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# Maps and Mentors in the Journey to Manhood

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> *The transition to manhood is rarely simple—a major source of stress for some, a great roller-coaster of adventure for others*

**Boys are on a journey to manhood. With reference to academic literature and data from two studies undertaken by the author, this article explores that journey. Particular attention is given to the opportunities and challenges for educators. Aspects of the territory through which boys travel are considered, and the contribution of schools and teachers as maps, signposts and mentor/guides is discussed.**

## Introduction

This article explores the question, "What contributions can schools and teachers make to the transition of a young male from boyhood to manhood?" In discussing the issue, the article makes use of the familiar analogy of transition as a journey. The analogy will be developed to consider the territory through which the journey occurs, and the maps and guides which might facilitate that journey. The article incorporates personal reflection, a review of relevant academic literature, together with data from two research projects which the author has undertaken in the previous five years.

Before developing the discussion, a brief description of the two research projects is necessary. The first (Smith, 2006) was an inter-generational investigation of experiences and perceptions of the transition to manhood, with a focus on the intersection of spirituality with that transition. Six trios of son, father, and paternal grandfather, were individually interviewed. All owned a personal Christian faith. Questions were asked about how they understood masculinity, where their ideas had come from, and specifically how they saw their faith and church experiences influencing their understanding. In the discussion that follows, this study is referred to as Project One. The second is a more recent study (Smith, 2011) conducted while journeying with a group of teachers and a small group of students as their school implemented a 'rites of passage to manhood' program within the Year 10 (New Zealand) classes. Interviews with the staff delivering the programme (as a group), and a random sample of the boys (interviewed individually),

focussed on perceptions of manhood, and their experience of being a part of the program. This study is referred to in this article as Project Two.

From a personal journey through manhood, and from observations gleaned from a working life as consecutively hospital doctor, church pastoral worker, counsellor and currently tertiary lecturer and academic, a perception gained is that the transition to manhood is rarely simple—a major source of stress for some (and consequently also for those around them), a great roller-coaster of adventure for others. Schools, given the amount of time boys spend (or are expected to spend) within their care, are a significant part of the journey. No school as an institution and no teacher as an individual can abdicate their role as contributor, as map or signpost, or as fellow-traveller and guide.

This article will first pay attention to some of the issues relevant to a discussion of boys growing up in contemporary Western societies. Subsequently, aspects of the specific opportunities and challenges faced by schools will be considered.

## The territory of transition

### 1. What makes a male a man?

The destination of the journey is manhood, but it would appear that thinking on the nature of manhood and masculinity has changed over recent years.

Historically, sex-role theory and essentialist views predominated. Sex-role theory views men and women as having pre-determined specific roles—classically, the worker/provider male and the home-maker/nurturer female. These roles arise from innate gender differences. This way of thinking is well illustrated by reference to books written in past decades as advice for boys—for example, Shryock's, *On becoming a man* (1951) and Knight's, *Everything a teenage boy should know* (1980). Such a view "misses the complexities within femininity and masculinity" (Connell, 2000, p.18). Often overlooked is the realisation that stereotypes may have a cultural basis (Law, Campbell & Dolan, 1999) and tend to change over time (Connell, 2003). Biological essentialism has seen the primacy of biology as a

determinant of masculine characteristics. 'Being a man' in this paradigm implicitly involves physical attributes and specific character traits, particularly physical strength. While in the current academic climate such a perspective struggles to maintain credibility, Connell (2000) points out, "This is the concept of gender underlying most pop psychologies of masculinity" (p. 18), which would likely be true in both the secular and Christian arenas. Authors writing from this perspective, such as Gray (1992) in the secular world, and Smalley and Trent (1992) from a Christian viewpoint, have been highly popular and influential within their different spheres.

