FIXING THE BOYHOOD BREACH:
FACILITATING ENGAGEMENT AND BELONGING THROUGH
CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS OF MASCULINITY

by

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Abstract

Many teenage boys struggle with their own masculine identities, specifically as it relates to how they are “supposed” to express and perform masculinity in an environment like a school. They are often influenced by culture and peer pressure to think of and perform masculinity in ways that can be restricting. This restriction can lead to feelings of alienation, impact their sense of belonging, and promote disengagement. One way to re-engage boys is to provide a space on campus wherein they can have open, honest discussions with one another. Having such discussions could prepare them to look at masculinity with a critical lens, promote a sense of belongingness, and encourage them to arrive at some deeper truths about the complexity of masculinity and their own unique identities.

When boys are given the opportunity to have critical discussions about masculinity, they can become active and willing participants in the inquiry and critical thinking processes. Furthermore, such open discussions can help them to build and establish bonds that encourage engagement and depths of understanding of both the self and their “masculine selves” (Givens et al., 2016). This qualitative study was designed as an examination of what happens when young males describe their experiences, emotions,
and evolving understandings of masculinity through their participation in a weekly group discussion. Intergroup dialogues across socio-cultural groups can be fruitful in tackling difficult subjects like race relations and gender relations, this study was designed to examine whether or not an all-male discussion group can foster a deeper understanding of masculinity and themselves and promote a sense of belonging. The structure of a discussion group has many aspects of the education process built into it: critical thinking, articulation of a claim, backing the claim with evidence, actively listening, and sharing thoughts and feelings on a topic, to name a few. Yet, boys may not think of group participation in this way. Boys tend to bifurcate their school identities from their actual identities. Thus, the onus is on the school, through making thoughtful curricular, pedagogical, or even programmatic choices, to meet the boys where they are at in order to encourage engagement and a sense of belonging through critical conversations.
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“A child belongs not to one parent or home.”

—African Proverb

“The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.”

—African Proverb

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.”

—Shakespeare
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The current discourse around education uses the language of war: combat pay, in the trenches, battle-scarred, veteran teacher (Barile, n.d.; McCrann, 2015; Robinson, 2019), and much more. This war tongue, used to describe national, state, and local education policy, especially policy failures, as well as the experiences of classroom teachers with their students, can have a negative effect on how male students see themselves. Given that there is a crisis of masculinity that is having far-reaching, often deadly implications for boys and men (Farrell & Gray, 2019; Kimmel, 2018; Reeves, 2022b), the language of war is still appropriate.

This boy crisis is most notable on school campuses across the country through the educational opportunity gaps that fall along gender lines. Male students are disproportionately disciplined (Piscitello et al., 2021), have higher dropout rates (Berlowitz et al., 2015; National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2018; Reeves, 2022b), and have lower test scores compared to female students (NAEP, 2018). Many boys, especially boys from marginalized communities, are disproportionately adjudicated (Piscitello et al., 2021; Smolkowski et al., 2016; Whitmore & Bailey, 2010). Given the disparate educational outcomes between genders, and across racial lines specific to male students, a war on boys is an apt description of a system that consistently produces gendered outcome gaps (Hoff Sommers, 2000).

These gendered outcome gaps, especially the gender gap, should be more accurately labeled the boyhood breach in order to express the magnitude of the disparity.
Breach is a term used in war and was popularized in the line from *Henry V*, “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,” when King Henry encouraged his men to muster the courage to fight on. In the above context, breach is defined as a gap in a defense. The term breach is found in the legal realm, too, as in breach of contract, breach of law, breach of agreement. For the purpose of this study, the boyhood breach describes the failure to uphold the terms of the socio-educational contracts to engage boys in school. This failure to engage boys in school has resulted in another type of breach, a brokenness in the relationship between boys and their own education.

