulk of their responses into an Excel spreadsheet which afforded me the opportunity to contrast pre-survey and post-survey responses and to tabulate those responses which would be quantitatively meaningful.

The data was collected at various stages through the study of the text *Legends of the Fall*. During this unit of study, students were required to read the text individually, respond to the text in groups, participate in class discussion and activities, and view parts of the film *Legends of the Fall*. The pre-survey was administered prior to the study of the text, and the post-survey was administered following the study of the text.

Throughout the project, students were asked to consider the way Harrison was representing a particular male character in light of stereotypical notions of masculinity.

The students were required to complete a pre-survey and post-survey based on the questions established by the 2008–2009 IBSC Action Research Team. The questions were as follows:

- What does a man look like?
- What should a man wear?
- How should a man behave?
- What does a man value?
- What does a man believe?
- Name three qualities you admire in your male friends.
- If I could be any man in the world, I would be...
- How does a man communicate?

- When do you become a man?
- What makes a 'good' man?
- What makes a 'bad' man?

In addition to the survey questions, the boys were required to respond in writing and verbally to the following questions prior to and during the unit of study:

- In the texts you have read in this class so far, which male character best represents manhood? Why?
- Thus far, we have read three texts in which the main characters have been predominantly male. In brief, provide your insights into the following characters: Red, Andy Dufresne, Boggs, Hundert, Sedgewick Bell, Deepak Mehta, The Father, The Son, and The Mother.
- Each of the texts we have read has been written by a man. How would you define the voice of the male writer? What themes appear to be emerging? What patterns can you identify in terms of plot, point of view, and setting?
- Comment on the absence of both women characters and women writers in the course thus far.
- Comment on your teacher's choice to focus on texts that feature male characters. Can you see any benefits or hazards with respect to choice made by your teacher?
- As you read the text, develop a detailed analysis of Colonel Ludlow, Alfred, Tristan, Samuel and One Stab. Rank the characters in order of most masculine to least masculine and account for your evaluation. Comment on what you believe Harrison's purpose is as he constructs his male characters.
- As you read the text, develop a detailed analysis of Susannah, Ms. Ludlow, and Isabel Two. Rank the characters in order of the most feminine to least feminine and account for your evaluation. Comment on what you believe Harrison's purpose is as he constructs female characters.
- Comment on the theme of 'exploitation' as it emerges in the text.
- How has your understanding of masculinity changed since you began to participate in this study?

## Results

### PRE-SURVEY AND POST-SURVEY RESULTS

While the majority of responses on the post-survey resonated with conventional constructions of masculinity, it was evident that some of the students were able to transcend the stereotype and reach for a more complex understanding of masculinity. For example, in one particular class of 16 students, while pre-survey results indicated that one student was willing to accept that there was no one definitive masculine 'look', post-survey results indicated that three students were willing to admit that there wasn't a definitive masculine 'look'. Although that number seems small, what was interesting to note was the number of responses in the post-survey response that were 'softer' in nature and relied less heavily on stereotypes. For example, one boy's response to "What does a man look like" was: "strong, muscular, handsome", whilst his post-survey response was: "strong, courageous". This apparent 'softening' was also present in the post-survey response of another boy who noted in the pre-survey that a man was to look "strong, tough, lacking emotion" and in his

final response that a man “should look determined to achieve”. This subtle shift toward intangible, human traits indicated to me that the boys could move beyond a superficial understanding of masculinity.

### RANKING OF MALE CHARACTERS

When I asked the boys to rank the characters in *Legends of the Fall*, in terms of their perceived understanding of who was most masculine and who was least masculine, I expected the majority to choose the character Tristan as most masculine, given Harrison’s representation of him as a wild, free spirit and the fact that his character was played in the film by Brad Pitt. Surprisingly, only about half of the boys picked him as the most masculine character, and I received numerous responses identifying One Stab and Samuel as most masculine. Given the spiritual nature of the character of One Stab and the romantic qualities of the character of Samuel, I was impressed by the open-mindedness of the boys in this particular activity. Additionally, contrary to the research I found in Newkirk (2002), indicating boys’ “favour of action over character development and introspection” (p. 70), I was impressed with their capacity to write eloquently about complex male characters.

Additionally, I was intrigued to see that Andy Dufresne, the character from *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* who had been identified in the pre-survey as the character most representative of manhood, maintained a solid standing in the post-survey. Only 11 students identified Tristan as the character most representative of manhood. This indicated to me that some of the boys were able to view intangible qualities, such as self-possession, as masculine attributes.

### RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS PERTAINING TO TEXT SELECTION

It was evident that students were aware that the texts had been chosen with the intention of providing them with boy-friendly, boy-accessible literature. I was both impressed and not a little discomforted by the number of boys who suggested that such an approach felt limiting to them. I was also surprised at the number of boys who were willing to accept such a narrowly focused set of texts as part and parcel of being part of a boys’ school. I recall reading these responses with a pit at the bottom of my stomach—it was clear that my own text selections were insufficient in terms of being able to provide my boys with a variety of perspectives from which to view gender constructs and the world around them.

### RANKING AND ANALYSIS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of my research came to me as I viewed the boys’ responses to the women in the text of *Legends of the Fall*. Superficial, stereotypical responses were in abundance, and it was evident that while the boys could speak eloquently and relatively open-mindedly about male characters, they were clearly unable to empathize with or demonstrate meaningful understandings of the female characters in the text, regardless of the fact that we had discussed both the characters and representations of the feminine in significant detail.

## Conclusion

The project’s findings indicated that boys’ understanding of masculinity can, at least to some extent, be broadened through an investigation of a text that included a variety of male characters who exhibited a spectrum of complex traits. Results indicated that many boys were capable of



moving beyond the hegemonic discourse as identified in Young's (2002) study noted in the introduction. When boys are required to discuss and subsequently write about the male characters in a given text, they are able to move beyond a conventional understanding of masculinity. Therefore, language arts teachers have the capacity, through direct instruction, to reshape and enhance boys' understandings of masculinity, and, as a result, the boys' own identities. Through a detailed examination of character, boys are better able to understand that there are no fixed definitions of masculinity; this may free them from the bonds imposed upon them by the 'hegemonic discourse' so ubiquitous in our culture.

It also became clear that a focus on broadening boys' understanding of masculinities must be balanced with a focus on equally important issues pertaining to femininity. The boys were explicit in their desire not only to learn about male characters, but to also learn about female characters. The research helped me to see that language arts teachers have the capacity, through direct instruction, to also reshape and enhance boys' understandings of femininity. While this may seem axiomatic, it must be noted that I had come to the research question with the mindset that boys need stories about boys: the research project forced me to reconsider how I was selecting texts for my students.

The findings also indicate that my students are thirsty for greater perspective when it comes to the writers they read and the characters they engage. They have noted that they would like to consider female characters and female writers in addition to the male, so that they can have a broader understanding of humanity.

Finally, it became clear to me that one must unpack the complex issue of gender in the language arts classroom, particularly if he or she as a teacher is immersed in an all-boys environment. First and foremost, we must question how, as teachers, our own 'Discourse' might contribute toward the development of conventional and hegemonic notions of masculinity. Secondly, we must ask ourselves if we are alienating boys from literature via the inadvertent 'feminization' of text. Thirdly, we must guard against buying into essentialist notions that there is a panacea for the current boy crisis, and that it is to be found in providing 'boy-friendly' curriculum.

## Implications for Practice

Language arts teachers who work in boys' schools can broaden their boys' understanding of masculinity by engaging in an explicit discussion about the nature of the male characters they encounter. Students who are actively engaged in an investigation of complex, unique characters will inevitably come to see that there is no single definition to what it means to 'be a man'. However, by the time I had completed my research, I had come to agree with Martino and Kehler's (2007) point of view that "attention must be directed to an examination of pedagogical practices that are conducive to simultaneously promoting higher-order thinking and engaging students actively in learning" (p. 425), as opposed to an approach that seeks solely to satisfy the apparent needs of boys as defined by the essentialist.

This is not to suggest that I have rejected the notion of same-sex education; my sense is that there is compelling evidence to suggest that boys and girls are at different stages of development throughout their academic career and that placing the two sexes together in the classroom may, at times, be detrimental to both sexes. I have come to see, however, as Martino and Kehler suggest

that we should focus on continuing to develop differentiated classroom strategies that can be of benefit to the teachers of both sexes. That being said, certain preferred practices for the language arts classroom that seem to be universal in nature have emerged throughout my research. These include “widening the circle” as noted by both Newkirk and Fletcher to include non-literary texts (such as components of social media), increasing fiction writing, increasing socialization in the language arts classroom by means of discussion and drama, increasing student choice with respect to the selection of personal reading, using biographical criticism as a means of providing context, integrating music into the curriculum, and providing praise and encouragement to all students who engage texts.

My sense is that in focusing on differentiation as opposed to gender differences, we can take the emphasis away from rigid constructions of gender, and focus our energies on student learning. That being said, in taking the emphasis away from rigid constructions of gender, we may also be inadvertently broadening our students’ understanding of masculinities.

Secondly, our students’ parents have a significant role to play in helping boys in particular broaden their understanding of masculinities, and we must, as language arts teachers, help parents to see that their ‘Discourse’ can have a significant impact on their boys’ understanding of themselves and others. In a recent article in *The New York Times* entitled “Dude, You’ve Got Problems,” Judith Warner writes: “Malina Saval, who spent two years observing and interviewing teenage boys and their parents for her new book *The Secret Lives of Boys*, found that parents played a key role in reinforcing the basest sort of gender stereotypes, at least where boys were concerned. “There were a few parents who were sort of alarmist about whether or not their children were going to be gay because of their music choices, the clothes they wore,” she said (Warner 2009). As educators, I believe we need to communicate to our parent body of the long term effects that their own ‘Discourse’ has on their boys’ understanding of masculinity and the boys’ capacity to become literate.

Finally, this action research has taught me that we must be balanced in our approach to this “thick stew” called gender (Fletcher 2006, p. 21). Three years ago, when I began to teach in an all-boys’ environment, I took much of the essentialist viewpoint at face value. As a result, I believed that our English program should teach boy-friendly texts under boy-friendly conditions. I am now convinced that we need to consider our textual selections more carefully, taking into consideration the need for both male and female writers and protagonists; my students have told me in no uncertain terms that they want greater perspective when it comes to their reading selections. In addition, I have come to believe that we have a duty to investigate and put into place teaching strategies that are proven to be pedagogically sound for all learners; action research can be a vehicle to this end.

Essentialist Michael Gurian (2000) offers the following in his text *What Stories Does My Son Need?:*

Primal stories teach boys what true manhood is. One of the most significant moral questions in the human dialogue is: ‘What is a man?’ Primal stories help answer this question. We can measure their suitability by whether they teach these ten moral competencies: decency, fairness, empathy, self-sacrifice, responsibility, loyalty, duty, service, honesty, and honor (p. 9).

I no longer see the traits Gurian has identified as being typically masculine—they are, as ever, genderless qualities which might be considered desirable in all individuals.

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## Reflection

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*I had heard about action research through various journals and professional development opportunities, but never experienced it firsthand. Now that I have, I would highly recommend the process to my peers, and hope that it will become a part of the professional development culture at my school. In particular, I found the research component engaging. I had taken some ideas at face value in the past, and the research process forced me to re-evaluate my stand on a number of issues. I feel more conversant with the issues surrounding boys' literacy, although I realize that I have much more to learn. The resources provided by the IBSC folks were outstanding, as were the sessions pertaining to the set up of the group during the IBSC pre-conference. I very much enjoyed these early discussions and workshops.*

*If I were to give advice to someone engaging in a similar action research project, I would suggest that he/she narrow the focus and collect as much quantitative data as possible. Most of my data was qualitative, and my study group was far too large. I found it difficult to simplify the responses my boys provided me, though I think it has been possible to find trends and make generalizations. I would also suggest that the timeframe of the study be limited—my study began in November and stretched through to February. Returning from our Christmas holidays, it took a long time to refocus the boys on the issues at hand.*

*Any individual who might be willing to take on this type of project in the future should also realize the time commitment involved. I found that I was not a particularly active participant in the year-long, large group online discussion. While I attempted to keep up with what the participants were doing, I found it difficult to keep on top of my own workload. Participants and their administrators need to be aware that meaningful action research requires time!*

*Overall, it was an honour to work with Di and the IBSC Action Research Team, and I was overwhelmed by the creativity and thoughtful nature of the group. I am looking forward to reuniting with the team and coming at the issues from the other side, so-to-speak. Thank you for the opportunity, Di and Brad, and thanks to the IBSC community for supporting such a tremendous initiative.*

*Mike Paluch*

# Real Men Don't Rape

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Dedicated to Alison. Your courage and example are an inspiration.

## Abstract

I doubt that anyone would deny that a male who wishes to be seen as a good example of masculinity and manhood would be offended by rape. Can this understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through the language arts curriculum? As part of an extra-curricular course, which ran once a week over an eleven week period, a group of grade 10 boys were exposed to and studied various types of literature which dealt with rape. They recorded their feelings in writing and anonymously, and also discussed them as a group. The findings suggest that the course was successful in enhancing their understanding of masculinity as it encouraged them to be more empathetic and more likely to act against rape.

## Research Question

*How can boys' understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through literature in the language arts curriculum?*

## Introduction

### REAL MEN DON'T RAPE

Working from this statement, my research explored two further questions:

- Can literature have any impact in changing boys' attitudes towards rape?
- If so, what types of literature are most effective in achieving a change in attitude?

Obviously concepts of what defines "masculinity" and "manhood" are important. In this research, however, I wanted to focus on an area where these definitions were fairly standard: Real men don't rape. Real men don't approve of rape. Real men prevent rape. But what is a real man? In his book about men, Robert Bly (1990) refers to both the 'Wild Man' and the 'savage man'. (The use and non-use of capitals is his idea.) The Wild Man has an energy which leads "to forceful action undertaken, not with cruelty, but with resolve". This is different from "the destructive, macho personality of the savage man". My hope was to lead the boys away from the 'savage man' personality without their losing any of the 'Wild Man' energy which is part of being male. I wanted them to be capable of "forceful action undertaken... with resolve".

It is easy for boys to become confused. “Dialogue is shifting away from the idea that a ‘right answer’ for boys and masculinity exists and that adults just have to shape boys into exceptional men”, according to John Ashton (2005). There are always fears that in order to prove his masculinity, a male may feel justified in using force to gain a woman. The examples he finds in text, particularly film, may lead him to become a ‘savage man’. Ashton (2005) cites Connell (1996) who claims that, “a good education must embody social justice. If we are not pursuing gender justice in schools, then we are offering boys a degraded education”. The language arts curriculum is ideally placed to provide texts which pursue gender justice.

