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HAVING THEIR SAY

Some Young Men's Beliefs and Attitudes about Being a Man

BY

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Abstract

Western societies are increasingly becoming aware of the many problems facing boys and men. In Australia these problems include one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world, a high divorce rate, with most divorces being instigated by women, the breakdown of the family, and conflicting messages about what it is to be 'a man'. This study examines and describes how a group of 15-17 year old young men, who attend a private single sex school in Canberra, describe their beliefs and attitudes about becoming adult men. Participants were asked to respond to questions posed in a survey designed specifically for this research. These questions looked at relationships, gender roles, family, fatherhood, work and leisure and whether impending manhood appeared confusing. The context in which participants are situated is one of cultural and social flux; it was the current discourse and debate in Australia about how to be a man, men's issues, and the perception of men in crisis, which gave this study its broad contextual frame.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom about boys/young men who attend elite private schools, the participants in this study emerged as egalitarian and flexible in their attitudes with regard to relationships, gender roles, parenting and work. This study therefore in part refutes the stereotypes, which surround students at private boys' schools, including those that purport that these students will hold predominantly hegemonic, traditional views about masculinity and their role as men.

This thesis presents the voices of some three hundred young men, adding to an area of research, which is contested and vigorous in its development. By exploring the beliefs and attitudes of a group of Australians who are on the brink of manhood tentative insights have been offered, and, I believe, some illumination gained. The dilemmas posed for meaningful adulthood for young men in Australia are very real. We need to listen to what young men have to say.

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