The broken relationship to school can cause many boys to feel disengaged. Many boys have a shaky relationship with school (Farrell & Gray, 2019; Kimmel, 2018; Reeves, 2022b), and it all begins with perception, perceptions of themselves and how they are perceived (Kimmel, 2018; Orenstein, 2020). Boys’ struggles to understand themselves and their masculine identities quite possibly contribute to their struggles in school, so addressing this need to understand could lead to more effective approaches to engaging boys (Givens et al., 2016). This study is predicated on the idea that in-depth discussions about masculinity can promote a sense of belonging; positive, active engagement in school; and academic achievement for male students (Givens et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to understand how participation in a weekly discussion group for public high-school-age male students fosters engagement, self-understanding, and promotes inquiry and healthy masculinity (Givens et al., 2016; Siscoe & Odermatt, 2022).

**Problem of Practice Statement**

By the time many boys reach high school, they feel profoundly disengaged from school (Curry & Athanases, 2020; Farrell & Gray, 2019; Iverson, 2007; Noguera,
Fredricks et al. (2004) identify three types of engagement as it relates to schooling: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement is when students are involved in school both academically and socially. Emotional engagement encompasses students’ reactions, negative reactions and positive ones, toward the people in school (adults and student peers) and academics. Finally, cognitive engagement is the willingness of students to put forth their best effort toward the complexity of understanding difficult concepts and practicing the mastery of different, challenging skills (Scheidler, 2012). Identity-based disengagement can result in any of the above three types, or even all three, and can negatively affect boys’ performance in and attraction to school (Farrell & Gray, 2019; hooks, 2008; Kimmel, 2011, 2018; Morris, 2005; Noguera, 2008; Sax, 2016).

Disengagement is typically measured through negative performance outcomes—drop out, exclusionary discipline, lower standardized test scores, and lower grades (Berlowitz et al., 2015; Haddad, 2020; Kim et al., 2010; Lee, 2014; Piscitello et al., 2021; Sax, 2016; Scheidler, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002; VanDeWeghe, 2006; Whitmore & Bailey, 2010). The short-term impacts of disengagement like boredom, falling test scores, falling grades, misbehavior, and punishment, to name a few effects, can lead to the long-term impacts like dropping out, disinterest in all things related to school, lower self-esteem, and feelings of alienation (Piscitello et al., 2021; Sax, 2016). Currently, much of the research on disengagement centers on the long-term results of disengagement, the outcome gaps between high-school-age males and females or between racial groups. While these are important outcomes to study and deserve a great deal of scrutiny, more attention needs to be paid to the one possible and critical root causes of disengagement: the struggle with masculinity.

Localized programs like Oakland Unified School District’s Manhood Development Program, detailed below, and Men of Strength, a national manhood
development program, address the factors that contribute to male disengagement through an exploration of masculinity. These “gender-specific instructional environments” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 181) can help develop “positive and transformative identities” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 181) in a safe environment where they can feel “free to be vulnerable about their feelings and identities” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 181), which can create “relationships of understanding, trust, and reciprocity” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 181). In this way, a program like MDP can address one of the root causes of disengagement, a lack of a sense of belonging that many boys feel. It does so by providing them a safe space to explore masculinity, promote healthy masculinity, develop a sense of belonging, and forge strong relationships (Miller et al., 2004; Siscoe & Odermatt, 2022; Zúñiga et al., 2012). Programs like these can lead to engagement, a sense of belonging, and the promotion of healthy masculinity (Givens et al., 2016; McGann, 2010; McGann et al., 2020).

**Background of the Problem of Practice**

Much of the focus of high-school-age male disengagement from school tends to be on the typical indicators of disengagement: dropping out of school, student misbehavior, exclusionary punishment, and the gender outcome gap and differences in outcomes between subsets of males on standardized test results (NAEP, 2018). Piscitello et al. (2021) argue that there are key indicators of student connectedness and wellbeing that can predict the likelihood that a student will drop out of school: attendance rates and truancy, student behavior and punishment (i.e., suspensions and expulsions), and reductions in academic performance (i.e., lower grades and lower standardized test scores). When compared to their female peers, dropout rates were higher for males across
all demographics (NAEP, 2018). One of the strongest predictors of a male student’s
decision to drop out is disciplinary problems (Berlowitz et al., 2015).