Colleen A Ward (1995) has researched rape awareness programmes around the world. In some instances she reported that “Unfortunately, the researchers found that the intervention programmes did not impact on rape-related attitudes... neither general attitudes nor empathy towards victims improved.” In other cases, she found that “research... demonstrated that a variety of educational packages are capable of improving attitudes towards victims of sexual assault and increasing general knowledge about sexual violence.” However, she concludes that ‘fundamentally, we know that rape related attitudes may be altered, but there is little precise information about what specifically prompts an attitude shift.’

This research thus set out to discover to what extent the boys’ attitudes would change, and which texts were most effective in achieving change.

## Research Context

My research was carried out at St Andrew’s College, Grahamstown, South Africa. Nearly 90% of the pupils are boarders. The College enjoys a unique relationship with its sister school, the Diocesan School for Girls. From grade 10 to grade 12 the pupils from both schools are co-instructed. This means that while the two schools maintain their separate identities, classroom instruction is co-educational.

I wished to conduct my research amongst a group of grade 10 (aged 15–16) boys. Because it would not have been possible to work with boys only within the constraints of the timetable, my group worked outside of normal teaching time. This meant that my volunteers had to give up another activity in order to attend. I had initially approached 20 boys to be part of the group, but administrative errors outside of my control meant that some of these boys were allocated different activities and by the time this had been sorted out I was left with a smaller group. The extra-mural demands of the school meant that I frequently lost the tennis players, the rowers, etc.

At the end of the day, I had a core group of 12 boys, with 5 others who attended some of the course. All their responses were recorded, but obviously only the core group could contribute to the development and comparison of attitudes.

## Data Collection

Rape is an emotional issue. Even though I was working with a small group of boys I had two concerns. One was that the boys would feel obliged to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear rather than what they really felt. The second was that they might give ‘silly’ responses in order to impress their friends.

In order to overcome these problems, many of the responses were written, either in questionnaires or in the journals that each boy used. In addition, each boy had a password which he used for the response sheets and journal. This meant that he could keep his identity secret from me, but that I could monitor any change in attitude in that pupil.

## Research Plan

The notion of *action research* was really appealing to me, because it can also suggest an ‘active’ or ‘adaptable’ plan! I had a definite idea of what I wanted to include in the research, but did leave space for changes, depending on how the group functioned. As it turned out, a frenzy of irresponsible newspaper reporting of a rape case forced me to change tack halfway through the research and in the end I left some material out. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, the process was worthwhile.

The group of boys were exposed to 8 different input sessions, outlined below.

## IMAGES OF MANHOOD

This was a simple test with a subtle subtext. The boys were given two sets of images—the first of sports stars, the second of notable theologians and politicians. I don’t think any of them were aware that one person in each set had been tried for rape, and I didn’t mention the fact. The boys were asked to rank the images from most masculine to least masculine. In addition, the boys filled in a questionnaire (Appendix A) which dealt with aspects of masculinity. This was based on a questionnaire designed by Bev Harrison, a fellow IBSC researcher.

## REFLECTION: REAL MEN DON’T RAPE ADVERTISEMENTS

At the start of this session we had an informal discussion on rape and each boy was given the opportunity to reflect on the discussion in his private journal. I then asked each boy to create a ‘Real men don’t rape’ advertisement.

## DEFINITIONS OF RAPE

In this session we looked at and discussed various definitions of rape from literature, dictionaries and rape crisis centres.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

For this session I used the book *I Have Life* (1998) by Alison as told to Marianne Thamm. I read a few passages which described her rape and the vicious attack she was subjected to. I wanted to focus on one of the men who had saved her. Tiaan Eilerd had been on his way home when the group he was in found Alison on the side of the road. I wanted to focus on Tiaan as a male role model. This session was to be a turning point in the research and made a huge impact on the boys.

## NEWSPAPERS AND THE MEDIA (TWO SESSIONS)

A curveball is inevitable in action research! Just when I felt that I was nicely on track, the local newspaper chose to splash a suspected rape case across its front page. In one of the worst examples of irresponsible reporting I have ever seen, the newspaper published the name and a photograph of a university student who had been accused by a first-year girl of rape. The apparent rape took place



in a crowded pub which is covered with CCTV cameras. Within in a day of his appearance in court Rhodes University announced that owing to lack of evidence no disciplinary action would be taken against the student. Within a week the police had dropped the case. While I was initially irritated by the media coverage, it did provide an interesting detour on the media's role on reporting on rape and especially the impact this reporting has on males. In the first session we analysed three newspaper reports on three different rape cases. In the second session, we analysed the letters to the press and other comment on the student rape case.

## PERFORMANCE POETRY

I have always been a fan of performance poetry and was interested to see the impact this would have on the group. They had two pieces presented to them. Firstly a group of grade 12 drama students performed *Rape Poem* by Marge Piercy. *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler had recently been performed in Grahamstown, and I was fortunate enough to get the actress (Deborah Robertson) who had performed the *My Short Skirt* sequence to repeat it to the class. We then discussed the impact and usefulness of the two performances and the boys provided written comment.

## FILM

I showed the group extracts from *The Accused*. Apart from being a film about rape, I wanted to focus on the culpability of the observers as well as using the character of Kenneth Joyce as a male role model.

## PEN PORTRAITS, COMPARISON OF LITERATURES AND FINAL REFLECTION

In a similar exercise to the first, the boys were given anonymous pen portraits of characters that had been studied during the course. They were also asked to make comparisons between various people, both real and fictional, as examples of male role models. They were then asked to reflect on what they had learned. Most importantly, they were asked which pieces of literature had had the most impact on them.

## Research Results

### IMAGES OF MANHOOD

There were few surprises amongst the sporting group. Victor Matfield, a Springbok rugby player, was clearly seen as the best image of manhood—tall, muscular, bearded—with a reputation on the field for excellence, passion and fair play. Only 20% of the sample group did not place him first, and those who didn't, placed him second or third. The only minor surprise was that one of South Africa's top footballers was placed second last—but then, this is a rugby school, and he wears an earring! The person who had been accused of rape was placed second, but few boys are likely to have known about this charge. In this man's defence, he was found not guilty of the charges against him and is seen as an exemplary model of a sportsman today.

The images of politicians and theologians gave very mixed results. Predictably Nelson Mandela came out on top, but not by much. Less than half the group put him in first place and of the six images used, even Robert Mugabe was placed as the best example of manhood by two boys. The second placed man overall was Angus Buchan. Most of the boys would have recognised his image.

He is a well-known preacher in South Africa, particularly popular within the farming community.

### REFLECTION: REAL MEN DON'T RAPE ADVERTISEMENTS

This was a necessary, but quiet session. The responses suggested that the boys were distantly aware of rape and didn't approve, but in an unemotional way. The advertisements were hardly imaginative and did not move beyond clichés such as: 'Be a Real Man', 'Don't be a coward', 'Wait for the real thing'.

### DEFINITIONS OF RAPE

Another slow session. The boys were confident that they knew what rape was and had heard it all before. This session made very little impact on the boys.

### AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This was an amazing experience. As I read extracts of Alison's abduction and rape many of the boys became visibly distressed and there were several sharp intakes of breath. I had provided each of them with a copy of Tiaan Eilerd's chapter, in which he described finding her after her attack and keeping her alive until she reached the hospital. There was a definite sense of anger directed towards her attackers and the boys were desperate to know what had happened to them. Suddenly rape was not just 'something that happened to other people out there'.

### NEWSPAPERS AND THE MEDIA

While I was concerned that the furore in the local paper could derail much of what I was trying to achieve, these were very useful sessions. Briefly, what became apparent was:

- (a) The media can and should play a significant role in raising awareness of rape, and
- (b) The reporting of the student rape case was more likely to entrench incorrect perceptions of rape. Instead of making males more compassionate and empathetic, it was likely to make them cynical. It was also likely to make males less inclined to believe a woman who claimed she had been raped and genuine rape cases less likely to be reported.

It wasn't necessary to use a computer to analyse the boys' responses. Asked to rank the three reports in order of 'heinousness', there was no variation. All 15 boys ranked the rape of the six year-old girl as worst, followed by the gang rape of a woman buying drugs, and then the student rape story. Then we discussed the fact that the worst incident commanded the least column inches and the fact that newspapers are only interested in sensationalism and not in creating a better society.

The boys were also asked to rank a number of letters to the press and statements about the student rape in order of 'reasonableness'. This exercise illustrated the boys' determination for justice and they approved highly of pieces which criticised people who wanted to condemn someone before he was found guilty. Discussion around this issue was interesting: "even if the student did commit the rape, you can't ruin his life until you **know** he is guilty"; "if he did rape her, he must be punished, but he has been punished already and I don't think he did it". This suggests that boys look for 'fairness' in literature, even if it is a newspaper. They felt that 'fair play' had not been upheld in some of these letters and would therefore reject any comments on the nature of men in them.

## PERFORMANCE POETRY

Boys are stereotypically resistant to poetry, particularly poetry that deals with emotions. While I was well aware of this, I believe that in the right environment, poetry can 'get through' to boys, particularly if it is presented in an interesting manner. I had hoped to introduce the poetry after the viewing of the film, but it proved more difficult than I had thought to obtain a copy of *The Accused*.

In any event, the poetry session was most productive and the boys were certainly not bored. Firstly, the boys read the two poems by themselves. Then, after watching *My Short Skirt* performed by Deborah Robertson and *Rape Poem* performed by a group of grade 12 drama pupils, the boys filled in a questionnaire (Appendix B) and we discussed their feelings.

Opinion was split on whether both poems were suitable material for grade 10 learners. Some of the boys felt that the content was a bit advanced, but the poems would be suitable if they were taught sensibly and if sufficient background was given. The emotions the boys felt were interesting. Both poems elicited feelings of guilt and some boys felt slightly threatened by the performance of *My Short Skirt* in particular.

In terms of assessing the difference between reading a poem and watching it being performed there was a clear distinction. The boys felt reading the poem was 'dead' and 'lacked emotion'. Seeing a dramatised presentation of the poem 'brought it to life' and 'made it real'. During the discussion at the end of the lesson, the boys said that the reason they often disliked poetry was that it was often dull, dealt with issues that they didn't know much about, and it was presented in a boring manner.

## FILM

By this stage of the project I was running out of time. It was not possible to show the boys all of *The Accused*, so I showed them key extracts. Discussion time was also limited. Nevertheless, it was clear that the film made a huge impression on them. Up until this time, everything had been conceptual and written rather than 'real' or 'visual'. Comments that were made included, "It is so much worse when you see it happen", "Even if it's just a film, it still looks violent". I focussed much discussion on the difference between Danny, the first man to rape the victim, Cliff Albrecht, the man who encouraged others to join in, and Kenneth, the man who eventually reported the rape to the police and, later, testified in court. Many of the boys felt that Albrecht was most culpable, as without his encouragement, it is unlikely that the incident would have escalated to the level it did.

The film once again opened discussion on whether women sometimes invite rape. No matter how wrong rape was seen through their eyes, they still felt that if a woman dressed provocatively, acted provocatively, or put herself in a position where she invited sexual contact, then the woman needed to shoulder some of the blame. If the sex in the film had just been between the victim and Danny, they would not have had nearly as much sympathy. Equally though, they felt that they lost sympathy for Danny as soon as he became 'forceful' or 'violent'. Several boys referred to Alison's story from *I Have Life* and compared the levels of violence from that story.

We also discussed Kenneth Joyce's actions at length. This is referred to later in my final discussion, but it is worth repeating here that they saw the need for a 'real man' to act and not just show disapproval.

## Findings

### IMPACT

The boys were asked to rank the pieces of literature in terms of the impact they had had on them and justify their choice. According to the boys *I Have Life* was overwhelmingly the most significant piece of literature studied. There were several reasons for this choice. Some boys commented on the fact that the incident took place close to Grahamstown, (the city of Port Elizabeth is about 130 km away) and was not “somewhere out there”. More significant though, was the explicit detail in which the rape was described. Far from being ‘sensationalistic’ the boys found the description emphasized the inhumanity and reality of rape. “Rape is not what it seems and a lot more actually happens at the scene of a rape.” The actions of Tiaan Eilerd also made a huge impression on the boys and elicited comments such as: “the bravery and decency of the young man who stayed (with) her” and “every man should be like him”.

The second most significant piece in terms of impact was very interesting indeed. The boys were really touched by the newspaper report about the six year-old girl who was raped. The impact was twofold. It was ‘sick’ and thus ‘stays in a boy’s mind’. However, they were equally disturbed by the size of the article and said that this suggested that rape could be ‘brushed under the carpet’.

The third most significant piece was *The Accused*. The boys felt that both the vision and the text of the film created an awareness.

### MASCULINITY

The boys were asked: “Do you see a difference between *being masculine* and being a *good male role model*? If yes, what is the difference?”

Nearly all of the boys did see a difference. ‘Being masculine’ meant ‘working out’, ‘being well-built’, ‘playing rugby’ and even ‘using women’. A good male role model, included certain aspects of ‘toughness’, but also included ideas of ‘family man’, ‘a wife and children’, ‘kind[ness]’ and ‘care for others’.

Given the research question, it could be argued that my research did not, in fact, enhance concepts of masculinity. However, this would be arguing definitions. In the context of the question, the boys were probably distinguishing between different masculinities and seeing the same difference Bly did in his ‘Wild Man’ and ‘savage man’. In the conclusion I mention the term ‘Real Man’, which one of the boys used. My aim was to lead the boys to an appreciation of this type of man and I believe this was achieved.

### MALE ROLE MODELS

The boys had studied a number of male role models, both real and fictional. They were asked to rank eight of these in order of being good male role models.

All of the boys felt that Tiaan Eilerd was the best role model, with Kenneth Joyce in second place. Eilerd’s qualities that impressed the boys were: “heroic”, “loyal”, “single-minded” and “helped someone he didn’t know”. Equally important though was that he “acted”, “didn’t need prompting” and “followed up”. The last few quotes are very important. Every boy knows what *should* be done; the real mark of a man is that he doesn’t just *know* what the right thing is to do, he actually *does* it.

The bottom end of the scale was divided. Some felt that Frans du Toit, the instigator of Alison's rape, was the worst example of masculinity, while others chose the unnamed man arrested for the rape of a six year-old girl. Chris Albrecht, the instigator of rape in *The Accused*, was also placed in second last place by some boys. The reasons for their choices varied. Du Toit was dismissed because he was so violent and his actions of rape and attempted murder were clearly pre-meditated. Other boys could not excuse the rape of a child.

When asked to rank Danny (*The Accused*) against Du Toit, all the boys found in favor of Danny and felt that the fact that he was drunk and had been "led on" by the girl were mitigating factors. Similarly, a significant number of the boys ranked Gareth Lidell (the student accused of rape) above the other males accused of rape or of instigating rape.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

As part of the final reflection, the boys were asked:

- (a) Has the project changed the way you view rape? Explain your answer.
- (b) Has the way you view someone guilty of rape changed at all? Why?
- (c) Please add any other comments you would like to make about the Research Process.