More recently, post-structural thought has challenged essentialist ideas. That masculinity is socially constructed has become taken for granted in much contemporary writing (e.g. Berger, Wallis & Watson, 1995; Buchbinder, 1994). From this viewpoint, Boyd, Longwood and Muesse (1996) refer to three key concepts. Firstly, they highlight the distinction between maleness and masculinity. Maleness (sex) is to be seen as a biological category, whereas masculinities (gender), "as cultural constructs rather than a biological inevitability, are inextricably connected with the economics, political, social, psychological and religious dimensions of life" (Boyd et al. 1996, p. xiv). Secondly, they discuss the concept of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity "has come to be a technical term designating the dominant construction of masculinity in our culture" (Boyd et al.1996, p. xv). Thirdly, as suggested in the quote above, contemporary thought thinks in terms of masculinities rather than the singular, masculinity. Connell (2000) writes that, "There is no one pattern of masculinity that is found everywhere" (p. 10).

The 'views of masculinity' landscape then, through which contemporary boys are journeying, seems very different to that experienced by their fathers. While the breakdown of rigid stereotypes may allow for a greater level of experimentation and finding a personal sense of 'fit', it can also cause a disorientation and sense of being lost in the ill-defined territory. If the journey to adulthood has not one but a range of potential destinations, how does one decide, if indeed the decision is conscious, in which direction to go? (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002).

## 2. Boys and their social scene

The following discussion has two parts. Firstly, there is the issue of boys and their families, and father-son relationships in particular. Secondly, brief consideration will be made of boys and their social behaviour.

Historically, industrialisation created a significant shift in family dynamics and in the parenting roles of both men and women. As men increasingly spent time away from home in paid employment, the home became a predominantly women-and-children environment and, accordingly, the burden of parenting fell to mothers (Adams & Coltrane, 2005; Balcom, 1998; Longwood, 1996; Mackey, 1998). One consequence of this pattern is the effect on boys' learning about their future role as fathers.

> There is a strong argument which says, in Australia a man's own upbringing does not prepare him readily for the duties and responsibilities of child-rearing. (Burdon, 1994, p. 17)

Femiano (1998) believes that the disintegration of social constructs that govern men's lives has resulted in a sense of being adrift in the complexities of fathering.

Recent decades have seen two significant but very different changes. On the one hand, there has been a diversification of family structure and many more children growing up without the presence of their biological father, or even of an alternative male role-model. On the other hand, in line with recently changed perspectives on masculinity in general, paradigms of fatherhood have shifted to a more nurturing involvement (Mackey, 1998).

Burgess (1997) and Balcom (1998) both note that historically, father-absence generally had positive connotations. The father may have been away from his family for prolonged periods for work or military service, but he usually retained an emotional presence and the prospect of return. Both writers go on to comment that most contemporary situations do not carry the same positive connotations. The reasons for an absent father are many (Balcom, 1998) and are not confined to one stratum of society (Donaldson, 2003). The effects on sons are to some degree related to those reasons. While the effects are also modified by the developmental stage of the son (Beaty, 1995), the literature overwhelmingly describes a negative impact on sons abandoned, either willingly or reluctantly, by their fathers. This negative impact includes difficulty in the development of a masculine self-concept (Beaty, 1995). However, as Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) point out, discussions of father-absence and father-presence are complex and at risk of simplistic interpretation.

Pragmatically of more significance than the views of researchers on fathers, are the views of children.

> Although the contribution of Australian fathers to the care and upbringing of their children is often criticised, many children talk about their fathers in very positive ways. (Burdon, 1994, p. 19)

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In Project One, one of the strong themes to emerge from the interviews was the sense that the interviewee saw his father as very significant in shaping his growing up. The influence, however, seems to be more passive or coincidental than intentional.

