

Constructing and Sharing Stories: Fostering Positive Masculinity in Year 10 Boys

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Further Information
This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

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Introduction

Working in boys' wellbeing has made me sensitive to the often negative portrayal of men in literature, society, and in the media. After reading the research of Brené Brown, Philip Zimbardo, and Martin Seligman, I decided to use stories as a platform to engage with Positive Masculinity; a field aiming to build self-esteem and character in young men.

This project invited 12 Year 10 participants to examine and challenge their own beliefs about masculinity. They then determined role models – fictional and real-life – who embodied the type of man they wanted to be and told stories about these inspirational men to boys in Year 7.

The Research Question

How might a story-sharing program broaden and strengthen Year 10 boys' definitions of masculinity?

Research Context and Participants

Berwick Grammar School is a boys-only institution with a ten-year history. The school's ethos comes from our unofficial motto of "Growing Good Men," a concept that underpins the formal and informal work we do with students. The new Peer Mentoring Program provided an opportunity to explore identity and masculinity with Year 10 students by urging them to provide good examples for their younger counterparts.



The Research Action

Participants undertook a series of lessons to help clarify their vision of what it means to be a good man, using Grenville-Cleave's (2018) 10 male strengths worth celebrating, the VIA character strengths, and their set text, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque, 2005). Participants then chose fictional and real-life examples of their own definition of a good man, constructing stories for their Peer Mentees that demonstrated these qualities.

Pre- and post- surveying and interviewing tracked changing ideas about how participants viewed what it means to be a man.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were the most appropriate evidence to explore how multiple realities of masculinity are constructed by different individuals. The key data collection methods were:

- Surveys and interviews
- Exit tickets after each structured lesson
- Stories produced by the peer mentors
- Researcher's field notes and observations

These were used to determine whether or not the boys' definitions of masculinity had changed, shifted or broadened and in what ways – what stood out as powerful new information for the participants.

Key Findings and Discussion

- The boys were painfully aware of male stereotypes and expectations to behave in a manner that is strong but unemotional - "be like a man," "man up," and "you're expected not to cry."
- The boys critically questioned their role models and found that even heroes behaved in problematic ways
- The boys embraced a new definition of masculinity which included being kind and protective and felt relieved to know they could be vulnerable and fallible– "good men... can make mistakes... actions in their past don't still necessarily determine if they are a good man."
- The boys came to see themselves as agents of change through the storytelling process. They liked the idea they were "breaking a cycle."



Conclusions

- Boys long for guidance and discussion about what it means to be a man
- Role models play a crucial role in the formation of a male identity boys want to inhabit
- Boys need opportunities to hear positive messages about masculinity and, **as dedicated boys' educators, we need to create time and space for this in our curriculum**
- Boys want to be part of the solution to both the toxic elements of traditional masculinity and the problem of how men are perceived, and are invested in a better future for their younger peers and sons
- Stories are a medium particularly attuned to how boys' minds work. Other ways we can use stories and literature to send positive messages to young men warrants further investigation.

Key Readings

FitzSimons, E. (2017) Positive education's new frontier: Curriculum integration. In M. White, G. Slemp and A. Simon Murray (Eds) *Future directions in well-being: Education, organizations and policy*, (pp. 53 – 57), Melbourne Australia: Springer International Press.

Grenville-Cleave, B. (2018). *Dare we let boys be boys? Positive masculinity and positive psychology*. *Positive Psychology News*. Available at: <https://positivepsychologynews.com/news/bridget-grenville-cleave/2010102714017>.

Zimbardo, P. and Coulombe, N. (2016), *Man interrupted: Why young men are struggling and what we can do about it*. Newburyport, Conari Press.