In response to question (a) comments included:

"Before, I thought rape was just a common thing that happened every day. I blamed no one, cared little and overall did not take much notice. After this project I view it in a totally different way. I see the real inhumanity in it"; "It made me realize that rape is not just a quick physical discomfort, but a sick act performed by men who have no respect for themselves or others... Rape is a psychological dilemma that you have to live with your whole life"; "Before I thought rape was really bad, but still over-rated although now I understand what is involved and the effects it has..."; "...my only idea of rape was men desperate for sex, but now I know it is a power hungry... act"; "It has shown me that rape is not just rape..."; "I used to think rape was obviously pretty bad, but watching movies, listening to poems and reading articles... has made me look at it in a... more serious way. It now seems more personal and I feel greater sympathy for anyone who has been through it."

Of the usable sample, 11 out of the 12 boys felt that the research project had changed the way they view rape. The one boy who answered "no" to the question said that "I have always disliked the very idea of rape. It makes me sick!!"

In response to question (b), comments included:

"[Rapists] are just meaningless cowards [who] want power"; "...this has enforced my views of how I feel about [rapists]"; "[rapists] are pathetic"; "I thought 10–15 years was a fair sentence [for a rapist] but the punishment should be more extreme"; "If proved guilty I have no respect for them. However, I have learnt not to judge the accused too quickly..."

Again, 11 of the 12 boys who attended every session answered "yes" to question (b).

Several boys chose to respond to question (c). Although these comments may not fall within the scope of the research question, they are interesting in showing how far they had come in developing an improved empathy towards rape victims.

“This research has changed the way I think about rape and I believe not enough people are aware how bad rape really is. Many boys joke about it, but I understand now that it is not really something we should make fun of. The research project has been a way of alerting me to rape and I feel that it has had the same effect on others”; “Thanks for opening my eyes and mind to, and for letting me truly understand the horrors of rape”; “It’s important to look at these serious issues... and more important to answer questions like those we have been given so that we can figure out exactly what our opinions are”; “The research has opened my eyes...”

## Personal Reflections

It was a long, strange trip. I must be honest, and admit that after the first few sessions with the boys I wondered if I was wasting my time as well as theirs. They were polite, but seemed indifferent and unconcerned. The turning point was reading passages from *I Have Life*. After that, everything seemed more important to them. Many of the boys seemed to take ownership of what I was doing; they hung around at the end of sessions and wanted to discuss issues. They also wanted to know more about the opinions of the class and how my research was going. In the final reflection, one of the boys whose written responses certainly suggested he was not interested in the project, suggested “we should do it again”.

## Conclusion

So can boys’ understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through the literature that we covered during the research? Rape remains a national shame in Africa. I would like to think that, however small, my research did lead to an enhanced understanding of acceptable, responsible masculinity. The seventeen boys who attended all or part of the course have been sensitized in two ways:

- Their attitudes towards rape, especially at the end of the course, suggest a repugnance of the act.
- I hope, also, that should they ever be in a position to prevent, hinder or discourage rape, they would not stand back, but that they would stand up as MEN and ACT.

As mentioned in the introduction, Robert Bly divided males into the ‘Wild Man’ and ‘the savage man’. The former is tough and manly, yet has a protective side; the latter is just ‘savage’. In the final questions which were posed I used the term “Real Man”. One of the boys changed this term to what he described as a ‘True Man’. Our definitions of ‘masculinity’ may differ; our definitions of what constitutes ‘literature’ may differ. There is debate as to what constitutes a ‘REAL’ man, but I believe that my research has helped the boys to understand that *true men don’t rape*.

Ward (1995) stated that “there is little precise information about what specifically prompts an attitude shift”. The boys were clear in their opinion that the autobiography *I Have Life* had the greatest impact on them. As a language teacher with a particular interest in poetry teaching, I was hoping that the two poems studied would have had a greater impact, but this was not the case. Literal language is perhaps more effective than figurative. If viewed in its entirety, the program proved more successful than I had expected. It would be fair to say that nearly all the literature was useful and the combined impact influenced the boys’ attitudes. They thought about what it means to be a man.

The small size of the group was also helpful. I have been asked by my headmaster to design a program for all the boys in the school, based on the findings of my research. An immediate concern was whether it would be possible to do it in groups of a similar size. Working with, at the most, seventeen boys provided a safe and intimate environment. In a larger group, this safe environment would be lost.

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## Appendix A

### LITERATURE & CONCEPTS OF MASCULINITY

1. What makes a good man?
2. When do you become a man?
3. What does a man look like?
4. What should a man wear?
5. How should a man behave?
6. What does a man value?
7. Name three qualities that you admire in your male friends?  

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8. If I could be any man in the world I would be \_\_\_\_\_?
9. In any of the books that you have read, or films you have watched, which male character best represents manhood?
10. List 5 words to describe him  

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## Appendix B

### 'MY SHORT SKIRT' RESPONSE SHEET

Do you think *My Short Skirt* is appropriate material for a grade 10 learner? \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

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What emotions did you feel after reading the poem?

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What emotions did you feel after hearing the poem performed?

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Do you think *Rape Poem* is appropriate material for a grade 10 learner? \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

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What emotions did you feel after reading the poem?

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What emotions did you feel after hearing the poem performed?

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What are the differences between reading a poem to yourself and hearing it read or performed for you?

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Please make any comments you want to about the two pieces studied today.

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## Reflection

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*I found the whole research experience to be positive and rewarding. Despite warnings of “avoiding the veneer of politeness”, I felt that all the comments I received from the other researchers and from Di were encouraging and affirming.*

*The concept of “action research” is far more relevant than “academic research”. I have always believed that education is about action and not about theory; and that what matters is what people can do rather than what they know about what has already been done. The research process gave me the room to be adaptable, and to alter course when it was necessary. This proved to be vital in my research, as events on the ground necessitated a detour. I was thus able to keep my work relevant. Had I not dealt with the much publicised “rape” case I believe my research would have lost credibility amongst the boys who participated.*

*One drawback was the size of the group. Although every member was very positive and involved, sometimes the sheer volume of information moving around was overwhelming. Perhaps in future the group can be divided into two or three smaller groups? I am sure that I could have been more responsive and helpful if I had been reading about 5 or 6 projects, rather than 14.*

*On a personal level it was both a wonderful and a painful experience. Researching boys’ attitudes towards rape is neither pleasant nor comfortable and there were times when I agonised about what to say, what to share and what to show the boys. On the other hand, their responses sometimes felt like a blessing; and a validation of what I was trying to achieve. The fact that I met Alison (the author of I Have Life) totally by chance, and was able to share my ideas with her, was wonderful.*

*My headmaster has expressed his satisfaction with the research. He has suggested that I design a course based on my work so that every boy at St Andrew’s College can be exposed to the material and he has also agreed for me to arrange for Alison to speak to the boys.*

*In conclusion, all I can say is thank you for the opportunity to be involved in something so meaningful.*

*Andrew Renard*



# The Roles Males Read

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## Abstract

Reading and study of literature or texts in the English classroom is not a new concept. However, the explicit teaching of an analytical framework to clearly address the values and beliefs expressed in the literature texts is somewhat more innovative. By addressing how manhood and masculinity are portrayed in texts, the English classroom can be transformed into the language laboratory wherein the dissection of words can lead to analysis of authors' belief systems. Then by extrapolation into our own world, the student can reflect on the language, appearance, behaviors and values associated with groups—such as males and the masculinities presented in his own or other sub-cultures. More than just conduits of 'cultural capital', the texts shared in the classroom can be subjected to deeper analysis that leads to judgment about the values and beliefs of the author and his context.

## Research Question

*How can boy's understanding of masculinity and manhood be enhanced and broadened through literature in the English curriculum?*

## Introduction

The English classroom in a boys' school is characterized by some specific 'male or masculine discourses'. Stories about males are read, discussed, taught and assessed while, at the same time, male students in the room are also making their own life stories.

While investigating stories or texts in the classroom of the previous century was to provide experience of 'canonical' texts, in the 21st century English classroom the critical investigation of texts asks readers to challenge cultural assumptions in texts and the representations of individuals and groups; thereby it is possible to critically evaluate the representations of manhood through texts. We have always believed we can use literature to enhance and broaden student's understandings, but by consciously addressing the way texts impart belief systems, such as masculinity and manhood, students can engage with literature in even more meaningful ways.

Explicitly addressing the concepts of masculinity with male students can be frustrating when focused upon the student himself, but students have few reservations about looking closely at the language, behavior and beliefs of other males. In the English classroom this engagement can be

harnessed by analyzing characters in texts. Often the dominant ‘male’ discourses (values and beliefs) are viewed as the one and only ‘real’ masculinity in a text or community. Teachers can discuss these characteristics of ‘manhood’ with boys because through texts we study characters and characteristics that group ‘like’ males together, as well as the conflict between groups and individuals created by competing male belief systems. Some members of the community are proud to triumph alternate and even resistant discourses that highlight the maleness of certain behaviors and demean other ‘non-masculine’ behaviors. We can study the terms and phrases borrowed from texts and from one another to describe how some appearances, behaviors and ways of thinking do or do not belong to certain types of ‘manhood’.

Whether consciously or sub-consciously, many assume that a system prevails in boys’ schools which models the appropriate appearances, behaviors and ways of thinking for men. This phenomenon is well known to the staff in boys’ schools, and presents an opportunity to engage students by teaching the concepts of manhood and masculinity. This action research project offered the chance to formally evaluate the effectiveness of explicit teaching of concepts surrounding manhood and masculinity.

At our school the focus on the study area of masculinity began five years ago as the 21st century English program seemed ripe for male students to explore how ‘men’ are constructed and represented. It was an excellent opportunity to closely examine the systematic ways of addressing the values and beliefs presented in texts with the Year 10 cohort at Anglican Church Grammar School (Churchie). We believe we arm students with tools for critical analysis of language and texts to explicitly address the concepts of manhood—specifically the representation of different types of masculinities. Is this actually working?

## Research Approach

The purpose of this project was to observe whether the boys’ understanding of masculinity and manhood is enhanced and broadened through literature in the English curriculum. As a group of teachers, we consciously deployed common set of texts chosen to elicit exploration of manhood and masculinities and deployed these across nine Year 10 classes with a critical framework for analysis.

Four recognized action research methods were adopted:

1. *Student Surveys* – benchmark the students’ understandings and observe changes
2. *Intervention texts and deploying these in classrooms with a critical framework for analysis* – specific texts were deployed in the curriculum with the goal of enhancing or broadening the students experience
3. *Teacher focus group* – sharing observations about student responses to texts
4. *Student focus groups* – gathering detailed information about their perceptions of masculinity, especially to see if these were enhanced or broadened by the interventionist texts

*The first step was to survey their beliefs:* To obtain a benchmark of the students’ understanding, all the IBSC action researchers agreed to deploy similar sets of survey questions with our different groups around the globe. The responses to the initial benchmark survey at Churchie did sponsor some additional investigation of specific areas through student focus groups. A simple online survey was

used at the end of the research period to gather responses about students' perception of their own uptake of the representations of manhood and masculinity.

*The second step involved teachers choosing 'interventionist' texts and deploying these in class with a critical framework for analysis:* This involved choosing and deploying a suite of texts to be used as intervention texts to broaden students' understanding by introducing additional ideas about representations of masculinity.

As teachers of texts, it is not unusual to introduce media texts, short stories and poetry into the English classroom and to engage in discussion of the student responses to these texts. The decision to use small texts was taken so they could be read and discussed during a standard lesson. Therefore, a range of short stories and poetry texts were chosen by teachers. The so-called 'intervention texts' used by all teachers across the cohort included:

Short Stories	Poetry
<i>Manhood</i> by John Wain	<i>War</i> by Thomas Shapcott
<i>The Test</i> by Angelica Gibbs	<i>Cats in the Cradle</i> by Harry Chapin
<i>A Blow, a Kiss</i> by Tim Winton	<i>The Streets of Laredo</i> Traditional American Poem
<i>The Pedestrian</i> by Ray Bradbury	<i>Life Cycle</i> by Bruce Dawe
<i>Reunion</i> by Arthur C. Clarke	<i>If</i> by Rudyard Kipling
<i>Powder</i> by Tobias Wolff	<i>1914 V: The Soldier</i> by Rupert Brooke
	<i>A Little Boy's Dream</i> by Katherine Mansfield
	<i>Leopard Skin</i> by Douglas Stewart
	<i>The Man from Ironbark</i> by A B 'Banjo' Paterson
	<i>Men of Australia</i> by Edward Dyson
	<i>Dulce Et Decorum Est</i> by Wilfred Owen

The range of texts was chosen to assist students in understanding manhood as a multifaceted concept and not limited to a mono-cultural viewpoint. The goal in choosing texts was for engagement but also to offer different male voices. While students are all in the same school uniform and classroom, it was felt that their different backgrounds and cultures needed recognition; therefore there are texts from many different types of masculinities. From old patriarchal Kipling to modern lyrical Chapin, and, from English, Northern American and Australian writers, we investigated masculinity that may be silenced or overlooked.

The students were also taught the critical framework to be used when analyzing texts. The classrooms were armed with a tool and language that allow them to identify dominant discourses as well as the marginalized and resistant discourses at work in our texts and communities. In this way their thinking about a concept as complex as manhood and masculinity can be objectively quantified, evidenced and discussed as they appear in texts.



*The third step involved teachers and teaching practice:* Regular meetings were held with the seven teachers who deliver the program. The objectives of focus group meetings were to:

- discuss ways we could investigate the masculine discourses through texts
- suggest texts and discuss teaching strategies for the texts
- communicate, share and refine pedagogy and criteria for assessment
- opportunity for immediate feedback about their perceptions of the student progress
- share student assessment and moderate teacher judgments

Many teaching strategies were shared. For instance, using James Gee's concept of "Club membership", teachers adopted the practice of using a simple table where a student appraises the representation of various male groups using the same headings—appearance, behaviour, language, beliefs and values. Obviously this is a useful method for students to analyze groups or discourses such as masculine sub-cultures.

Yet another way to look at Discourses is as 'clubs' with tacit rules about who is a member and who is not, and rules about how members ought to behave (if they wish to continue being accepted as members). Being a member of a family, a peer group, community group or church, a drinking group, a classroom, a profession, a research team, an ethnic group, a sub-culture or a culture requires 'rites of passage' to enter the group, the maintenance of certain behaviors (ways of talking, valuing, thinking) to continue to be accepted as an 'insider', and continued 'test' of membership applied by others (Gee, 1990, p. 143).

