

BOYS HAVE HEART: GENDER EQUALITY AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract

Throughout the the fall term of 2015, fifteen boys from Fairfield Country Day School, (ages 14 to 15), participated in eight workshops on global citizenship, gender equality and masculinity. Our goal was to make the boys better global citizens by focusing on gender equality and masculinity. The eight workshops - largely centered around the film clips from the documentary ‘The Mask You Live In’—written, produced and directed by Jennifer Seibel Newsom—exposed the boys to facts and concepts that were entirely new to them. The data gathered showed that boys can become better global citizens by simply being aware of the inequality between men and women. With this raised awareness, every boy came up with an action he could take to mitigate this imbalance.

Introduction

During the summer of 2014, we were struck by the number of reports of violence against women on college campuses and even at prep schools here in the U.S. That same summer I read *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Power, and Violence* (Carter, 2014) and was deeply affected by the global human rights crises Carter outlines in the book. Gender inequality, notes Carter, is an issue that crosses all races, classes, and regions:

“There is a system of discrimination, similar to racial discrimination, extending far beyond a small geographical region to the entire globe; it touches every nation, perpetuating and expanding the trafficking in human slaves, body mutilation, and even legitimized murder on a massive scale. This system is based on a presumption that men and boys are superior to women and girls...My own experience and the testimony of courageous women from all regions and all major religions have made it clear...that the result of twisted religion and violence is a pervasive denial of equal rights to women, more than half of all human beings, and this results in tangible harm to all of us, male and female” (Carter p. 1).

We asked ourselves what we as teachers of boys could do to help promote gender equality and change some of the societal attitudes about women and men. We wanted the project to examine gender equality through the lens of society’s definition of masculinity. Unfortunately, many boys across the globe are aligning masculinity with athletic and economic success, demeaning women, and violence. They are also learning that “being a man” means you must hide your emotions. Our goals in this project were to teach boys the importance of gender equality, locally and globally, and to show them that healthy masculinity has nothing to do with the way society and the media defines it. Before our 9th graders go off to secondary school and college, we want to make sure they are aware of some these issues and understand that they can take action to make changes.

Stringer (2014) states that “the primary purpose of [action research] is as a practical tool for developing solutions to problems experienced” (Stringer, p. 10). While the boys may not have known they were experiencing this problem, our job was to show them that they and all people are part of the problem and also the solution. Our workshops, called “Boys Have Heart” would focus on United Nations’ Millennial Goal #3: Promoting Gender Equality. Our research question was: *Can workshops on gender equality make boys better global citizens?*

Literature Review

In *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Power and Violence*, Carter (2014) lays out the long-term, systemic oppression of women's right to freedom, education, equal opportunity in work and pay, and social standing - even within her own family. Carter explains the root of much of the violence against women is justified by the major religions of the world:

The relegation of women to an inferior or circumscribed status by many religious leaders is one of the primary reasons for the promotion and perpetuation of sexual abuse. If potential male exploiters of women are led to believe that their victim is considered inferior or "different" even by God, they can presume that it must be permissible to take advantage of their superior male status (p. 19).

Thinking about this issue globally by addressing the UN Millennial Development Goals, we can focus on Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women. According to the UN, there has been much progress since the goals were made back in September 2000:

- The developing countries as a whole have achieved the target to eliminate gender disparity in primary, secondary and tertiary education
- Globally, about three quarters of working-age men participate in the labour force, compared to half of working-age women

- Women make up 41 percent of paid workers outside of agriculture, an increase from 35 per cent in 1990
- The average proportion of women in parliament has nearly doubled over the past 20 years
- Women continue to experience significant gaps in terms of poverty, labour market and wages, as well as participation in private and public decision-making. (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml>)

However, there is more work to do. The U.S. Justice Department reports “191,610 cases of rape or sexual assault in the US in 2006 and 91% of the victims were female. More than 475 women assaulted every day. The estimate is that only 16% of these cases are reported to the police, and the rate drops to fewer than 5% on college campuses” (Carter, p. 118). In many third world countries the statistics are difficult to measure. After reading Carter’s book, we wondered what we as teachers of boys could do to lessen the violence against girls and women. Even if our students are never the perpetrators, they need to know that standing by silently can be harmful too. Inaction has an effect. We wanted them to understand that each of them has a role in our global society.