> Well—obviously I think now that he was very significant in that I think, I mean we'd never talked about things but I—in watching him and how he did life, so I mean that's obviously helped shape my view of things. (son: Theo[1])

> No one has ever told me that that's sort of the way it should be, it's just, kind of, the way that I've, kind of, sort of, been around and you just assume it's normal, that's how it is…Our relationship mostly just seems to be doing stuff together rather than sort of sitting down and having long chats or anything like that, it's just kind of getting stuff done and just being around each other mainly. (son: Michael)

Turning the focus to boys' social behaviour, it is worth stressing that the majority of young males do not fit the 'boys behaving badly' category, and it is too easy to brand all young males with a generic negative label. There are factors, however, which need to be considered when comparing boys and girls. Firstly, rates of suicide in New Zealand (as with other Western nations) are approximately four times higher for males than females in the 15–24 year old group. The rate of suicide for this age group has been rising over recent decades (Beautrais, 2003). Secondly, and appropriate to an educationally-oriented discussion, statistics show that boys are suspended and excluded from school at higher rates than girls. Lloyd (2000) reports from the UK, an exclusion rate of boys three to four times higher than that of girls. In New Zealand, exclusion of boys is 2.5 times more common than that of girls (Education Counts, 2007). These examples show that, while many boys are doing well, a higher proportion of boys are showing signs of stress and distress than their female peers.

Boys' anti-social behaviour has been specifically linked to the transition to manhood. Several commentators would contend that the secularisation of transition has resulted in harmful "pseudo rites" (Grof, 1996, p. 10).

> When rites of passage disappear from conscious presentation, they nonetheless appear in unconscious and semi-conscious guises. They surface as mis-guided and misinformed attempts to change one's own life. (Meade, 1996, p. 29)

> **"** *Several of the boys referred to the idea that men don't do stupid things—or at least know when to stop* **"**

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[1] Names have been changed.

This may be manifest in a variety of ways. Salisbury and Jackson (1996) refer to violent behaviour and sexual prowess as means whereby boys seek to turn themselves into men. Lashlie (2005), describing her experience working in New Zealand prisons, concludes that many men end up in prison as a result of misguided attempts to prove their manhood. Others have described adolescents' attraction to cults (Hunter, 1998) and to gang culture (Grof, 1996; Hill, 1999; Sanyika, 1996; Tacey, 1997) as rite-of-passage substitutes, as individuals seek a longed-for sense of belonging. Tacey (1997) points out that while in the old rituals the ordeals of passage were closely monitored by village elders, often no such effective monitoring is available to contemporary youth with resulting high levels of destructive outcomes. Socially more acceptable, but potentially just as destructive as a substitute rite of passage, is the contemporary man's search for validation through commitment (often excessive and obsessive) to career success (Tacey, 1997).

The young males interviewed for both Project One and Project Two referred to a mark of manhood as moving beyond stupid or anti-social behaviour.

> There's a lot of thirty year olds out there who are still kids at heart, still boys. (Martin)

When asked to explain the "*thirty year old boys*", he talked in terms of seeing irresponsibility and selfishness in the way they related.

> I see 50 year old boys out there all the time. So it's [being a man] definitely not an age thing…You definitely know when you're dealing with a man and when you're dealing with a boy. (Steve)

Steve developed his view of "*fifty year old boys*".

> They've lied to themselves, I think…You know, they've never been challenged, say on their attitude. (Steve)

Several of the boys interviewed in Project Two, all aged fourteen, in talking about what they saw as characteristics of men, referred to the idea that men don't do stupid things—or at least know when to stop. One of the boys talked very positively about the relationship he had with his step-father, but viewed his real dad as immature.

> He's real immature for his age—I think I'm more of a man than he is sometimes.

## 3. Boys and educational achievement

In recent years, much has been written to draw attention to the apparent academic under-achievement of boys in schools, as compared to that of girls (e.g. Burns & Bracey, 2001; Education

Review Office, 1999; Rutledge, 2000). While for some, the relative lack of achievement is incontrovertible, this is not universally accepted. Writers have challenged the deficit views of achievement, placing the discussion within a broader perception of male economic advantage and social privilege (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001) and educational policy (Francis, 2006).