*The fourth step was student focus groups:* Students' perceptions were gathered and survey data explored in greater depth. Small focus groups, with a total of twenty students, were consulted in evaluating the course.

## **Research Context—The Numbers**

- Anglican Church Grammar School has three sub-schools: Year 1–6 in the Preparatory School; Years 7–9 Middle School; and Years 10–12 Senior School
- Year 8 to 12 groups are about 220 to 230 students per cohort
- Action research project study focused upon the 200+ students in nine Year 10 English classrooms for a period of three months
- Curriculum delivered by seven English teachers via eight 45–50 minute lessons as timetabled in the fortnightly cycle

## Research Context —The School and English Curriculum

The Year 10 English curriculum for semester one was based around the central theme of “Images of Masculinity” thereby addressing the behaviours, language, values, beliefs and attitudes associated with male groups. The units are summarized in the chart below.

Unit 1: “Images of Masculinity”	Indicative Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Developing and understand that language is used within particular cultural and social contexts</li> <li>■ Developing knowledge of and an ability to use the critical analysis terms: such as <i>discourse</i>, <i>foregrounding</i>, <i>gaps and silences</i>, <i>positioning</i>, <i>privileging</i></li> <li>■ Analyzing the written grammar and visual elements of magazine articles and e-zines</li> <li>■ Critically evaluating texts [critical questions and frameworks]</li> </ul>	<p><b>Spoken Task</b></p> <p>Report of research into the way a particular male group in society is represented using slideshow support and examples from the media</p>
Unit 2: “Creating Images of Masculinity Through Stories”	Indicative Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reading short stories and developing tools for critiquing narratives and recognizing the ways males are portrayed</li> <li>■ Developing an understanding that texts construct particular versions of reality and the world; they are always “partial”</li> <li>■ Using language creatively</li> </ul>	<p><b>Written Task</b></p> <p>Short story based around a male character</p>
Unit 3: “Representations of Masculinity in Literature – Poetry”	Indicative Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reading, understanding and critically evaluating poetry</li> <li>■ Understanding and identifying the use of various poetic techniques and forms to impart values and beliefs</li> <li>■ Writing a critical essay based on one of the selected poems</li> </ul>	<p><b>Written Task</b></p> <p>Expository essay written under supervised conditions</p>

## The Literature Review

Readings from the collection *More Than Just Marks: Boys’ Education* have been very helpful in a variety of contexts, but in this action research project the poignancy of Pelissa Tsilimidos’ article is best summed up in her own words:

Boys seek role models from a variety of sources, and if that is as indisputable a fact as psychologists and counselors would have us believe, then our responsibility lies in steering these boys to a wide variety of positive (and perhaps not so positive because the human condition learns much of its lessons from seeing what not to do) role models and allow boys to make the choices (*Tsilimidos, 2005, p. 99*).

21st century pedagogy ought to be reliant upon texts and conversations surrounding texts, but this involves more than staring at great pieces of work as if in a picture gallery. The contemporary critical reader is reading the content of the text as well as the values, beliefs and cultural context of the texts.

The view of reading as a transaction between reader and text can prove immensely liberating for students, and ought, be made explicit to them... The role of the teacher in deepening and refining the response involves a valuing of students' initial responses as a starting point and giving them opportunity... to test that initial response against the response of others and against the text. Meanings readers take from texts are to some degree determined by the culture in which they have grown up. This again is something that can be made explicit to young readers (*Morgan, 1998, p. 143*).

*Queensland Study Authority Syllabuses on Critical Reading:* Going beyond traditional reading practices, the student reader is encouraged to interrogate the texts for more than just the author's intention, and to address the belief systems mobilized in the texts and identify how readers are positioned. The Syllabus, curriculum work programs, teaching objectives and assessment instruments are all reliant on a view of language where all texts can be addressed by three criterion or domains—cultural, operational and critical.

#### EXTRACTS TAKEN FROM ENGLISH SYLLABUSES 2002 AND 2008

Domain 1: Cultural	Domain 2: Operational	Domain 3: Critical
Understanding and responding to contexts	Understanding and controlling textual features	Making and evaluating meaning
Knowledge and control of texts in their contexts	Knowledge and control of textual features	Knowledge and application of the constructedness of texts
Includes elements such as audience, purpose, text-type conventions	Includes elements such as: spelling; punctuation; grammar; cohesive ties and linking ideas	Includes elements such as: values and beliefs underpinning texts; stereotypes and representations

(Queensland Study Authority, 2002) (Queensland Study Authority, 2008)

*Critical reading:* James Gee, one of the foremost theorists in critical literacy, offers some effective ways of visioning the analytical concept of 'Discourse' that informs 'critical domain' pedagogy through which we see, teach and interact with texts.

The term 'discourse' is used in many different ways in the literature in linguistics and literacy, so it is important to remember that I mean by 'Discourse' (with a capital 'D')... a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role' (*Gee, 1990, p. 143*).

Discourse is a useful way of addressing cultural constructs such as male groups:

A Discourse is sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. Another way to look at Discourses is that they are always ways of displaying (through words, actions, values and beliefs) membership in a particular group or social network (people who associate with each other around a common set of interests, goals and activities) (*Gee, 1990, p. 142*).

Common practice is to deploy a common set of critical literacy questions as we investigate texts. It seemed important to trace some of the literature from whence these came. Wendy Morgan, in *Re-viewing English*, sets questions for developing critical reading skills.

Questions guide the teacher's planning; they are not always to be used directly with interrogating students, but may instead be 'translated' into activities which strategically develop understanding of the issues. Such activities (and questions) may be followed by deliberate reflection to permit the more conscious articulation of these understandings (Morgan, 1998, pp. 159–160).

Some examples of these questions are listed here, separated under sub-headings:

1. Situating the text

- How is the topic being presented? What themes and discourses are being used?
- How is the text encouraging you to think and respond?

2. Locating the text in the world

- Where does the text come from?
- What social function does this text serve?

3. The writer the reader and the world in the text

- How does this text construct a version of reality and knowledge?
- How does the text represent the reader and set up a position for reading?

Further use of the practice of critical questions can be found in many sources, but notably in McLughlin and DeVogd's *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Student Comprehension of Text*. They present a range of theme-based critical literacy lessons from American teachers exploring areas such as *Exploring Identities* and *Seeing Beyond the Bias*. Some 'critical' questions designed to give a framework for textual analysis in matters of race, class, gender and other forms of difference include:

- Who or what is in the text?
  - Who or what is missing from the text?
  - What is marginalized?
  - What does the author want you to think?
  - What story might an alternative text tell?
  - How can information from the text be used to promote justice?
- (McLughlin and DeVogd, 2004 )

## Results

Selected student responses to the intervention texts that attest to the successful investigation of the concepts of manhood are recorded here.

Short Stories	Student Responses
<i>Manhood</i> by John Wain	Tells how males try to appear tough and strong; Alternate endings—stereotypical ‘tough’ ending vs. ending not stereotypical; About how the father wants the son to be a super star; Pride and boxing—have to play tough sports to be a man; Taking separate paths in life to what father wants; Son trying to please his father even though he wants to do something else; pleasing parents; Father pushing his son too hard to be the man he wanted him to be; Father was over controlling his son’s life and living through his son
<i>The Test</i> by Angelica Gibbs	Racism and driving; Men are very opinionated; Acting superior; Proving yourself to others; Driving tester thought racism is ok
<i>The Pedestrian</i> Ray Bradbury	Awkward behavior and difference of opinions; A man lost in a by world of machines; Not letting TV control you; Trying to fix things; Male who refuses to conform to society; Can you have real masculinity when being different?
<i>Powder</i> by Tobias Wolff	Father and son taking risks; How men are likely to take risks and break rules; Father not scared about doing something illegal while son is watching
Poetry	Student Responses
<i>1914 V: The Soldier</i> by Rupert Brooke	Nationalism and war; Male stereotypes and representations in early days of white Australia; Soldier does what he is told even though he is against war
<i>Dulce Et Decorum Est</i> by Wilfred Owen	Realities of war—death and horror; Impacts of War on a family; showed how war diminished a man’s masculinity; dying for country is questioned
<i>Cats in the Cradle</i> by Harry Chapin	Men find it hard to achieve a balance between work and family; Fathers who put their careers before their family; How children see their parents as role models; Strong, brave men but not standing up for family; Men are busy; they will be the one earning money; Neglect and growing up to follow father’s example
<i>The Man from Ironbark</i> by A B ‘Banjo’ Paterson	Country men can be volatile; City vs. country men have different values and beliefs; Men enjoy having a joke; Stupidity and comedy are often put together by men

## BENCHMARK SURVEY

The benchmark survey of the Year 10 students indicated some particular understandings of the concepts of manhood and masculinity. When probing boys' identification of role models the surveys revealed:

- answers were heavily reliant on visual texts (movies, *YouTube*, websites etc mentioned by 82% of respondents)
- heavy focus on sporting heroes, Hollywood actors and media supported males (64% of respondents)
- references to life-writing genres such as autobiographies and biographies (as opposed to fiction)
- strong adherence to dominant discourses with little reference to marginalized or alternate views of male behavior, language or values and beliefs
- uptake of critical terms such as 'Discourse' had been effective (over 75% of the students using the critical vocabulary successfully)

## FOLLOW-UP SMALL FOCUS GROUPS

As a follow-up, three small focus groups (each six or seven students) met to elaborate on their survey answers. Students with an academic inclination were chosen to be part of this group because they were also asked to give feedback about both the content of the learning and the process of learning. From these discussions ideas were received such as "English has enlightened my view of cultural groups". To confirm these interactions additional feedback was sought and resulted in the construction of a simple online survey designed to specifically collect their perceptions of their learning.

Year 10 Online Response Survey	Yes	No
1. Do you think you are better at looking at the characteristics of individuals and groups?	100%	0%
2. Do you think you have an awareness that many different male groups exist?	100%	0%
3. Do you realize there are different kinds of manhood and masculinity?	100%	0%
4. Do you think you have grown to be better at looking at the characteristics of manhood and masculinity?	100%	0%
5. Do you think you have seen some male characteristics that you DO like and would like to adopt?	85%	15%
6. Do you think you have seen some male characteristics that you DO NOT like and would NOT like to adopt?	95%	5%
7. Does connecting with ideas of manhood or masculinity in texts help you think about male groups?	80%	20%
8. Do you think you have greater understanding of manhood or masculinity in your community?	95%	5%

## TEACHER FEEDBACK

The teachers' observations were gathered from the fortnightly focus group meetings.

- Some teachers noted that they had become normalized into reading and dealing with the same texts as if roaming a gallery of the great works; by using a variety of texts they were consciously reminded that discussing the critical elements increased student understanding and engagement with texts.
- The analytical process for critically reading texts was appealing for male students; the critical reading questions are effective tools because these were the constant familiar structure as the student journeyed between different texts.
- Students generally had too much emotional connection when responding verbally to questions about their own beliefs, but drawing upon the characters in texts and discussing their beliefs was a more effective way for students to express their opinions.
- Teachers found they encouraged more students to have greater objectivity when analyzing the values systems of other people—specifically by using the actual words from texts rather than making-up the words and ideas associated with specific stereotypes.

## Conclusions

Through continuous evaluation and improvement of the curriculum design and assessment outcomes over three years, we have focused on representations of manhood and masculinity and developed skills for critical reading. This action research journey validated the inclusion of masculinity and manhood as a focus in our Year 10 curriculum. Most obviously, this study works very well in the context of a boys' school. Strong student-centered curriculum is vital for successful engagement and this is achieved by focusing upon masculine discourses with Year 10 students.

Explicit exploration of the ways males are represented in texts and the analysis of the construction of male characteristics in a range of texts and contexts are clearly linked to explicit study of values and beliefs. By designing the study program that complies with the Queensland Syllabus, by employing teaching practices where the critical reading of texts is foremost, and by specifically appealing to the boys' school environment, the students and teachers find this subject matter is very appropriate.

There were significant observations by the teachers to support the assertion that when studying male groups (manhood and masculinity), students become engaged in English and there is growth in critical reflection. Use of critical questions contributes to the students' ability to appreciate the constructed nature of texts, and thereby the constructed nature of values and beliefs in texts and in their own lives.

## Implications for Practice

This action research project has shown that our emphasis on the analysis and subject matter of manhood is having an impact. We will therefore continue to focus on critical analysis of texts and overt discussion of the belief systems surrounding manhood.



Generally, having established the effectiveness of this focus on the study of manhood and masculinity, we will continue the natural cycle of evaluation and modification through which the curriculum evolves. Specifically, the following actions will be implemented:

1. The benchmark survey developed for this action research project will be a permanent tool in the Year 10 English program because it is a successful learning device and discussion starter.
2. The common set of texts explored in Year 10 English created opportunity for many to have conversations about the shared reading experiences. Yet, even greater range of different male voices could be included in the collection (e.g. Asian-Australian and immigrant voices). The mainstream or dominant discourses are part of the students' common understanding, so there may be room for teachers to further intervene with alternate and more resistant readings of manhood.
3. The narrative assessment task presently focuses on developing a 'well-rounded male protagonist.' We may encourage a more thorough investigation of male discourse by refining the task to include male characters on 'rite of passage' journeys.
4. We used poetry and short story texts. The survey results suggest students access many non-fiction texts, and so we will endeavour to include more of these. Many interesting non-fiction texts were discovered during the background reading for this project, and extracts from these may well support the study. The actual historical documentation of the beliefs surrounding manhood could create even more critical distance because these documents attest to the constructed nature of masculinity. Perhaps a historical tracing of masculine discourse over the last century would be useful support for the creative texts used in the curriculum. For example, from *Making the Australian Male: Middle Class Masculinity 1870-1920*:

At St Peter's, militarism was increasingly glorified early in the century through practices such as old boys who had served in war being invited to the school by the headmaster and paraded before the boys as models of manliness (Crotty, 2001, p. 83).

The posting of the Anzac soldier as the Australian masculine ideal also marks the final stage in pre-1920s boys' adventure stories of the divorce of manliness from femininity (Crotty, 2001, p. 167).

5. An inspection of movies or short films could be effective. Through the survey it was noted that large numbers of students' referred to male role models from visual media, so we will include visual as well as written texts. Taking some advice from Pelissa Tsilimidos *Male Role Models in Film: Perceptions of masculinity in Australian Film as Text in English*:

Some well selected Australian films used as texts for English to supplement the richness that is offered in literature, offer boys local references, more familiar characters and situations, and a variety of male role models, not far removed from their own worlds (Tsilimidos, 2005, p. 104).

6. Finally, the academic exploration during the action research project has sponsored reading and thinking in values education. Further investigation will ensue. For example, the concept of worldviews is in the spotlight of values education:

As students examine the values and actions of others (be this in their English texts or in 'real' life) and trace these back to the presuppositions or worldviews from which they

issue, they will develop a 'critical literacy of life'. This is the sort of intellectual tool they need to engage with the 21st century and to assist them in deciding what sort of life is worth living. In an increasingly diverse society, we are faced with a supermarket of worldviews, all of which purport to represent reality to us (Mitchell, 2004, p. 25).