Boys, and boys of color in particular, tend to be punished disproportionately
(Piscitello et al., 2021; Whitmore & Bailey, 2010) compared to female students. The gap
between White and Black students when it comes to exclusionary discipline begins in
elementary school most notably through the referral process (Smolkowski et al., 2016).
When it comes to exclusionary punishment like suspensions, in California suspensions
for Black students peak in middle school and drop once they enter high school (Koran,
2018). In schools where there is a stronger sense of belonging for Black students,
disproportionate discipline between White and Black students is virtually insignificant
(Fisher et al., 2019). Schools must endeavor even harder to send a strong message to
Black male students not only that they belong, but that they are highly valued and integral
to the school.

In the world of zero-tolerance discipline, the disproportionate punishment of
Black students and students with disabilities often sends the message that they do not
belong (Berlowitz et al., 2015). From the sixth grade to the ninth grade, disciplinary
referrals tend to spike, a particularly concerning trend given the fact that “‘students
are more likely to drop out of school for disciplinary reasons before the age of 16’”
(Berlowitz et al., 2015, p. 12). Thus, if males are disproportionately disciplined compared
to female students (Berlowitz et al., 2015; Sax, 2016; Skiba et al. 2002), and if male
students of color are disproportionately disciplined compared to White male students
(Berlowitz et al., 2015), then the same disparity in messaging occurs for male students
with regard to being told that they do not belong in school.

Much like how a sense of belongingness and engagement in school are strongly
correlated, there are strong correlations between behavioral engagement and standardized
test scores (VanDeWeghe, 2006). Regarding standardized test results, it is often the case
that outcome gaps between racial groups and between genders tend to be the main areas of focus for signals of student struggles or student successes. Using reading scores from the 2019 NAEP data as an example, and as a probable reflection of school disengagement (Lee, 2014; Scheidler, 2012; VanDeWeghe, 2006), these gender-based outcome gaps become stark (see Table 1).

Table 1

National Public-School Gender Gaps in 2019 12th Grade NAEP Reading Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Gender Gap in Scores Favoring Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>15 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAPI</td>
<td>13 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>14 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>11 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>14 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-disabled</td>
<td>9 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>3 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from NAEP (2019).

The 12th-grade reading scores, which are based on a 500-point scale, reflected in Table 2, show a similar trend. When controlling for gender, girls consistently outperform their male peers in a subject like English Language Arts (ELA).

Table 2

National Public-School Racial Gaps in 2019 12th Grade NAEP Reading Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (Male) Performed Lower Than Group 2</th>
<th>Group 2 (Male) Performed Higher Than Group 1</th>
<th>Racial Outcome Gap (Total Point Difference)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>33 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>20 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asian American Pacific Islander</td>
<td>4 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>23 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from NAEP (2019).
Given the tendency to focus on racial outcome gaps or gender outcome gaps within racial groups, what does not get a lot of attention are the intra- and inter-group outcome gaps that exist within high-school-age boys as a collective. These intra- and inter-group outcome gaps suggest a general feeling of disengagement from school among male students. The data show that the intra- and inter-group differences in dropout rates, discussed in the previous section, are not the only place where there is racial disproportionality.

While it is tempting to feel like things balance out when all the subjects’ scores are reckoned together, boys tend to outperform their female peers in math and science, as reflected in Table 3; the average outcome gap between boys and girls in reading, for example, is 12 points, while writing shows a 14-point gap, both of which are far more significant compared to the much smaller gap of 3–4 points between boys and girls in math and science. This begs the question: How big of an outcome gap is tolerable?

Table 3  

National Public-School Gender Gaps in 2019 12th Grade Reading, Math, Science, and Writing Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (Male)</th>
<th>Group 2 (Female)</th>
<th>Gender Outcome Gap (Total Point Difference)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>278 (Avg. Reading Score)</td>
<td>290 (Avg. Reading Score)</td>
<td>12-pt. gap favoring female students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151 (Avg. Math Score)</td>
<td>148 (Avg. Math Score)</td>
<td>3-pt. gap favoring male students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151 (Avg. Science Score)</td>
<td>147 (Avg. Science Score)</td>
<td>4-pt. gap favoring male students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143 (Avg. Writing Score; data from 2011)</td>
<td>157 (Avg. Writing Score; data from 2011)</td>
<td>14-pt. gap favoring female students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from NAEP (2019).
Gender gaps in outcome exist statewide in California and locally. Currently, the trends in statewide test scores in California have declined as a result of the pandemic, school closures, and distance learning (ETS, n.d.). These events have only exacerbated the racially disproportionate outcome gaps and the gender gap. While the statewide trends are all downward, not all districts were affected the same. The district in which I teach had the high school ranked toward the top in the state in ELA and math. Digging deeper into the results, there are clear outcome gaps by gender between both the school site and statewide, as reflected in Table 4. These gender gaps tend to show up most notably in English language arts. When considering the common measurements used to determine engagement to and success in school, one must be mindful of a key caveat: the disengagement from school that many boys feel, as evidenced by some of the common measurements above, could either not reflect complete disengagement or could go much deeper and is more profound than the numbers reflect.