This article is not the place to enter into the polemic around achievement. The debate, as illustrated by the references above, is often not simply about the well-being of boys and girls—it is political and part of a broader societal tension around gender. This observation, however, should provoke a consideration of the impact of the debate on the territory through which boys are journeying. If the conclusion is that the territory is being made harder rather than easier, then maybe it is time for a fresh look at the questions from a perspective that focuses primarily on the welfare of young people, rather than on academic or political point-scoring.

## 4. Boys and spirituality
The final area for consideration in terms of territory is that of spirituality and faith. David Hay (1998, cited in Wright, 2000) asserts that "children's spirituality is rooted in a universal human awareness; that it is 'really there' and not just a culturally constructed illusion" (p. 41), a view echoed by a number of other writers (Bao, Whitbeck, Hoyt & Conger, 1999; Markstrom, 1999; Smith, Faris, Denton & Regnerus, 2003). Donahue and Benson (1995) state, "Opinion poll data indicate religiousness is widespread among adolescents" (p. 2). Markstrom (1999) links this importance of religion to adolescents with general developmental characteristics in adolescence—the development of abstract thinking, the ability to reflect, and the awareness of the existential questions, 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I here?' Engebretson's (2006) Australian study of teenage boys and their spirituality reported that participants describe a spirituality that challenges dominant constructs of what it means to be a man, and has a greater focus on relational values and personal integrity.

Contrasting with internal experience is Heinz Streib's (1999) work on external expressions of religious belief. He argues that the religious landscape has changed and that "the obligation to a certain tradition no longer seems to be the model for religious socialisation" (p. 265). His study suggests that increasingly adolescents are looking for transcendent spiritual experience in non-traditional ways and this has led to his coining the term "off-road religion" (p. 255).

Cook (2000) explored the impact of church involvement on the attitudes and behaviour of thirty-two non-Caucasian teenagers involved in inner-city Protestant churches in the United States. She found significant positive outcomes for those teenagers compared to non-involved teens. Specifically, she noted the contribution of church as being: the provision of mentors, the development of the ability to self-regulate, the fostering of identity development, the provision of a supportive community and the benefit of a relationship with a powerful, loving Other. Although "the youths eagerly attested to the importance of church in their lives" (p. 728), she also found that the church-involved group were more likely to have biological parents at home, less likely to have a family member on welfare, and more likely to have a job. She comments that the contribution of these other factors to well-being may also be significant.

In Project One, each participant was asked where they saw the church fitting in supporting boys growing to manhood, both in potential and in actuality. The responses were consistent. Although there was a feeling that the church could have a role, and needed to have a role, in reality it was generally perceived to be either not very effective, or totally irrelevant. These responses were not just from the sons, but from the fathers and grandfathers as well.

> I think that the church service on Sunday is probably often the most inefficient way of reaching young people, because it is often geared to older people. (Martin's father)

> At the moment—where I see it? Totally irrelevant. Maybe that's an indication of where I'm at but I find it irrelevant because it's irrelevant for me and I don't think if it's irrelevant for me it can be relevant for my boys and it's not. I can only sort of speak to that in terms of the experience I've had and as I've observed it. (Eddy's father)

In his discussion of the prevalence of interest in spirituality among young people, Tacey (2003) challenges traditional religion to rethink its stance. Churches are faced with the challenge of adapting to significant social change while retaining their underlying ethos. The key words used by the sons interviewed in Project One related to the need of churches to consider the extent to which they are *relational*, *relevant* and *real*.

## Opportunities and challenges for educators
Having considered some of the aspects of the territory which boys need to navigate, the role that schools and teachers might play in that journey, can be examined. Connell (2000), in referring to the contribution of schools to gender identity

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formation, separates the school as 'agent' from the school as 'setting'. The school is both an active, albeit sometimes unconscious, agent in supporting (or undermining) the journey. It is also a setting in which other interactions—peer group activities, for example—take place, unbeknown to staff.

Comments on school as setting will be drawn from Project One. Subsequently, attention will be given to three specific areas of agentic contribution—school ethos, curriculum and relationship.