The concepts associated with the development of boys into men are various, but the fact remains there are many different types of masculinity, and the perspective of the contemporary student is broadened and enhanced as a world citizen if he can develop confidence in his own brand of manhood, as well as appreciate and respect differences in others.

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## Reflection Statement

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***Highs:** The action research process catalyzed and assisted in the process of consciously enunciating curriculum analysis, and assisted the teacher meeting and sharing process by giving the group a common point of intellectual discussion. The project also assisted in the cycle of continuous improvement required in the 21st century educational environment by supplying the opportunity to assess, and make plans to improve the educational outcomes for students.*

*The process encouraged self-reflection about our professional teaching practice. We found ourselves explicitly and consciously explaining curriculum practices necessary for effective classroom practice. This educational focus on the successes in the academic life of students does motivate and engage teachers. Speaking with teachers about teaching practice should not be difficult, but this process gave all involved an opportunity to offer feedback about their perceptions of student progress. As professionals with much to offer, the process gave the teaching staff an opportunity to negotiate timings, suggest texts and approaches, and to discuss ways we could investigate the common projects.*

*Asking the students to evaluate their learning was another healthy practice because we managed to question some of our preconceptions about students' engagement with texts. The survey responses delivered some reminder of the changing value systems of our students.*

***Improvements:** The study took place in one year group of 200+ students over a period of less than three months. A longer time frame and perhaps use of longitudinal study comparing years would offer a more detailed study as there would certainly be more data to analyze. With such a benchmark and with further development of online surveys, there is also opportunity to investigate other students (older and younger), or even to track the responses a particular year of students as they progress through the school.*

***Overall:** Self-reflection is important to keep our curriculum current and engaging. The regular meetings with teaching staff went beyond operational matters to include explicit theorizing and explaining curriculum practices necessary for effective classroom practice. This behavior will be continue to be encouraged and, while the action research for IBSC have ended, we'll maintain a similar internal reference system to keep our curriculum current and engaging for the boys.*

*Tony Rowan*



# Boys to Men: Student Responses to Interpretations of Masculinity and Manhood in Literature

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## Abstract

Fourth grade boys have clear and similar views on the meaning and their interpretations of manhood and masculinity as it is presented in literature. The fifteen participants in this research study read and discussed characters and themes prevalent in eight novels. A few of these novels were Newbery Award winning selections. Participants in this study completed a pre-survey and post-survey, assessing their opinions and interpretations of masculinity and manhood as presented in this literature. Throughout the research, students almost unanimously identified the same five qualities as those best exemplifying masculinity and manhood—bravery, intellect, responsibility, perseverance/determination, and kindness. Some may argue that kindness is the least stereotypical attribute on this list derived from these 9- and 10-year-old boys. Contrary to popular images in the media, strength, bravado, athleticism, and wealth were not remarkable descriptors. This could be due, in part, to their lack of relevance to the literature addressed in this research effort. These findings may support that 9- and 10-year-old boys' interpretations of masculinity and manhood are overwhelmingly similar but far from stereotypical. Further analysis would offer greater credence to the diversity in young male perspectives on masculinity and manhood.

## Introduction

Researchers have varied views pertaining to the roles and influences of literature on perceptions of gender roles, especially as it pertains to children. Dutro (2000) concluded that children's literature frequently displayed dichotomous views of gender roles, masculinity and femininity. Wu (2005) concluded that images of masculinity in literature geared towards adolescents correspond to ideology prevalent in Western culture. That ideology presents boys as naturally wayward, self-reliant, venturesome, self-assertive, anti-social, and anti-conformist. The author highlights the protagonist in the Harry Potter series as embodying these attributes. Wu also surmises that boys in literature are presented as tough and rough, unemotional and unrelational.

A few of the novels pertinent to this research effort were Newbery medal winners. Of the litany of research addressing Newbery Award winning novels, Kimmel (1990) concluded that such novels remained highly stereotypical regarding gender and cultural interpretations. These findings

support both Dutro (2000) and Wu (2005). In order to effectively evaluate these conclusions the present research study was formulated. Do participants view masculinity and manhood in literature through the lens of bias, stereotype, and gender roles or are their perceptions more diverse and inclusive? This study attempted to examine these perceptions.

For the purposes of this research study and the developmental level of the students involved, masculinity and manhood were used interchangeably. It is also important to note that throughout the research, the teacher refrained from providing a specific definition of manhood and masculinity. During class discussion, the teacher used the terms and allowed the boys' personal definitions to guide their responses. At no point was any interpretation of manhood and masculinity discouraged.

## Research Context

Participants in this study were fifteen fourth graders, ages nine and ten, at an independent, K–12 boys' school. The Gilman School, located in the state of Maryland in the United States of America, has a total student enrolment of nearly one thousand. Like most independent schools, the Gilman School has a longstanding tradition of educating boys for over a century.

It is the mission of the Gilman School to “*educate boys in mind, body, and spirit*”. As such, one staple of the school's overall curriculum is regular, intentional instruction in character development. The fourth grade curriculum integrates these value-based lessons and activities into our discussions of literature during Reading class. Dutro (2000) encourages adults and children to utilize literature to re-evaluate static notions of boyhood and girlhood. Throughout the course of the school year, students read and discuss nearly a dozen novels, many of which were Newbery Medal winning titles. Bryant (2008), in a study of Newbery Medal winning titles between 1997 and 2007, concluded that each of the titles would serve as excellent novels for instruction in character education.

The Reading curriculum for fourth graders at the Gilman School has many objectives. Immersing students in great literature, developing analytical skills, and integrating tenets of character are paramount.

## Research Plan

For purposes of this research inquiry, over a period of six months, students read eight novels (listed in the order in which they were read): *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* by Bette Bao Lord; *Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World* by Mildred Pitts Walter; *The War with Grandpa* by Robert Kimmel Smith; *Stone Fox* by John Reynolds Gardiner; *Arthur, for the Very First Time* by Patricia MacLachlan; *Sounder* by William H. Armstrong; *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor; and *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. A unique attribute of these novels is that the main character, except for the first novel, is a boy around the same age and developmental level as fourth graders.

Even though none of the eight titles presents animals as lead characters, animals do have significant roles in five of the eight literary pieces. Interestingly, Yarbrough (2007) concluded that masculinity is an unstable categorization in children's literature especially when animals are presented in an anthropomorphic way. As such, students frequently labeled animals as possessing the characteristics and qualities embodying manhood and masculinity, thus, in a way, supporting Yarbrough's instability theory.

## Research Approach

This research inquiry is based on the broad allowances of the action research model. That model, by definition, is intended for practitioners who are regularly involved in assessment and evaluation and work closely in the natural environment in which the individuals are being served. As such, the action research model, unlike other rigid forms of research inquiry, allows practitioners to modify their action plans as change is necessary. According to Creswell (1998), qualitative research design, the umbrella under which action research falls, requires that the researcher build a complex, holistic picture. The interactive nature inherent in the action research model is what gives researchers the greatest latitude in their approach to problem-solving.

## Data Collection

This was a three-fold research process. In addition to in-class discussion, lessons, and activities, students completed various surveys. Prior to reading each novel, students completed a pre-survey addressing their views, definitions, and characterizations of masculinity and manhood. It is important to note that after discussion and input from the action research team, the pre-survey was amended after its initial use. After reading each novel, students completed a post-reading survey. This survey addressed the same questions as the pre-reading survey with slight modifications of the third research question. The final survey was completed after reading all eight novels. This survey was a more comprehensive attempt to glean participant responses on masculinity and manhood.

## Results

Student definitions of masculinity/manhood changed slightly over the course of this research experience. Using data extracted from the pre-survey, students defined manhood/masculinity in the following ways:

Manhood is acting your age; ... men who stick up for people, stay strong, and not be a wimp; ...is all about when a guy has many responsibilities; certain decisions in life describe manhood. Looks will sometimes describe manhood; not giggling or sending notes in class; Doesn't hesitate; Is very funny; Has special abilities.

Student responses ranged from descriptions of actions to intense focus on outcomes and decision-making. Over time, those definitions evolved, including somewhat more reflective and poignant responses.

Manhood is a stage in a man's life where he can take care of himself and others; Masculinity is never to back down and stay strong; Manhood is being strong in mind, body, and spirit; ...to have courage, to always be willing to do anything; ...to be a real man and gentle; ...acting like a man; Manhood is growing up. Not like puberty, but like doing something mature. Like if someone needs help with a cart at Wal-mart you could help...; Manhood is to be in charge of the family and to do anything for it; ...is someone who is strong, big arms and legs, fast, handsome, responsible, and smart; To me, manhood is someone growing up not just in appearance but mentally so you can be an adult and make the right choices for your children.

In the pre-surveys, when asked to identify a character in a book, movie, and/or television show



who best portrayed manhood/masculinity, most students selected characters from television shows. Most characters, cartoon or real, were male. Those characters were described as *smart, calm, nice, quiet, tells the truth, organized, calm, civilized, makes sacrifices, helps others, strong, manly, strong-hearted, talk their problems out, and funny*. One student described a main character as “...learned his lesson that being an adult is not as fun as it looks”. In a few instances, female characters were mentioned. Those female characters were described as “*quiet, calm, and likes everybody*”.

## PRE-SURVEYS

Student responses to the question “*If I could be any man in the world, I would be...*” ranged from family members to leaders in business and industry to professional athletes. One student selected Bill Gates because “*he gives most of his money to charity*”. Another student selected Jackie Robinson because “*he stood up to people who believed in racism*”. In a few instances, boys chose themselves as the man they would be, stating that they like the way they are and would not want to change.

In the pre-surveys, research participants overwhelmingly listed the following qualities that every man should have: *caring, thoughtful/kind, smarts, responsible/dependable, nice, helpful, able to keep promises and commitments, trustworthy, fun, brave/courage, determination or perseverance, overcomes fears*. These characteristics were similar to the findings in the post-survey.

In their responses to the question addressing when a boy becomes a man, research participants identified various stages, accomplishments, and experiences where this transition occurs.

...when he starts to care for someone; after college; when he becomes responsible, mature, and smart; around the age of 15 because he is almost going to get his driver's license and he is responsible; when he is twenty-one; when he helps someone out, takes care of his parents, and takes responsibility for what he has done; when he shows bravery, toughness, and does something great; when he gets mature and thoughtful; when he can take care of himself; when he is ready to take on life, buy a house, and live on his own; ...when he knows what life is about. Life isn't always about having fun.

The majority of the participants selected male characters from books, movies, and television shows, which they concluded best portrayed qualities of masculinity and manhood. The attributes listed on the pre-surveys matched their definitions and were synonymous with the character traits—determination and perseverance—offered in student definitions. The few female characters identified were described as courageous heroines (i.e., Anne Frank).

## Literature

During the examination of most novels, there were poignant conversations and passages of literature which prompted discussions of manhood. The level to which the students were able to infer and make meaningful applications to real-life situations was rewarding. Overall, attributes of the main character comprised the majority of participant responses. In all instances, the protagonist was presented as a hero with admirable character qualities. Agrass (2007), in the study of British literature and images of masculinity therein, highlights the tendency for male characters to appear as hypermasculine or overly feminized. The researcher would argue that this literature presents characteristics emblematic of the predominantly male characters, but these attributes are

universal and non-gender specific. This is evidenced in the students' selection of females as those who best portray qualities of masculinity and manhood.

In the next portion, each novel used in this research effort is summarized. Student responses and literature-based lessons and discussions surrounding manhood and related themes and attributes will be discussed.

### IN THE YEAR OF THE BOAR AND JACKIE ROBINSON

This story involved a female main character whose family emigrated to the United States from China. After facing many challenges in her transition to a new country, new customs, and a new school, her perseverance and love of baseball, and Jackie Robinson, ultimately enable her to gain wider acceptance and appreciation of her twoness—being both Chinese and living in America.

It is important to note that the main character in this novel is female. In the student post-surveys for this, our first novel, boys identified many characters as best portraying qualities of masculinity and manhood. Although the majority of the students identified the father, Mr. Wong, and Jackie Robinson as the characters that best portrayed qualities of masculinity and manhood, some students selected various female characters in the story as best portraying these characteristics.

Only a few participants identified the female main character, Shirley, as best portraying qualities of masculinity and manhood. Shirley showed courage and perseverance in the novel and “*kept her composure*”, as one student stated. She endured moving to a new country, not speaking English, having no friends, and being beaten-up by the school bully.

A few students did identify Mabel, the bully in the story, as the character best portraying manhood and masculinity. Mabel was described by participants as aggressive, athletic, and a leader. It is apparent that a few boys in the study attribute those qualities as gender specific, male attributes and not female characteristics. Groce (2001) found that the female protagonists in Newbery Medal-winning literature were described negatively due to their physical appearance but were praised for their academic intellect. This observation was true for the psycho-social adjustment of the main character. Groce also found that the same female characters were lauded for their heroic feats. Heroism, bravery, and intellect were frequently identified by the participants in this study as most representative of masculinity and manhood. Those qualities were also reflected in female characters.

In this novel, the overwhelming majority of students selected Mr. Wong and Jackie Robinson as the characters that best portrayed masculinity and manhood. Mr. Wong was described as *responsible, smart, courageous, and kind*. Moving his family to America from China showed his courage. His kindness was reflected when he became temporary landlord, cleaned the basement, repaired discarded goods and gave them as gifts to the tenants. Jackie Robinson was described by students as *courageous, never giving up, athletic, kind, and determined*.

In this novel, sports played a secondary role in the plot. As such, athleticism was a notable characteristic that the research participants concluded reflected manhood and masculinity. In class discussion, students highlighted Jackie Robinson's *courage, perseverance, and integrity* as most defining masculine traits.

## JUSTIN AND THE BEST BISCUITS IN THE WORLD

This novel detailed the life challenges of a 10 year-old boy who lived in a home with three women—his two older sisters and his mother. With the absence of his deceased father, a visit to his grandpa's ranch teaches him some important life lessons regarding responsibility, women's work, perseverance, and when men cry.

One significant discussion of this novel centered on the idea of 'women's work' versus 'men's work'. Justin, the protagonist, was unable to cook, wash dishes, make his bed, and properly fold his clothes; therefore, he concluded that it was women's work based on his inability and the ease with which his sisters and mother were able to accomplish those tasks. However, spending time with his grandpa, he learns that there is no such thing as women's work. In order to be successful, one must put forth effort and keep trying. Grandpa concluded that *"Making the bed is easy now, isn't it? All work is that way. It doesn't matter who does the work, man or woman, when it needs to be done. What matters is that we try to learn how to do the best we can in the most enjoyable way"* (pp. 65, 66). The research participants agreed that regardless of the type of work, success requires putting forth effort and practicing.