**Table 4**

*11th Grade School A and Statewide Test Scores 2021–2022 School Year*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male (School A)</th>
<th>Female (School A)</th>
<th>Gender Gap</th>
<th>Male (California)</th>
<th>Female (California)</th>
<th>Gender Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Met or Exceeded Standard</td>
<td>Met or Exceeded Standard</td>
<td></td>
<td>Met or Exceeded Standard</td>
<td>Met or Exceeded Standard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>67.71%</td>
<td>67.39%</td>
<td>.32% Gap</td>
<td>34.82%</td>
<td>26.97%</td>
<td>7.86% Gap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>79.78%</td>
<td>89.53%</td>
<td>9.75% Gap</td>
<td>42.85%</td>
<td>54.80%</td>
<td>11.95% Gap</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Educational Testing Service, 2023.

What makes this issue of great import is that the short-term impacts of disengagement listed on page three can lead to the long-term impacts of disengagement.
like dropping out, disinterest in all things related to school, lower self-esteem, and feelings of alienation that could even stretch beyond school (Kimmel, 2018; Sax, 2016; Tyre, 2008; Whitmire, 2010).

Ultimately, to better understand male disengagement from school, what should be studied, aside from the effects of disengagement indicated above, are the various sociocultural contexts that boys navigate in school, specifically as it relates to masculinity. Studying the sociocultural contexts of high school boys can be done through the boys themselves, as they are in the unique position to study, critique, and highlight these sociocultural contexts.

**A Working Definition of Masculinity**

According to Connell (2005), masculinity can be defined as “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (p. 71). Put simply, masculinity is a point of reference that is engaged to such an extent as to have an effect on the body, how one views it and wields it, effect on the mind, how it is shaped and formed, and effect on the sociocultural, political, and natural environments. Connell’s (2005) theory of multiple masculinities emphasizes the importance of social context in masculine expression and performance. With this in mind, distinguishing between masculine behaviors that are sociocultural or traits that are hormonally and biologically driven can be difficult. Oftentimes, definitions of masculinity and femininity are made at the extremes of their expressions.

**Expressions of Masculinity and the Problem with Toxic Masculinity**

Biological males can be defined as individuals born with XY chromosomes in each cell as opposed to XX chromosomes. Additionally, biological males are born with mobile gametes compared to immobile ones (females). With that being said, the
sociocultural behavior of biological males that are at the more extreme end of masculine expression can fall under the category of toxic masculinity or hegemonic masculinity, the two terms not being interchangeable (Connell, 2005; Harrington, 2021). Hegemonic masculinity is a socially contextualized, dominant expression of masculinity, whereas the meaning of toxic masculinity, a term that has become more mainstream, is still unsettled (Harrington, 2021). The difference between masculinity and toxic masculinity is in the degree of harm that is caused. Things are much more nuanced than what the American Psychological Association claims (French, 2019). Connell’s and Harrington’s definitions reflect the APA definition only to the extent that they discuss the extremes of masculinity like the APA but do so as part of a larger definition of masculinity. Certain characteristics attributed to masculinity are damaging, specifically those aspects that are harmful, or toxic. However, expressions/performance of masculinity are not inherently damaging, as the American Psychological Association claims, but toxic masculinity can be. Before getting into the specifics of toxic masculinity and its problematic use, it is necessary to define masculine expression and performance.