## 1. School as setting

Of the six sons interviewed for Project One, three had attended a Christian or church-based high school. Dan's primary education was at a Christian school, but he had attended a State secondary school. The other two young men (Steve and Theo) had been at State schools. There were no major differences in the experiences of these six between the state schools and the Christian/religious foundation schools in relation to transitions to manhood. As the sons reflected on what or who had supported their journey to manhood, school and schoolteachers did not feature significantly in an explicit way. Theo described how school had given him opportunities to develop responsibility.

> My final seventh form year I was involved in everything. I was the lead role in the school production and I was involved in the counselling department working with younger students and I was a prefect and I had various responsibilities so that was great and I guess all that helped shape me.

Steve's father thought that some of Steve's teachers had contributed positively, but Steve himself did not mention them. While it would be hard to believe that school had not had a significant shaping effect on their transition to manhood, the influence seems to have been 'hidden' rather than overt.

## 2. School ethos

The new New Zealand Curriculum Document (Ministry of Education, 2007) clearly roots the specifics of subject content in school ethos and values.

> Every decision relating to curriculum and every interaction that takes place in a school reflects the values of the individuals involved and the collective values of the institution. (p. 10)

The values listed by the Curriculum Document include equity, community and participation, integrity, and respect.

Previous mention was made of the literature regarding suspension and exclusions. In this context, Berkeley (1999), Cullingford (1999), Lloyd (2000), and Munn and Lloyd (2005) have commented on the importance of school ethos—that schools can be 'including' or 'excluding' in their general tone—and that this is often reflected in their suspension and formal exclusion figures. Berkeley (1999) believes that school ethos is more significant than government policy in determining exclusion rates, and discusses different ways of conceptualising students—as scholar, as community/family, or as socially deficient.

Extending the picture further, Munn and Lloyd (2005), and Knipe, Reynolds and Milner (2007) have linked exclusion from school with issues of wider social exclusion and isolation. Knipe et al. (2007) discuss an apparent link between exclusion from school and the wider social issues of underachievement, limited employment opportunities and involvement in criminal activity.

It is too easy to pathologise adolescent boys who are experiencing difficulties, either academically or socially. A systemic view needs to be taken in which the young person and their family along with their teachers and the school as institution form an integral whole. Schools do not have the luxury of washing their hands of responsibility for difficult situations. There is a need to move away from apportioning blame to a more constructive look at the bigger picture.

Every school needs to pay attention to its culture. Ethos is a two-way flow. The ethos of any institution is created by the individuals within it, particularly those in leadership and positions of responsibility. Reciprocal flow occurs as individuals within the institution absorb the values and attitudes, sometimes unwittingly, and embody the ethos, thus perpetuating a way of being. Ethos may be deeply embedded and resistant to change, but is not immutable if a group of people has the will to identify and recreate the way they want it to be. In relation to gender, school staff need to be asking what messages are being sent in the way people relate and in the images presented, about how to think and live out 'being a man'.

## 3. Curriculum

It is interesting to note that, in recent years, schools appear to have been paying more attention to issues of gender identity within the broader school framework and within curriculum. Lashlie's (2005) report on her work with twenty-five New Zealand boys' schools is a good example. Given that the curricular choices that boys make are often driven,

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albeit subconsciously, by their notions of what 'manly' subjects might be (Foster, Kimmel & Skelton, 2001), this attention is entirely appropriate. Other writers (e.g. Salisbury & Jackson, 1996) have provided practical strategies and exercises for use in schools, aimed at provoking young males to explore their ideas of gender. Alongside this increased awareness has been the intentional introduction of programs and courses that are not part of the examined curriculum, but which are directed towards broader life skills, and particularly gender issues. One example is *The rite journey* program, which was the program being implemented in Project Two (Smith, 2011). *The rite journey* is a year long program designed by Australians Andrew Lines and Graham Gallasch for use in Year 10 (Australian Year 9). The year's activities blend content on manhood and relationships, with ceremony and personal challenge.

While there were clearly some challenges in running the program—largely associated with it being a first time implementation—feedback from both the staff involved and the students was positive.