Around the same time that I read Carter’s book, there was a flurry of reporting on rape and sexual abuse on boarding school and college campuses in the U.S., including the articles ‘Reporting rape and wishing she hadn’t’ (Bogdanich, 2014), ‘St. Paul’s grad charged with sexually assaulting student’ (Blessing, 2014), and on the radio, ‘Rape on Campus: Painful Stories Cast Blame on Colleges’ (NPR, 2014). Very quickly our intellectual puzzle became: What is it in our society that leads some boys

and men to engage in violence against women and girls? Is there a deeper societal belief that condones or causes this behavior?

In comes 'The Mask You Live In' (Newsom 2014), a film produced by the Representation Project that illustrates the way our culture teaches boys that being violent is part of being masculine. Dr. Caroline Heldman states in the film, "Masculinity is not organic, it's reactive. It is a rejection of everything feminine." It is no wonder that a man uses violence to solve a problem if he is taught through our cultural norms that he cannot express his feelings in other, so-called feminine ways. "We associate sexual conquest with masculinity." (Newsom 2014) With this belief, boys and men cannot have a fulfilling, authentic relationship with a girl or woman. The hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity we see in mass media reflect a cultural tension and fear about the fact that gender is socially constructed and there is a pressure to fit into those boxes (Newsom 2014). When boys are 11, 12, 13, and 14 they talk about their friends and they share secrets with them. Starting at about 15, 16, or 17 the language shifts and they start talking about being hurt or betrayed by friends. Boys learn to keep their real feelings inside when they are with their friends. We have feminized talking about feelings, relationships, and empathy. If it is feminine, in this mindset, it is weak and bad. This leads to two assumptions: girls are weak and *less than*, and boys are confined to the narrow parameters of so-called manly behavior. They learn to wear the 'mask.'

It is clear that on a local level our students need to raise their awareness of their perceptions of women and men, the facts about the disparity between the two sexes, and the way the media portrays them both. Furthermore, they need to integrate this knowledge into their global outlook. Last spring, at a UN panel discussion on

women's leadership, Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury from Bangladesh stated, "Each one of us needs to be globally connected. The days of staying in our national boundaries are gone. It is necessary to see women's rights and equality as human issues, not women's issues. Men and women together, we have the power to empower." Our focus with the boys this year was to highlight how their views and actions towards girls and women affects them personally, affects their community, and affects all of humanity. "Whatever I do in my community," Chowdhury says, "has an impact – positive or negative – on the rest of the world."

Our job was to make an action research project out of this subject and reach our boys effectively. *I Can Learn from You*, by Michael Reichert and *For Whom the Boy Toils*, by Reichert and Richard Hawley illustrate the importance of the relationship between teachers and boys. One striking finding is that "Boys experience their teachers before they experience the lessons they teach" (Reichert & Hawley, 2013). They respond well to a teacher who is passionate, expresses vulnerabilities, accommodates certain levels of opposition, is humorous, masterful of his or her subject, and/or who will go the extra mile to reach them. We hoped to impart all of these qualities while teaching these boys about their global responsibility to examine the social constructs built around men and women.

Research Context

Fairfield Country Day School (FCDS) is a small, independent PK–9th grade boys school founded in 1936. It is located in Fairfield, Connecticut, a mid-sized, coastal New England town. FCDS balances strong academics with the development of the whole boy. We embrace traditions, but welcome new ideas. At the heart of Fairfield Country Day is its sense of community. There is a palpable culture of caring for one

another. It is a place where the boys feel safe to take risks to learn and express themselves.

Our research participants were the 15 boys in the 9th grade class. The boys were all 14 or 15 years old. They varied in academic ability, but were similar in race, culture, and socio-economic status; all white, upper-middle class, and mostly Christian. Of the group, five have been at FCDS since Kindergarten, two since 2nd grade and the rest at least since 8th grade. They knew each other well and felt comfortable together. We chose to do our project with the 9th grade class because of the small size and because the boys needed to be mature enough to understand the issues surrounding gender.

We gave the boys an overview of our project and sent home an information sheet and an informed consent document, which they and their parents all signed and returned. We assured them that none of their names would be used in our paper or presentations but explained that photos and/or video clips would be used to document the research.

The Action

One of the immediate challenges that we faced was how to take these 14-year-old boys from their relatively sheltered viewpoints of life in Fairfield County to a global view of the issue of the gender equality. If we started with some of the brutal news stories of sexual assault on U.S. campuses, or honor killings that occur in many countries across Africa, Asia and Europe, we felt the boys would not relate and we would lose them. We needed to start closer to home before they could process any of these atrocities. We began with the boys themselves and talked about what it means to be a man and what it means to be a *good* man.