Another discussion relating to masculinity and manhood involved shedding tears. Justin, the main character, was embarrassed when his grandpa saw him "crying like a baby" (p. 66). In the novel a discussion ensued between Justin and Grandpa about men who cry. Grandpa admitted that he also cries. Justin is shocked to learn this. Grandpa concluded the conversation by stating *"The brave hide their fears, but share their tears. Tears bathe the soul"* (p. 68). The research participants concluded that it's permissible for boys and men to cry when they are hurt, injured, or sad about something. This does not make one a wimp. Participants distinguished that sometimes boys cry when they are poor sports, when losing a game or competition which, by their definition, is not an acceptable reason. The boys did acknowledge that there are gender stereotypes regarding crying.

In the post-survey, the students overwhelmingly selected Grandpa and Justin as the characters that best portrayed qualities of masculinity and manhood. Justin was described by the research participants as *brave, hardworking, willing to learn, mature, perseverant, and fast*. Grandpa was described as *brave, hardworking, teacher, patient, sacrificial, athletic, strong, and nice*. Overall, the research participants concluded that men must be strong, hard working, and have courage. From this novel the participants also concluded that it was acceptable for men and boys to cry if it was for a good reason.

## THE WAR WITH GRANDPA

This novel addressed a boys' developmental inability to deal with loss—the loss of his bedroom. After declaring war on his Grandpa, Peter ultimately learns significant lessons addressing manhood, responsibility, and the true ills of war.

In the post-survey, the students overwhelmingly selected Peter and Grandpa Jack, the main characters, as those who best portrayed qualities of masculinity and manhood. Peter was described as *brave, strong, persistent and determined*. Research participants felt strongly that what Peter had learned—that everything in life isn't fair—was a significant lesson attributable to his own maturation. Grandpa Jack was described as *determined, nice, responsible, smart, tough and strong*. The research participants viewed Grandpa as a teacher because he taught Peter lessons about life

and war. They also thought that Grandpa was creative, trying to settle the war without fighting. Finally, participants thought he was tough, because he was able to overcome the grief of losing his wife.

### STONE FOX

A historic David and Goliath narrative, this story surmises the life challenges of a 10 year-old boy and his efforts to save his grandpa and their potato farm. Willy, the protagonist, uses his boyhood ingenuity and the money in his college account to enter him and his dog, Searchlight, into the national dog sled race, a race intended for adults.

In the post-survey, the students overwhelmingly selected Willy and Stone Fox, the main characters, as those who best portrayed qualities of masculinity and manhood. Willy was described as *brave*, *persistent and determined*, and *smart*. He was applauded by the research participants for his ability to harvest an entire potato crop with only the help of his dog. Participants also recognized Willy for the sacrifice he made, depleting his college fund, against his grandfather's wishes, to enter the race. Willy also had self-confidence and faith that he would be able to achieve his lofty goal of winning the race, even against the feared Indian, Stone Fox. Stone Fox was described by research participants as *smart*, *confident*, *strong*, *determined*, and *kind*. The participants admired his passion and purpose for entering the dog-sled races, to use the earnings to buy back land for his tribe.

It is important to note that a few students identified the dog, Searchlight, as the character who best exemplified qualities of masculinity and manhood. Searchlight helped Willy harvest the entire potato crop and, in the end, lost her life due to the stress and strain of the dogsled race.

In addition, class discussion centered on Willy's heroic efforts to save his grandpa and the farm. He was willing to sacrifice all he had, his college savings account, to enter a dogsled race against adult men, including Stone Fox, who had never lost a race. Willy did not heed the advice of other adults who tried to convince him to sell the farm. His determination was cause for discussion about the aforementioned characteristics attributable to manhood and masculinity. Willy's mantra was an aphorism his grandpa often iterated— "*Where there's a will, there's a way*" (p. 37). The research participants concluded that Willy was committed to finding a way to save both grandpa and the farm. Most agreed that his determination was extraordinary. Conversation then proceeded to address areas in their personal lives where determination was evident. Although no boys offered any life-altering, suspenseful examples, the tenets remain deeply rooted in their collective boyhood experiences.

### ARTHUR, FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME

In this novel the main character, Arthur, was a cerebral 10 year-old. Spending the summer on his aunt and uncle's farm and meeting Moira, a free-spirited girl, challenged Arthur to unwind, take some risks, stop living in the pages of a book, take action, and live a little.

In the post-survey, the students overwhelmingly selected Arthur, the main character, as the best portrayal of masculinity and manhood. Participants describe Arthur as both *brave* and *smart*. The research participants noted that Arthur was brave for building the pen, saving the pigs, and sneaking to Yoyo Pratt's house in search of Pauline. Students also admired that Arthur became more adventuresome as the plot unfolded.

It is important to note that a few students identified Arthur's aunt and uncle, Elda and Wrisby, in addition to Moira, as the characters who best exemplified qualities of masculinity and manhood. Three students said that Aunt Elda best portrayed qualities of masculinity and manhood because *she climbed a high tree*, which Arthur was afraid to do until the very end. A few students also acknowledged that Moira was *thoughtful* and *responsible*. Yet others labelled Uncle Wrisby as *thoughtful*, *strong*, and *helpful*; their descriptors of masculinity and manhood.

In class discussion, the students were engrossed in conversations regarding Arthur's maturity throughout the story. As the novel unfolds, the research participants discussed the actions that Arthur takes. These actions show his bravery, courage, and willingness to take action, which they, in turn, attribute to characteristics and qualities reflecting masculinity and manhood. Later the students related their personal growth experiences to those of Arthur.

## SOUNDER

This novel, the winner of the 1970 Newbery Medal, chronicled the life and challenges of an African-American sharecropping family in the late 19th century in the southern United States of America. The story unravels as the boy journeys to find his father, his missing dog, and himself.

In the post-survey, the students overwhelmingly selected the boy, the main character, as best portraying the qualities of masculinity and manhood. Participants describe the boy as *brave*, *persistent*, *determined*, and *responsible*. The boy went on journeys alone, watched his siblings, and goes into the jail to see dad, alone. The boy showed persistence and determination when he went on a long quest, alone, to find his father. And, the boy was responsible because "*when dad is gone, the boy has to take care of his family*".

It is important to note that in addition to the boy, a few students selected the mother as the character who best exemplified the qualities of masculinity and manhood. She was described as *brave*, *responsible*, *encouraging*, *courageous*, and *perseverant*. Despite the father's decision to steal the ham to feed his hungry family, a few students selected him as the character who best exemplified qualities of masculinity and manhood. The father was described as *brave*, *perseverant*, *determined*, and *strong*. One student stated, "*Dad loved his family so much, that he went to jail for them*".

Overwhelmingly, the participants highlighted the importance of the role that the lonesome journey the boy took as paramount to his development into a man. Like the historic rituals of many Native American tribes, this boy goes on a vision quest, a journey alone, to clarify his future, thus returning a man. In further class discussions, students debated perceptions of crying and loss. After the boy's father was arrested, the author states, "*[The boy] felt like crying, but he didn't. Crying would only bother him*" (p. 39). Students discussed the significance of this passage and how it related to characteristics of maturity and manhood.

Additional discussion involved other aspects of maturity, dealing with grief and loss. "*But you must learn to lose. The young don't know how to learn it. Some people is born to keep. Some is born to lose. We was born to lose, I reckon*" (p. 52). The students connected this message with the plight of the sharecropping family, the bleak future that many southern African Americans had during this period in American history, and the hope that occurred at the end of the book when both the father and Sounder returned and the boy found a school where he could fulfil his lifelong dream,

learning to read. Students concluded that these observations were all examples of determination, an integral characteristic symbolic of manhood.

## SHILOH

This novel, the winner of the 1992 Newbery Medal, addressed a boy's yearning to change the world, including his very own, by saving an abused dog. The protagonist, Marty, through a series of rash decisions and lies learns to confront his challenges head-on and take responsibility for his actions; ultimately learning that right and wrong is not always so clear.

In the post-survey, the students overwhelmingly selected Marty, the main character, as best portraying the qualities of masculinity and manhood. Participants described Marty as a *risk taker, brave, determined, kind, and loving*. Marty took the risk of making a deal with a man who was known for his dishonesty and lack of integrity. Marty was brave because "... *he stood up for what was right*".

It is important to note that in addition to the main character, a few students selected other characters as best exemplifying the qualities of masculinity and manhood. A few students selected Dad for his strength and for helping Marty and Shiloh. Other students selected Mom for her love and care for Marty. And, three students selected Shiloh, the dog, for his *love, strong heart, determination, and for putting up with Judd (perseverance)*.

Class discussions specifically related to manhood addressed the events of lying and blackmail. Overall, students concluded that Marty was making the best decision to lie to his family about hiding Shiloh. The rationale was that he was lying to help someone or something else. Students agreed that blackmail was not positive, but in this case Marty was saving a life; therefore, blackmail was not too bad. Ultimately, students concluded that making difficult, mature, adult decisions is not always so easy.

## WHERE THE RED FERN GROWS

In this novel, the main character, Billy, in his yearning to own hunting dogs shows perseverance, sacrifice, and grit. In the end during the penultimate moment, his two dogs miraculously sacrifice their lives to save him.

In the post-survey, the students overwhelmingly selected Billy, the main character, as best portraying the qualities of masculinity and manhood. Participants described Billy as *brave, persistent or determined, courageous, and strong*. Students recognized that Billy worked for two years to save money to buy his dogs. He also chopped the tall tree alone for days just so he could keep a promise to his dogs. Walking 32 miles without any shoes was also an example of Billy's determination and bravery.

It is also important to note that some students selected other characters from this novel as best exemplifying the qualities of masculinity and manhood. The dogs, Old Dan and Little Ann, were also selected for their *bravery, sacrifice in saving Billy, keeping their promise to protect him, and their intelligence*. These are the same characteristics students used to identify the main character.



According to participant responses on the End of Research survey, of all eight novels read, this novel best portrayed qualities of manhood and masculinity. Fourteen out of fifteen participants selected the same character, Billy, from this novel. Participants were flabbergasted by Billy's determination, working for two years, saving every penny he had, without any shoes. Billy's chopping down the tallest tree in the forest so he could keep his word to his dogs, exemplified the transition from boyhood to manhood.

There are a few other passages that the participants identified as significant to their explanation and connection with the themes manhood and masculinity:

"After Papa had left, I started thinking, 'He doesn't even talk to me like I was a boy any more. He talks to me like I was a man'" (p. 79); "Well, all right. If that's the way you want it, I'm for it even if it is only an agreement between you and your dogs. If a man's word isn't any good, he's no good himself" (p. 81); and "Billy, there are times in a boy's life when he has to stand up like a man. This is one of those times. I know what you're going through and how it hurts, but there's always an answer. The Good Lord has a reason for everything He does" (p. 239).

## Discussion of Results

Iwamoto (1996), in a study analyzing award-winning children's literature, found that friendship, adventure, and family relationships were the most prevalent and noteworthy themes. Clemens (2005), using narrative discourse analysis, studied images of masculinity by studying 103 novels which specifically targeted teens. The researcher addressed concerns of hegemony in literature, concluding that the majority of novels present a more holistic world view on images of masculinity in literature. Clemens also concluded that images of hegemonic masculinity remain prevalent, but race, class, and cultural heritage are also noteworthy factors influencing the interpretation of masculinity. Inherent in the literature for these fourth graders, issues of race, class, and cultural heritage remain significant milieus for literary interpretation, especially regarding interpretations of manhood and masculinity.

Based upon student responses on all research surveys as well as direct observations from in-class lessons, three research conclusions were made.

1. According to the fourth grade boys in this study, masculinity and manhood are best encapsulated in five qualities—*bravery*, *intellect*, *responsibility*, *perseverance/determination*, and *kindness*. These traits may reflect messages ingrained from their nurturing or images of masculinity and manhood in media or the direct effects of the school's curriculum. It appears that the research participants were much more sensitive to the inner strength the main characters possessed.
2. Overwhelmingly, the boys selected MALE characters in the novels as those who best portrayed qualities of manhood and masculinity. But, in cases where there was a predominant female character, students selected those female characters as best portraying qualities of manhood and masculinity, describing them with the same adjectives and descriptors used for male characters in the novels. In a few cases, students used the same descriptors to define animals as best portraying qualities of manhood and masculinity. Their consistency in defining these attributes strengthened the conviction of their opinions.



3. Using responses from the End of Research survey, fourteen out of fifteen participants selected Billy from *Where the Red Fern Grows* as the one character who best portrayed the qualities of manhood and masculinity. This novel had a great amount of action, suspense, some blood, and death, which was not typical of the seven others. Some would argue that this is the stereotypical 'boys' book.' This novel was also the most recent one read. Student selection of this character could be due, in part, to the qualities that Billy possessed. In the student post-surveys, Billy's description overwhelmingly fit the profile of the boys' definitions of masculinity and manhood. Billy, in their minds, was the consummate image of a man. He conquered many challenges—surviving a fight with a gang, chopping down the big tree, saving his dogs from death, overcoming Rubin's death, winning the championship coon hunt, and surviving the attack of a mountain lion. The excitement of these adventures could certainly have influenced the participants' selection of this novel and this main character.

On the End of the Research survey, I asked the students two final questions: a) *What was the main purpose/intent of this research effort addressing masculinity and manhood*; and b) *Describe the type of man you intend to be when you grow up*. The responses were reassuring and poignant, authenticating their previous responses to literature, and applying these characteristics and qualities to their own lives. According to participants, the main purpose of this research effort was:

I think it was for us to learn what it was because we never learned the real meaning of manhood; ...to tell us how to grow up; ...to show us that we need to do these things to become a man; I think the purpose was to become more mature; I think the purpose was so when we are men we know how to act; the intent was for us to learn a lesson so someday we can have manhood too

Participants also concluded that when they grew up, they planned to be the type of men who:

I intend to be nice and successful at what I do for a living...; I intend to be kind, loving, caring, helpful, and all around nice ...; I want to be nice, kind, and generous; I want to be nice and responsible...; ...responsible and smart; ...a brave, athletic, outgoing, smart, and caring person; I intend to be a thoughtful, well-mannered person. I will be the type of person that god wants us to be. (It is important to note that religion, prayer, and divine intervention were significant themes prevalent in a few of the novels).

I entered this experience with an open mind, interested in learning from the boys. After reading all of the student responses, I have concluded that literary discussion of significant themes, even in the elementary school, is a principal strategy in helping to develop character. Gilman School's intentional means of incorporating discussions of values within the literature is appropriate, astute, and valuable.