> They've talked about stuff they wouldn't otherwise have talked about at their age. We've shown them parts of what it means to be a man and how to deal with things in a manly way. (Teacher)

> There seem to be some positive comments out in the community—mums are really keen on it—probably more than dads. (Teacher)

> It's been a good class—it doesn't feel like a class where you have to sit and learn, but we have learned. (Student)

> It helped me with what I want to be—provoked me to think in my own time—things have gone on in class that I have followed up—it's been a nice break. (Student)

Alongside the content, both staff and students valued the ritual elements of the program. For example, early in the year each boy wrote on a stone something that he wanted to leave behind, the group then walked to the sea shore and threw the stone into the sea.

> The beach—we wrote something on a stone— we're getting rid of it. It made you think what could you do better. Before it, it seemed a bit of a waste of time but after, you could see the reason behind it. It worked for me. (Student)

The program serves to illustrate the opportunities for creative presentation of significant content. Wright (2000), while not addressing the issue of gender specifically, talks about the need to balance

communication of traditional values with the development and encouragement of critical thinking skills. Given the diversity of views on masculinity, opportunities for discussion and exploration without prescription or judgment are important.

### 4. Relationship

From years of asking the question of groups of students, it seems that high school teachers are remembered more often for the way they related to people as individuals, rather than for their curriculum knowledge or pedagogical skill. This element of relationship and modelling was apparent in Project Two. Even in the first two weeks of teaching the program, the teachers experienced a different way of being in the classroom.

> The relationship thing, student / teacher, is a unique thing—quite different from normal teaching that I've found. And the fact that we have them 6–7 hours during the week—you create a pretty good relationship with the boys, which is something I haven't experienced in normal teaching. (Teacher)

> It's the whole emotional side of things. I'm always giving a piece of myself to them and it's mentally draining. (Teacher)

> I was talking about Dad yesterday in the second half of the period. The period ended and there was [another] class following and I was still thinking about the old man at the end of that period. Really, no teaching went on in that second period. I gave them something to do but I was thinking about what I said. I thought "should I have let them in that far?" It's a really personal thing. (Teacher)

At the end of the program, teachers were asked to comment again on relationships and modelling.

> I think the biggest thing for me is seeing the students as human beings, not just kids in front of you to teach. You learn about their home life, the tragedies they've had, the happinesses they've had—they'll freely tell you that—sometimes it's emotionally hard to deal with—there's a huge trust thing which is not there when you teach a normal class. (Teacher)

> You are accountable for role-modelling what you are talking about. (Teacher)

> You can't talk one thing and know in your own life you're the complete opposite. (Teacher)

A number of boys also noticed the different environment.

> Mr X is always open about everything, he's not afraid to tell us things. It's helpful, encouraged us to share. Teachers are always big scary monsters

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that you don't like, but we've got quite a few cool teachers. 'Cool'? Cool means down to earth, doesn't pick on people. (Student)

We can communicate a lot more now, a lot of the boys have learned to grow up, the class has come together a bit. (Student)

The message here seems to be a reminder that teachers are not passive communicators of information. Rather, the power of relationship and the impact of modelling are significant, at least as signposts, and potentially as real-life guides for boys on their journey to manhood.

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## Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to review the territory through which boys are journeying on their way to manhood, and to consider the opportunities for educators in the provision of support and guidance on that journey. In conclusion, the importance of listening and carefully responding to the thoughts and experiences of the young men with whom teachers work, needs to be emphasised. Students probably have more questions than they will admit to, and fewer answers than they would like their teachers to think. It is not only a responsibility, but also within the capability of each person involved in the educational endeavour, to offer as a gift, the willingness to provide maps that are relevant to *their* journey (which might look different to maps previously used); the availability to act as a guide for part of the route; and the unswerving belief that, despite the hard work and heartache that might be involved, each young man can make it to the destination. TEACH

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*Students probably have more questions than they will admit to, and fewer answers than they would like their teachers to think*