The eight workshops we led were structured around film clips, *TED* talks, news articles, and *YouTube* videos. The compelling footage was an effective way to get the boys talking about gender and how it affects them.

Workshop 1: Defining Global Citizenship / Gender Beliefs and Attitudes

The boys began by completing an anonymous survey titled ‘Beliefs and Attitudes,’ which included questions about gender and global citizenship. We had the boys come up with their own ideas about what a global citizen is, but it was a challenge for them: they had never heard the term. We ended with the definition our action research team in Cape Town wrote:

- Realizing how your actions affect others;
- Thinking about how your *inaction* affects others
- Stewardship - the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care
- Developing empathy
- Opportunity to contribute to a global problem; innovative thinking
- By reflecting on others, you come to know yourself
- Being collaborative; working together
- Appreciating multiple perspectives
- A responsibility to keep informed of global affairs

Workshop 2: Defining “Man Up”

We had the boys deconstruct the phrase “man up,” and illustrated how it can be harmful, especially when it is used with young boys. We discussed the narrow

parameters peddled by media and society in which boys should behave from a very young age. We talked about ‘the mask’ they learn to wear to show the world they are tough and how that can lead to unhealthy masculinity. We showed them the TED talk featuring Joe Ehrmann titled “Be a Man,” which powerfully depicts the unhealthy beliefs about what it means to be a ‘real’ man.

Workshops 3 & 4: Masculinity and Femininity as Social Constructs

The purpose of this lesson was for the students to begin to understand how gender identities are shaped by society and culture. We had the boys identify “hyper-masculine” (i.e., physically built, unemotional, and non-communicative) via representations of male characters in film, television and video games. Students began to understand that when representations of boys and men are repeated over time, they can become accepted as reality. We also wanted them to see how their own families and friends expect them to act.

*Workshops 5 & 6: Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche “**We Should All Be Feminists**”*

After several sessions learning and discussing the ways in which masculinity is taught versus inborn, the boys were ready to start learning more about the inequalities between men and women. It is important to add that we repeatedly acknowledged the biological differences between men and women, but our focus was on the inequalities that have nothing to do with biology. We wanted them to see now how everyone is affected by social constructs, and how girls and women are treated unfairly.

We showed the TED talk “We Should All Be Feminists” and gave the boys the transcript to Adiche’s talk. For homework, we assigned sections of the transcript to every boy and asked them to write about what they learned, what surprised them, and how their ideas about feminism were changed or not. The boys’ written responses

clearly showed they were beginning to see the subtle and not so subtle ways in which men and women are expected to behave, and how these strict definitions of masculinity and femininity can be harmful. One boy had this to say:

“In the second paragraph [Chimamanda] talks about how we aren’t apes anymore, and we live in a completely different world. So you can’t blame gender inequality on biology. You can’t blame it on class either, for they are different forms of oppression. I don’t believe that just viewing this TED talk will make you a better global citizen, but what you do with the information can.”

Workshops 7 & 8: International Gender Inequality Facts

During the last two workshops the boys were able to integrate these new concepts and look at many of the ways girls and women are treated unfairly around the world. We showed the clip and read the article entitled ‘Gender equality comes one toilet at a time’ and we read and discussed ‘21 facts you never knew about international gender inequality. By this time in the project, the boys were ready to process some of the more disturbing facts about gender inequality. We encouraged them to come up with action they could take now or in the future to make a positive change. There was not enough time to delve into the actions they could take, but the seed was planted.

Data Collection

Over the course of the eight workshops, the boys responded to video clips in focused discussions by writing journal entries, taking a quiz on male characters as role models, creating “strength v. weakness” posters, diagramming similarities and differences

between males and females, and other similar hands-on activities. Our data collection also included observations of the boys made during the workshops.

We did not use the same data collection tool every week, which had advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were that the boys who were less willing to speak in the discussion section of the class period had to be engaged in the action at the end of each class. With a concrete product (i.e., poster, diagram, quiz result) they were more relaxed sharing their ideas about what they had just done. The boys who had a difficult time expressing their thoughts in writing were able to express them out loud, and vice versa. Changing the data collection each week also kept the boys more engaged. They came alive during the activities where they had to get up and move. The discussions were more challenging and often the same five boys were doing the talking.

The disadvantage of using different data collection techniques was that we had less measurable data, but we hoped the recorded focus group interviews would highlight the overall effect of the workshops. The workshops themselves were not the time to quantify the boys' improvement as global citizens, but instead a time to educate them and make them aware of what global citizenship is, particularly in terms of gender equality. At the beginning of the project and several weeks after the end of the project, the boys took a pre- and post-test, which became one more source of data.