Expressions of masculinity are the ways in which qualities that are stereotypically masculine are expressed by any given individual. The emphasis on the word stereotypically is important to note, since this word acts as a way to both emphasize the characterization of masculinity as well as to emphasize the narrowness of masculinity’s definition. Masculinity cannot be boiled down to a few key expressions; it is far too complex. Also false is the idea that only biological males, those born with XY chromosomes in their cells and not XX ones, and those born with immobile gametes and not mobile ones, can express stereotypically masculine qualities.

When it comes to defining masculine performance, it is much like the definition of masculine expression in that it deals primarily in stereotypes, but the term performance implies that one is under close scrutiny by others. The key distinction between the two
has many modern writers on masculinity call it the burden of performing masculinity (Smith, 2021). It is called a performance because masculinity is a practice engaged in at the cultural and social levels. The idea of masculine performance being a burden goes at least as far back as the 1950s (Mayer Hacker, 1957).

With the above two working definitions of masculine expression and performance in mind, the closest one can get to the term toxic masculinity’s origin, and definition, comes from psychology professor and author Shepherd Bliss, who used the term to describe his father’s “authoritarian parenting style” (Harrington, 2021, p. 347). Bliss purposefully used a “‘medical term’” as he felt that there is an “‘antidote’” (Harrington, 2021, p. 347). There really is not a formalized definition of toxic masculinity. Indeed, as Harrington (2021) points out, “toxic masculinity has become a framework for popular and scholarly understandings of the gender factor in social problems,” and it is often used “to signal disapproval” (Harrington, 2021, p. 346).

Before its current common use, Terry Kupers used the term in his study of men in prisons (Harrington, 2021). He posited that toxic masculinity is a term to refer to male behavior that is concerned with “‘the most problematic proclivities in men,’” including “‘resistance in psychotherapy’” (Harrington, 2021, p. 347). With this origin in mind, the term toxic masculinity is problematic for a few reasons. Toxic masculinity is often left out of the “broader theorization of masculinity” (Harrington, 2021, p. 346)—rightfully so, since its original intent was to discuss one specific person, Shepherd Bliss’s father, and one specific group of marginalized men with a proclivity for violence and aversion to seeking therapy (Harrington, 2021). The term has strayed far from its original use. Now the term is used to describe men who behave in ways that are socially unacceptable (e.g., physically or emotionally violent). Oftentimes, the term “toxic masculinity” has been hijacked, and its current vagaries have strayed far beyond its original intent in reference to Bliss’s father and Kupers’ study of violent men in prison (Harrington, 2021).
It is in the best interest of this study of masculinity and its possible effect on male student disengagement in school to avoid using such a term. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) is the preferred term, because the term toxic masculinity is not applicable given its origin and continued misuse. If anything, using a term like toxic masculinity to label the aforementioned statistics merely highlights the unique crises facing boys and men, crises obscured by the ubiquity of patriarchal institutions.

**Another Problem with Patriarchy**

The crises boys and men go through often go unrecognized because the world is predominantly patriarchal, defined in one instance as a universalizable structure that is both political in nature and that privileges men at women’s expense (Farrell, 1993). One must hesitate to use the above definition of patriarchy, however, because it renders invisible the struggles boys and men face by implying that only women are an expense, and not boys and men as well. One of the critiques of this way of looking at the condition of masculinity as it relates to the ubiquity of patriarchy is that there is a shift from looking at the public, social realm to the inner realm of the individual (Connell, 2005). Connell’s argument is that the focus *should* be on the public, social realm, patriarchy’s effect on masculinity, because an organized structure wherein men have power at the expense of those who are harmed by it cannot fundamentally change if ignored—an indisputable fact.

The key difference between patriarchy and masculinity is that the former is an organized structure wherein men have power, while the latter is an umbrella term used to define characteristics stereotypically associated with manliness. With all of that in mind, the problem of high-school-age male student disengagement needs to be looked at and addressed using the lenses of the complexity of masculinity (Connell, 2005) and
belongingness (Strayhorn, 2019). But, in order to determine if there is a disengagement problem, one must first look at the typical measurements of disengagement.