## Conclusions

Fourth grade boys think similarly in regards to their definitions and interpretations of manhood and masculinity as it is presented in literature. Overwhelmingly participants in this study identified *bravery*, *intellect*, *responsibility*, *perseverance/determination*, and *kindness* as the leading attributes which define masculinity and manhood. Often, regardless of the gender or whether the character was human, if that character portrayed these qualities, the boys included them as ones who best exemplified the qualities of manhood and masculinity. Hu (1998) in a study addressing Newbery

Medal winning novels, concluded that values acquired through adversity enabled the protagonist to mature into intelligent and responsible ‘adults.’ These results strongly support the findings of this research.

Iwamoto (1996) found that various award winning literature, including Newbery Medal winning novels, failed to adequately represent the various images of diversity of the American landscape. The author found an overrepresentation of White, male protagonists. These findings support research conducted by Moorcroft, four years prior. Moorcroft (1992) found no trend towards greater inclusivity of varied gender roles in the portrayal of girls and women in Newbery Medal winning novels.

Participants in this study chose qualities of masculinity and manhood as a function of the characters actions and behavior, not necessarily as a function of his/her gender. As a result, these findings fail to support research by Iwamoto regarding stereotypical gender roles, especially for the female characters. As the literature used in this study was self-selected, only two Newbery Medal-winning novels were included. One novel had a White, male protagonist and the other did not. Regardless of the gender or ethnicity of the protagonist, the participants selected similar core values as a reflection of manhood and masculinity.

## Implications for Practice

Further research into the effects of literary discourse for boys is integral to greater in-depth analysis of their appropriate development. Educators must constantly encourage open dialogue when discussing literature, allowing boys to freely share their opinions—even ones that may differ from the commonly accepted norm. It is assumed that boys’ perceptions are their reality. In our world of technology, the definitions and norms continue to change. In this study, it was apparent that some age-old descriptors of manhood and masculinity remain: *bravery, intellect, responsibility, and perseverance/determination*. Those definitions may, in fact, reflect the educational and social class culture of students enrolled in this elite, independent school. It may, however, reflect a change in gender norms and male perceptions thereof.

*Kindness* was a consistent attribute of the protagonists, male or female, in each novel. In this modern era, there is a growing concern for the appropriate development of boys. Myriad reports paint a dismal and depressing picture, with images of instant gratification overwhelming the basic tenets of civility and mutual respect. Growing concerns for fallen role models and lack of integrity in sports, business, and religion cast a dark shadow on a future filled with optimism. The inclusion of this characteristic by these fourth grade boys reassures me that boys’ early perceptions of manhood and masculinity are not completely testosterone-laden and narcissistic. The students repeatedly identified traditional female qualities—love, forgiveness, care, and kindness—as attributes that best define what a man is and should be: The residue of hope.

Further research into the selection and awarding of the Newbery Medal seems to be an area where additional data are necessary. The consensus among researchers is that most Newbery Medal winning novels maintain the same stereotypical interpretations of gender and ethnicity prevalent both historically and in the modern age. It is imperative that educators assess and re-evaluate the values presented in literature. The messages may ultimately contradict your intended purposes, your personal philosophy, and your school’s mission and, in the long run, be a detriment to the holistic development and success of tomorrow’s men.

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## Reflection

*This research experience has been rewarding. The actual process of gathering the research data was fairly seamless. Reading student responses, in-class discussions on issues of manhood and masculinity, and teaching/reinforcing values through literature remains a personal passion.*

*During the summer of 2008, I began contemplating what approach I would take to gather data. For the most part, that plan was implemented, minus some minor edits and changes throughout. Input from the research team members during their experience helped me fine-tune and amend aspects of my research plan.*

*I greatly enjoyed reading the updates of my fellow researchers. As one of the few researchers with elementary age participants, I was intrigued by the research plans of those studying both middle and upper school age students.*

*At sundry points I questioned whether my plan was too grandiose and overwhelming. This almost became a reality once I began writing my report. Trying to summarize research findings for eight novels in less than 5,000 words was impossible. The support and direction of Di, our team leader, was very helpful.*

*The results of my study were also reassuring. The five characteristics that the students concluded for attributes of masculinity and manhood were similar to those discussed in class. These characteristics included both traditionally masculine and feminine attributes.*

*There were two aspects of this research experience that were surprising. The first of which was that students selected male, female, and non-human characters as best exemplifying attributes of manhood or masculinity. I extrapolate that the characteristics and qualities, therefore, are not solely male but are behavioral characteristics. I was also surprised that the students overwhelmingly selected the same protagonist as the character who best exemplified qualities of manhood and masculinity.*

*Since completing this research effort, I have become a more ardent supporter of research-based best practices for practitioners. I have encouraged, and will continue to encourage, colleagues to design and implement research to examine and assess the work they do. The process and the reflection were both important and significant professional development opportunities that every educator should experience.*

*Edward M. Trusty Jr*

# Truths Universally Acknowledged: Reading for Gender in *Pride and Prejudice*

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## Abstract

Critical literacy activities have been successfully employed as a means of educating students about gender, allowing them to explore the construction of reader roles and the ways in which texts present men and women. The action research project discussed in this article considers the use of these techniques when teaching Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* to a class of teenage boys, with the aim of enhancing and broadening their understanding of manhood and masculinity. The activities served as a distancing device, allowing students to discuss these issues without the risk of self-revelation; they also encouraged students to communicate their thoughts about masculinity and related topics in a more subtle and discriminating way. As the research progressed, it became clear that many students had a greater understanding of the multifarious nature of masculinity than they had before starting the unit of study.

## Introduction

Recent thinking about gender has tended to question the idea of a single, unified definition of masculinity, and posits instead the notion that masculinity has a performative function. For example, Butler (1990) argues for the existence of numerous ways of "doing" masculinity that vary according to social and institutional context, whilst Connell (1987) uses the term "masculinities" to describe this multiplicity of discourses, and explores their hierarchical relationships.

Like Gilbert and Rowe (1989) who posit that "when we write, and when we read, we enter into the dominant and accepted sets of social meanings" (p. 16), Reid (1989) draws on the work done by Culler (1982) on the construction of reader roles. His discussion of a mode of criticism that "provides leverage for displacing or undoing the system of concepts or procedures of male criticism" (p. 63) leads to the realisation that "to 'read as a woman' meant that we had to confront and oppose much that we usually do as readers, in order to articulate things otherwise suppressed" (p. 114). Reid's attempts to interrogate the portrayal of women in a variety of literary and non-literary texts are recalled in the work of Martino and Mellor (2000) who suggest that "it is important for readers to become aware of how they arrive at particular understandings of texts" and express their desire to "draw students' attention... [to] the way texts are gendered in terms of the reading positions they make available to readers" and "how particular reading practices or ways

of reading can enable readers to take up alternative reading positions and produce other readings” (p. xi).

The critical literacy text-analysis activities suggested by Martino and Mellor are similar to those described in Josephine Peyton Young’s *Young’s Boy Talk: Critical Literacy and Masculinities* (2000), her account of a home-schooling project which encouraged boys to reflect on their conceptions of masculinity. Some of Martino and Mellor’s activities are in fact used in the research conducted by Wallowitz (2004) during a home-school critical literacy course. Like Simpson (1996) who believes that the use of critical literacy enables students to become “more conscious of how texts work upon them and less susceptible to manipulation by what they read and view” (p. 119), Wallowitz states that critical literacy is a tool that allows students to read in a more subtle and discriminating way.

Informed by Kramp (2007) in his exploration of masculinity in Jane Austen’s work, and with recourse to the work done by Martino and Mellor, Young and Wallowitz, an action research project was undertaken to explore the question:

“How can the teaching of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* through the use of critical literacy techniques enhance boys’ understanding of masculinity and manhood?”

## Research Context

City of London School is a moderately large independent boys’ school located in the heart of the city. It is a selective school, whose students are aged between 10 and 18 and reflect the diversity of London itself: many racial and religious backgrounds are represented in the student body, including a large Jewish population.

## Research Sample

The 5th Year class selected to take part in the research was of mixed ability, and consisted of 19 boys of 15 and 16 years of age. These students were working towards GCSE (General Certificate in Secondary Education) and IGCSE (International General Certification in Secondary Education) examinations and their study of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*, the text selected as the focus for action research, was part of this process.

## Research Plan

Although my teaching of *Pride and Prejudice* had the ultimate goal of preparing students for examination, I planned lessons that would hopefully enable them to consider issues surrounding manhood and masculinity through the use of critical literacy techniques. There were, broadly, three parts to this process. Firstly, I wanted students to understand both the action research process, and the concepts underlying critical literacy: how attitudes towards gender are created and regulated by texts, and the assumptions that readers bring to the things they read. Secondly, I planned to engage them in a course of study of the text itself, focusing on the ways in which men are presented in the novel, the types of masculinity privileged by the novel and considering in particular the character of Mr. Darcy. Finally, I encouraged students to develop a reading of the novel as a whole, and to consider its status as a cultural artefact.



My choice of a 5th year group as the subject of my research was determined to a large extent by the existing curriculum. I thought that it would be fruitful to use *Pride and Prejudice* as the basis of a study of masculinity, and this was a text that was offered for study at IGCSE level. The structure of my year, taking into account other teaching commitments, was also such that I was able to engage with the action research study in a time scale that suited me by working with this class.

## Research Methods

The research methods were qualitative in nature, and aimed to measure my students' engagement both with the course they were undertaking and the novel itself, as well as assessing their attitudes towards masculinity and manhood before, after and during the research. To this end, a "pre-test" survey, intended to indicate the boys' existing ideas about these issues, was taken by every member of the group, and repeated after the unit of work was completed. A variety of techniques was used to collect data throughout the course: field notes and still photography, audio recordings of lessons and (self-selected) focus groups, as well as worksheets and other written assignments completed by participants.

## Results and Discussion

Responses to the initial survey revealed a somewhat mixed picture. As perhaps might have been expected in a liberal, cosmopolitan school in a diverse capital city, a number of respondents gave answers that appeared to indicate an understanding of masculinity that went beyond "traditional" or hegemonic conceptions of gender. The idea that men should be "caring" was fairly widespread, for example, and a number of students stated that there was a great deal of diversity amongst men—and no such thing as an ideal man. However, many of these students also stressed the importance of more traditional signifiers of masculinity (e.g. height, muscularity, hairiness) and took as role models men, mainly athletes or sportsmen, who might be seen to illustrate some or all of these qualities. Other role models included political leaders such as Nelson Mandela or Barack Obama, although it should perhaps be noted that the survey was taken on the day after the US President's inauguration, which had been heavily featured in UK broadcast media and newspapers. Such figures could, of course, be seen to represent the equation of power and leadership qualities with desirable masculinity.

The majority of students did not align themselves with traditionally marginalized or stigmatised models of masculinity. Only one student chose a homosexual celebrity as a role model (and, interestingly, chose to submit his survey anonymously) and a small number of respondents seemed to adopt, perhaps provocatively, an almost stereotypically chauvinistic stance: one boy said that a man "should be courteous to inferiors such as women". Some respondents demonstrated an apparent awareness of the performative nature of masculinity, with one student writing for example that men should be able to cry, but must also demonstrate a "tough outer layer". Although one student questioned the terms of the questions he was being asked ("Man is an umbrella term in many ways"), others did not distinguish between sex and gender, and one student simply defined women and men in opposition to one another, writing in answer to the question, "What does a man look like?", that a man was "Not like a woman". Another group of students wrote in a self-consciously glib or amusing fashion, perhaps indicating their embarrassment at addressing the issue at all.



A similarly mixed picture emerged from the first focus groups and lessons that I took, and some boys continued to make jokes that expressed their own discomfort. I noted, of the first focus group, that “Initially students appeared to find it awkward to address [the] issues raised, making jokes and glib comments”, for example that the sandwiches provided contained “masculine” bacon and “gay” lettuce. Similar attempts at humour were made in the second lesson of the course, when students were asked to complete a questionnaire about their early experiences of gender; one student, for example, shouted to another that “I’ve done a survey and it turns out you’re GAY”. As another student put it in his journal:

What is interesting to see in the classroom, and it can be noticed immediately, is the class’s reluctance to talk about masculinity. They deal with it by joking about it. I think it will be a difficult task to get the class over the barrier of insecurity and to a point where talking about masculinity does not cause awkward jokes and silences.

There was an interesting contrast between the comments of some boys in the questionnaire (even though it should also be noted that a number of boys wrote in a thoughtful and discriminating way), and what they later said in focus groups convened to explore further their ideas about masculinity and manhood. Based on a question Laraine Wallowitz (2004) asked of her students in a similar survey, the boys were asked “Did you ever challenge gender stereotypes, for example by playing with a toy usually played with by girls? How did others react?” Several boys wrote their responses in capital letters, some using only a single word: “NO”; “NO—except for wearing a pink hat as a joke”; “NO!”; “No. Never have, never will”. Similarly, another boy, in response to the question “Can you remember a time when [being male] was a disadvantage?” presented an image of hyper-masculinity by writing “When I was too brutal”.

In the focus groups, however, some of the same boys spoke very differently, acknowledging the complexities of gender and identity. In response to an exercise where participants were asked to place male celebrities on a “masculinity scale”, one said (of the occasionally transvestite comedian Eddie Izzard): “[he’s] a transvestite but masculine—likes guns and fast cars, which you attribute with being masculine, although I don’t think they make someone masculine”.

The disparity between work done in class and the more intimate discussion involving other students who had chosen to attend focus group sessions revealed the students’ difficulty in discussing masculinity and manhood as these concepts applied to them. The use of *Pride and Prejudice*, however, made the discussion much less personal, and much less focused on the students themselves, and therefore easier for them to engage with without the risk of self-revelation. As the project progressed, boys seemed to become more comfortable, and more fluent, in discussing issues of masculinity and manhood. There was, increasingly, less recourse to humour as students became accustomed to the use of critical literacy activities; boys appeared to welcome the opportunity that these provided to write and speak about masculinity and literature in a more subtle, complex and discriminating manner.

Activities adapted from *Gendered Fictions* (Martino and Mellor, 2000) allowed students to consider the ideas about gender that they bring, as readers, to a text. One student felt that a ball scene from *Pride and Prejudice*, in which I reversed the gender of characters, illustrated the fact that “We generally think of men as more powerful, active or assertive while women have actions done to them [and] men do actions”. Journal entries revealed that students were increasingly thinking

about the nature of established gender roles, even if their opinions were not yet fully formed. One wrote that “in literature, we have a bias, or expected view of men and women” and another added that “It [the lesson] proved to us that women and men can be similar and [we felt] shock as it shows us [the] fixed roles of men and women in society”. One boy, who in a focus group had professed to an essentialist view of sex roles—“To be a man is to be almost like a ruler in some ways... to be in charge, the alpha male, the top dog”—found himself thinking about gender in a different way. In a journal entry, he wrote: “Are men and women opposite? Can they not be somewhere in the middle? Not black and white but lots of shades of grey. They aren’t so different”.