Data Analysis

The survey consisted of questions on beliefs and attitudes about gender. One of the statements was 'In general, the father should have greater authority than the mother in making family decisions.' The boys' responses all fell somewhere close to 'Somewhat Disagree,' both before and after the workshops. The good news was that

these boys do not endorse fairly outdated views of gender roles in the family. (Their answers did not change significantly from pre- to post-survey, which may be a reflection of the questions rather than the boys' views on gender equality)

Our post-workshop interviews were a more effective tool for analysis. We videotaped the boys in focus groups of three (five groups total) using a semi-structured questionnaire. We provided breakfast sandwiches and orange juice to make the experience more relaxed. During the interviews, every boy's voice was heard, unlike the workshops where often the same few spoke. We transcribed all of the interviews and came up with six themes:

1. Definition of a man (stereotypical)
2. Definition of a good man
3. Social constructs of masculinity leading to gender inequality
4. Raised awareness of gender inequality
5. Making an impact on gender equality locally, nationally, and globally
6. Global citizenship

We then took the transcripts and uploaded them onto *Dedoose*, a web-based application that can organize and integrate qualitative data.

Discussion of Results

It was clear by the end of our project that the majority of the boys became better global citizens, or at least became aware of their impact on the world. Workshops on gender inequality can indeed make better global citizens.

Themes 3–6 from above were at the heart of the project: *Social constructs of masculinity that can lead to gender inequality*; *Raised awareness of gender equality*; *Making an impact on gender equality locally, nationally, and globally*; and *Global citizenship*. However, it was very important to lay the foundation for the boys by exploring themes 1 and 2—*definition of a man and definition of a good man*—in order to get to worthwhile discussions about gender equality. For the purposes of this discussion, we are combining themes 4 and 5 because it was by raising their awareness of gender equality that these boys learned how they could make an impact.

Social constructs of masculinity leading to gender inequality

Some of the boys made the connection that the societal norms for boys and young men could lead to violence against women. Boy G said, “Some [boys or men] get angry...they tend to fight because they can't talk about what's going wrong and then they just get mad at everything.” Boy L added, “It [social constructs for masculinity] could lead to someone who has all their emotions and feelings that are bottled inside of him and sometime that’s going to have to be released and that could be released on like either women or [on] a child.” Having the boys make the connection between the way we raise boys and violence in our society was one of the most important aspects of our project and an outcome we were hoping to produce.

Boy B said, “From—I guess birth, you’re taught to be more manly...than the next man...violence is something that makes you more manly so it can cause more violence between people because you keep on being more manly than the next person.” Boy L added, “there’s a lot of NFL cases, with Ray Rice in the elevator [for

example]” and “it can [lead to] violence like anger, like contempt maybe,” said Boy C.

Raised awareness of gender inequality, making an impact

During one of our first workshops we asked the boys if they could think of examples of gender inequality and very few boys could come up with any examples. There was a sense that gender inequality was not an issue they should be thinking about; that it was a girls’ issue. “We always hear about things being unfair for girls” (Boy B), but he could not name one.

By the end of the workshops, the boys had been exposed to a significant amount of data on gender equality and violence against women. Over the course of 10 weeks, at least some of them were able to process the big ideas. On the last day of the focus groups, the last boy (Boy M) we interviewed said, “Before I thought gender inequality would fix itself, but now...having been in the class and getting all this info that I really didn’t know before and seeing how much of an impact it [gender inequality] had on the global community, now I think it’s really important that people know about this. It really changed my feelings on gender equality. And I really think I’m going to go out into the world and try my best to fix it...I’m way more passionate now. I really feel strongly about it.”

This was music to our ears. If one boy thought this, then the project was a success. The ripple effect could begin. However, it was not just one boy who talked about how how he wanted to make a difference. We heard many encouraging things from many of the boys. “Well now people know you can help others because maybe I didn’t know that it hurts to be left out of something because of gender” (Boy K);

“maybe just looking out for your [girl] friends because people won’t be in their right minds at parties...just keeping an eye out for them probably would help just because—a voice in that situation definitely matters.”

Overall, we believe the workshops planted an important seed for the boys to cultivate. One of the problems with focusing on gender, however, is that much of the data is developmentally too advanced and/or graphic for 9th grade boys. Sexual violence against women is more of a high school subject and although these boys are technically high school age, they are the oldest of a Pre-Kindergarten to 9th grade school.

Global Citizenship

When we introduced and discussed global citizenship, we got the sense that the boys did not understand how they, as 14 to 15-year-olds, could become global citizens. The “globalness” was a bit overwhelming. We repeatedly stressed to them that their raised awareness could make a difference in the world. Every one of their acts of kindness, fairness, and awareness could lead to more. About half way through the project Boy K emailed us a video he had found on *YouTube*. The subject line was “Global Citizenship” and in the body he wrote, “The boy in this video starts a chain reaction of good deeds that positively affect society. This is an example of what is lacking in the world. It doesn’t matter how small or big your actions are it just matters that you act.” At the end of the workshops, Boy L said, “Well maybe part of that global citizenship and gender equality is that you should like help out the community but at the same time like keep in mind who you’re helping on more...men or women?” Boy K wrapped it up well when he said, “Think globally right? So I think that.... you don’t have to be the one who goes around the world

and changes everything but you can start local and see where that goes.”

Without this curriculum, the boys could not appreciate the breadth and depth of the issue of gender equality. Their newly-acquired knowledge has undoubtedly opened the door to a global issue for them.

Conclusion

Based on the interviews and the feedback from the boys, these workshops were successful in making the boys better global citizens by raising their awareness of gender equality. We also wanted the boys to understand that gender equality is not only a women’s issue, but also it is a human issue. It was clear from the interviews that they got this idea. The boys were able to make the jump from social constructs of masculinity and femininity, to gender inequality, to global citizenship.

Most of the boys cited the ‘The Mask You Live In’ (Newsom 2014) as the most interesting part of the workshops. The film’s focus was on boys and men and healthy vs. unhealthy masculinity. Again, this highlights our 9th graders’ developmental age and egocentric stage. They came to life when we discussed the definition of masculinity. During the last workshops, when we read the global statistics on gender inequality (noting that the statistics are difficult to verify), the boys became quieter. They were not ready to delve into the more brutal facts and we did not want to force the issue.

One of the most important results of the workshops was the global viewpoint the boys began to exhibit. We wanted them to understand that the actions we take in our own community have a ripple effect that can ultimately help or hinder the global community. The boys were able to grasp the idea of global citizenship and their final

assignment was to list ten adjectives describing global citizenship. Far and away the word they used the most was “kindness”. If that is the only thing they learned, this has been a great success. We are happy to report they learned quite a bit more than that.

Implications for Future Practice

We would certainly like to do workshops with the 9th grade boys again next year, but we would expand our focus to include more about global citizenship and less specifically about gender equality. We might look at the list of Millennial Goals with the group and having them choose the ones they would like to examine more closely. We would like the project to be led more by the boys themselves. Perhaps each boy, or small group of boys, could choose their own global issue and create his own action. Promoting gender equality would still be an important part of the workshops. This is an issue the boys must be aware of by high school.

Reflection Statement

Participating in the IBSC Action Research Project has been one of the more challenging and rewarding experiences we have had during our 20 plus working years. The high standards outlined by IBSC made us create lesson plans for which we were more accountable, knowing they would be public. Creating the time to plan carefully and then finding the time to meet with the 9th grade was not easy. Thanks in large part to support from our Headmaster and Head of Upper School we made it work. The last time we wrote a paper of this length and structure was in graduate school, when life was simpler. There was no husband, children, committees, and students who were vying for our time. Maintaining the balance amongst all of these

things was difficult, but we did it and we are more confident as teachers because of it.

The rewards far outweighed the challenges. As Lower School teachers, we felt lucky to get to know the 9th graders as older boys (Molly taught some of them in Kindergarten). They were a close-knit group who were always kind and respectful to one another. That is not something we would expect to see in every group of 14-year-old boys. It was also quite rewarding to take an issue that we were passionate about and see a few of the boys sharing our passion. This project, unlike a traditional academic class, highlighted the character of the boys, which is a big part of the education here at FCDS. Raising the boys' awareness about gender equality and global issues in general allowed us to get the boys to think deeply about their characters and roles in the community, both locally and globally. By the end of the project we were so proud of these boys for their thoughtful insights and planned actions. Our thanks goes to John Munro, our Headmaster, for encouraging us to pursue this and providing us with the class time, Richard Runkel, Head of Upper School, for agreeing to be our mentor while he led the boys through a very busy year, and Josh Norman, our team leader, for his always kind suggestions and guidance. We highly recommend action research for all teachers to further their professional growth.

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