Many students also demonstrated an increasing awareness of the way in which power is manifested in texts, and the ways in which some kinds of masculinity are privileged over others. In an activity designed to assess students’ perceptions of which male characters in *Pride and Prejudice* were set up by Austen as the most desirably masculine, boys were asked to rank the characters from “most masculine” to “least masculine”, with the majority placing Mr Darcy at the top of the scale, and Mr Collins at the bottom. One boy noted in his journal that Darcy, although in some ways atypical of what a “real” man should be in his opinion, was presented by the novel in this way: “Interesting to see that even though a character like Darcy who seems to be passive with feminine qualities can be portrayed [sic] as the most masculine figure in the book”.

There was heated discussion about the relative status of male characters, as careful attention was paid to the ways in which the text prepares readers to make judgements. One student, for example, said that Mr Bennet, who is often seen in his study, was therefore being presented as “lazy” and that this was typical of the way in which men are often portrayed: “they’re [seen as] lazy, they can’t be bothered to do anything”. There was also discussion of the status of married men in the novel, as the most desirably masculine characters are single; some students felt that marriage was equated with emasculation. Students also looked carefully at the language attributed to male characters or used to describe men in the novel. One wrote, of Mr Bingley, that “We’re not told his first name—denoting very public appearance”.

By using critical literacy activities as an approach to the text, students also gained an understanding that masculinity is a social construct that varies over time and between cultures. Two lessons were spent comparing the way in which Darcy is portrayed by Colin Firth in the BBC miniseries of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and in the original text. In response, one student wrote that “The TV version shows a lot of... physical masculinity and how he expresses his feelings. The book does not go into much depth in terms of physical masculinity.” Others added that both versions of the character were masculine, but in different ways. In my notes about the lesson, I wrote that there “Seemed to be an acceptance, generally, that ideas about masculinity are elative and culture/time-specific—not absolute”. This impression was borne out by the comments made by students in their journals, with one boy noting, by way of example, that “masculinity takes many different forms, and... modern masculinity is different masculinity to old masculinity”. Another concurred, writing that:

over time peoples [sic] perception of what it is to be masculine have changed, as the society around them changes. Overall, since the time *Pride and Prejudice* was written, when masculinity was being gentlemanlike and well mannered, the perception has now moved to a more physically dominated masculinity where it is important to be strong and sporty.

This is, of course, rather reductive: but demonstrative, nonetheless, of this student's increasingly sophisticated thinking on the issue.

As the unit of study progressed, there was also a greater sophistication in the language used to write and speak about men and masculinity. Students tended to use words more carefully; one boy, for example, talked about Darcy "not showing any signs of selfishness or other traits *associated* with men" (my italics). By way of contrast, in his "pre-test" survey he was somewhat sweeping in his expression of a Darwinian view of male behaviour: "man has to act like he does in order to survive... They need to fight in order to survive due to Evolution from the apes".

Although every student became much more nimble with the language he used, using words such as "masculine" or "feminine" with confidence, poor expression on the part of some boys—at least some of the time—appeared to indicate a lack of understanding about some of the tasks they were undertaking as part of the project. One student wrote, of the TV version of Darcy, that "Film, even though written 200 years later; still portrays masculinitys [sic] in form of sports". Another wrote that "In the film—he is nervous and shy, which is similar to how a lot of men act today. This shows that masculinity is very much like people are today". This somewhat muddled statement could be indicative of the student's desire to please his teacher by saying the right kind of thing. Other members of the group perhaps chose to hide their confusion by making rather bland comments, such as "It was interesting to see how in depth Jane Austen has made his [sic] character". Such fence-sitting on the students' part could reveal an unwillingness to risk embarrassment by explaining that they were unsure about the issues under discussion. This was the case, to a greater or lesser extent, for a small number of boys throughout the course at various times. For example, one student, when looking at the way male characters were presented in the text, wrote that Mr Bingley had a "passive name"—an observation that apparently makes no sense.

During the lessons on Darcy, I also observed in my lesson notes that I felt a particular point was "understood and engaged with by *some* students, although perhaps not all—some students rather unengaged". Indeed, some boys did seem to become more distracted as they approached the end of the course, perhaps because of the complexity of the material for less able students and the sophisticated thought processes that it sometimes demanded. Many of the boys who demonstrated the best grasp of the concepts under discussion, who displayed the most interest during lessons and who tended to speak and write about gender in the most sophisticated manner also tended to be those who showed most interest in the project in general. Several students of this type chose to attend focus groups during their lunch hour, for example, and were keen to engage in discussion about the project outside lesson time. It is also notable that many of these boys—i.e. those who were both most interested in the project and relatively sophisticated in their thinking—were also those whose initial responses to the "pre-test" survey were the most thoughtful and discriminating. By the same token, those boys who performed least well on paper were often those who contributed least to class discussions.

The final lessons of the course, however, revealed that every student had made significant progress using critical literacy activities. Both a discussion of what the current popularity of *Pride and Prejudice* says about the nature of contemporary masculinity and an activity that asked students to critique different "readings" of the novel were approached with confidence and demonstrated the group's awareness of the ways in which texts, and readers, create meaning. One student, for

example, noted that the final lessons, which invited students to think about the novel as a whole, “highlighted for me the way in which your initial attitude affects the way you read the book and interpret it... I also caught a glimpse of how it is to read the book as a different person”. He also remarked that “the class behaved so well in the latter part of the lesson”, pointing to this as an indicator of engagement with the material. An audio recording of the lesson does indeed reveal a generally focused and motivated group.

There was one notable dissenter, however, a student who had been supportive of the project and who had contributed to focus group sessions. He concluded that:

Some people feel obliged to think outside the box or differently and that if you don't you are stupid. So many people do it now that thinking inside is different. Constantly people don't notice what is gleaming [sic] them in the face. We need to first notice what we first see before doing something else. Jane Austen was writing a story about what women like. Not to try and spark a revolution in how we think of masculinity.

The responses that this student made to the exit survey appeared to provide evidence of his rejection of the premise of the research. His answers did not change a great deal from the “pre-test” survey: for example, his response to the question “What does a man look like?” in the initial survey was “Male characteristics” and in the exit survey, “strong, rugged etc”. Both this answer and others appeared to indicate that his thinking had not advanced a great deal—and the same was true of other respondents.

Other responses to the exit survey, however, provided strong evidence that many students had broadened their understanding of masculinity and manhood as a result of studying *Pride and Prejudice* using critical literacy techniques. Boys were often keen to point to a wider definition of manhood than they were at the beginning of the course, in terms of both physicality and personal characteristics. Even those students who did not interrogate the terms on which the questions were being asked were more likely to demonstrate awareness (to a greater or lesser extent) of the performative nature of masculinity. One such respondent wrote in the “pre-test” that a man should behave “dominantly and powerful”; in the exit survey, however, he stated that “he should behave as he would like to behave... he should be free and behave freely and not conform to the behaviours of man and its world”. This statement, while unclear, does at least recognise that men feel pressure to “conform” to expected behaviours, and that such behaviours are not necessarily innate.

## Conclusions

Students gained a great deal from the project as a means to approach the study of masculinity. Firstly, the use of literature served as a distancing device, allowing students to discuss masculinity and manhood without the potential embarrassment of self-revelation. Secondly, the critical literacy activities provided students with the tools to discuss the way in which masculinity is presented in *Pride and Prejudice*, and to consider the attitudes that they bring to the text as readers. The results of this were reflected in the more discriminating language used to discuss masculinity and manhood as the project progressed, in the lack of awkwardness or embarrassment that students displayed when discussing these issues, and the evidence that students ended their study of the novel with a greater understanding of the multifarious nature of masculinity than they had at the start. There was some evidence, however, that not every student benefited equally by participating

in the project. At least one student was unconvinced by the ideas underlying the research, and others either changed only partially in their thinking or appeared not to fully understand some aspects of the process. Many students were engaged throughout the course, and participated consistently in classes; others were less motivated.

## Implications for Practice

Journal entries for the final lesson revealed a generally positive response to the project as a whole, as did the final focus group. One student wrote that “It has inspired me to think much deeper into many themes in the book, and has been challenging enough to make us look beyond the obvious.” Another remarked that “I have found this project very useful and believed that it has helped me enormously in understanding the novel.” There was also considerable evidence that students were interested in the issues raised by the project, and that they welcomed the opportunity to discuss these. Given these assessments, and the evidence that the project did enable many students to broaden their understanding of masculinity and manhood, teachers should consider the use of critical literacy strategies when planning to teach a text. Such strategies can prove useful not only when raising conceptions of gender and masculinity, but also as a means of capturing interest in the text under discussion, as students can make a connection between the world of the text and issues that concern their own lives. For many teachers, the use of these techniques could be a useful addition to their armoury of teaching strategies.

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## Reflection

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*My involvement in this action research project has been very rewarding and, a great deal of the time, very enjoyable. In terms of my development as an educator, the action research process itself has proved a useful tool with which to reflect upon, and ultimately improve my practice. The specific focus of the project—masculinity—provided me with the opportunity to engage with my students on an issue that proved to be of some significance to them, but also encouraged me to approach my teaching from a different angle than I normally would. The project, then, had an invigorating effect, which I hope was transmitted to my students.*

*The research, once planned, went fairly well. It took me a little while, however, to get to this point: as might be expected, it can be difficult to find time to engage in a literature review and planning process at certain points in a busy school calendar. This stage of the project undoubtedly took longer, in addition, because I had not taken part in action research before and was keen to check that I was taking the right steps. The comments and questions of my colleagues on the IBSC action research team were helpful, however, in ascertaining that I was indeed going in the right direction.*

*The nature of school life can also, at times, prevent action research from running smoothly. Fire alarms and heavy snowfall, as well as other factors, occasionally prevented lessons and focus groups from going ahead as planned. These could often be worked around, but perhaps made the data collection stage more protracted and less focused than it otherwise might have been.*

*The support of colleagues at City of London School was invaluable in making the project a success. Fellow teachers in the English Department took a great deal of interest in the project, as did members of the senior management team. I was fortunate to be given a great deal of practical assistance: catering for focus groups, technical support, the books and photocopying funds that I requested when engaging in my literature review. However, I was equally lucky to be surrounded by colleagues who were prepared to discuss the progress of the research with me and suggest their own ideas about it.*

*Any difficulties were also mitigated by the knowledge that other team members were available for consultation if necessary, as well as by the thought that—despite occasional frustrations—I was contributing to a worthwhile project that would ultimately benefit the students I teach.*

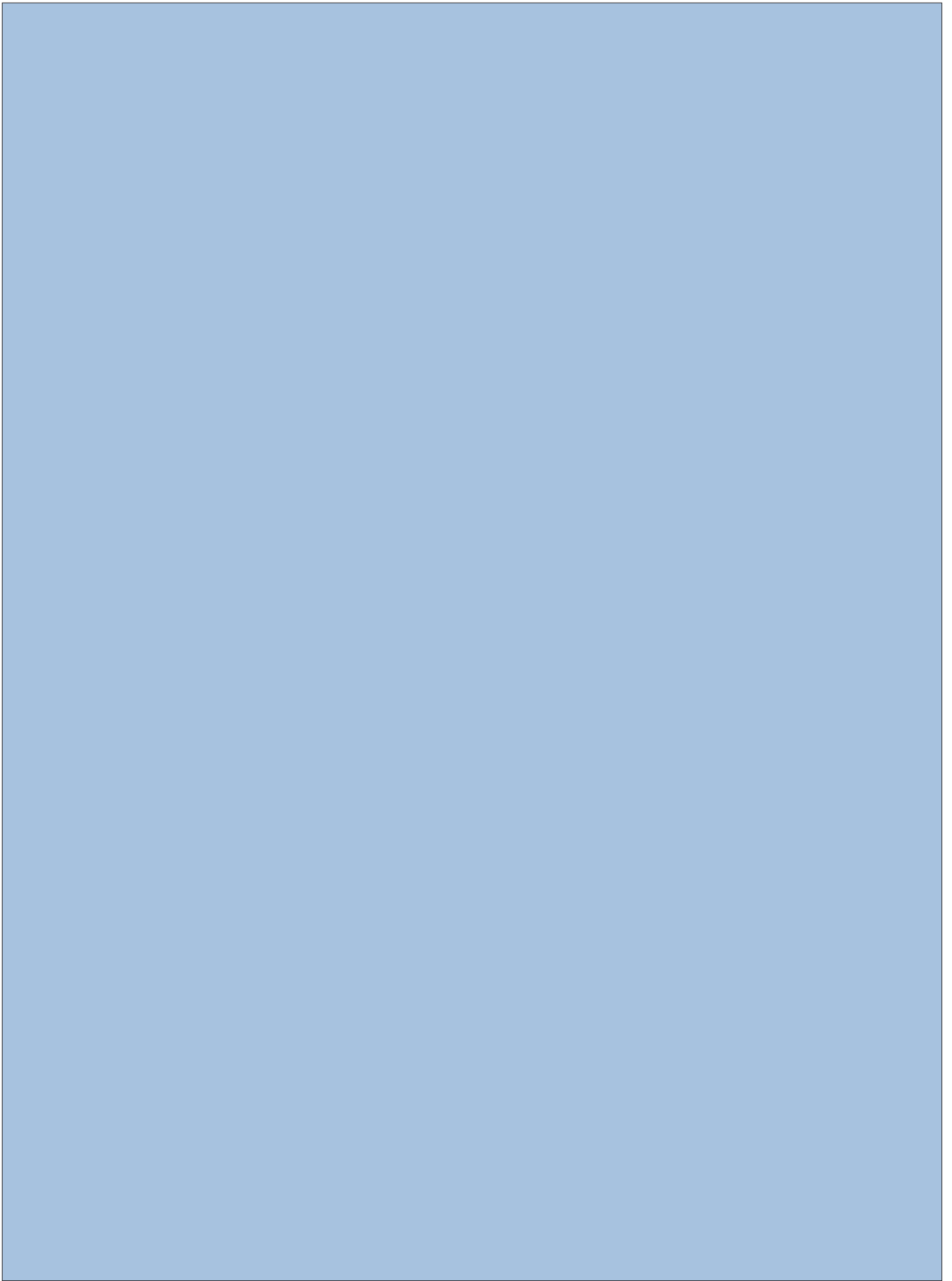
*In short, it was a positive experience, and one which I would hope to repeat. I discovered the value of action research as a tool for teaching and learning, and felt that the teaching I did as a result made a refreshing change from my normal practice. I also come away from the research process with the belief that the teaching of literature can indeed extend boys' understanding of masculinities, and with the determination to highlight these issues—so important to boys approaching manhood in a changing world—in my future practice.*

*Jack Williams*











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