**Belonging and Peer Pressure**

Starting with their struggles in language development during pre-K and kindergarten, boys begin to feel a sense of not belonging in school (Eliot, 2009). As boys get older, socialization away from school or the embracing of school are a result of peer pressure and social pressure (Eliot, 2009; Farrell & Gray, 2019; hooks, 2004; Kimmel, 2011; Morris, 2005; Orenstein, 2020; Sax, 2016). Humans are social creatures, and human beings within groups regulate one another through enforcing norms and expectations for behavior that, if not adhered to, could earn the non-adherent possible ostracism. The pressure to conform is rarely done in the often-caricatured way in which peer pressure is depicted, where one boy is overtly pressuring another to do something he may not want to do. It is more accurate to describe peer pressure as occurring implicitly wherein boys, who are highly tuned to what fellow boys think, regulate and modify their behavior to the group’s norms almost imperceptibly and rather seamlessly (Kimmel, 2011, 2018; Orenstein, 2020).

For boys, peer pressure in school is often guided by sexism and sexuality (Farrell & Gray, 2019; hooks, 2008; Kimmel, 2011, 2018; Noguera, 2008; Orenstein, 2020; Sax, 2016). For example, one common form of peer pressure among boys and young men is to “prove” themselves through sex with girls. This way of proving oneself upholds the notions of both hegemonic masculinity (detailed later) and heteronormativity. The boys feeling this pressure, however, do not conform uncritically. They are adept at finding ways to subvert these unrealistic expectations through deflection or rejection (Duckworth & Trautner, 2019). Additionally, pop culture and sociocultural conceptions of masculinity
often solidify these sexual expectations as well as equating success in school with negativity (Kimmel, 2011, 2018; Orenstein, 2020).

In American popular culture, two figures have become staples in the portrayal of high school life, the “nerd” and the “jock.” The two figures are set up as polar opposites, effectively putting them into boxes, wherein any deviation outside of it is met with ridicule. This boxing-in relates to Porter’s (2019) claim that boys and men are put into a “man box,” a particularly stunning image of masculinity that reflects its confines and constrictions rather than its seemingly liberatory power and potency. These two figures typify the idea that masculinity can be negotiated as an either-or relationship, when, in reality, masculinity is far more complex. The tendency to simplify masculinity and masculine expression is precisely why boys and young men need a place to explore their own self-understanding as it relates to their own masculine identities.

When masculinity and its expression become simplified on campus, oftentimes it comes in the form of hegemonic masculine traits (Connell, 2005), traits that can show up most notably in sports and that can encourage school disengagement (Fowler, 2021). The intersection of masculinity, athletics, and school engagement presents an atmosphere that neglects to challenge expressions of hypermasculinity to the detriment of the disengaged boys in Fowler’s (2021) study. There are, however, effective programs that encourage healthy masculinity to the benefit of the boys and men involved (Givens et al., 2016).

**Male Student Engagement**

The Manhood Development Program (MDP) for ninth grade Black boys in the Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, California, counteracts the confines of Black masculinity by providing counternarratives. In the program, the boys learn about Black male leaders from history, have guest speakers from the community who are Black male leaders, and engage in critical discussions about Black male identity that challenge the
narrow stereotypes the boys encounter on campus and in popular culture. Furthermore, they are gaining a more relevant education, wherein “learning about Black leaders and Black history [is] empowering…. [that] Black manhood [is] consistent with achievement and ‘doing something’” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 179). This supplementary education translates over into the boys’ classroom experiences. One participant observed, “‘I’m actually trying to speak out more in the class. To show what I’ve learned to actually start a conversation’” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 180). A program like MDP highlights the interrelationship between having a safe space to meet and discuss issues around masculinity, explore their masculine identities, feel a sense of belongingness, and affect academic outcomes. Furthermore, it provides the participating boys with a means to disrupt the harmful stereotypes about Black male students, one stereotype being that they are “anti-intellectual and anti-school” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 168).

The program places an emphasis on Na’ilah Nasir’s (2012, as cited in Givens et al., 2016) argument about social spaces and cultural spaces as being areas that can provide the means with which to develop identity—namely, “material, relational, and ideational resources” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 170). Material resources refer to the physical environment and the messages it can give to an individual about who they are and/or who they could be (Givens et al., 2016). For example, the overuse of exclusionary punishment can often send the message that a student does not belong. Relational resources are “how the relationships with others in the setting provide us with information about who we are (and are not),” typically based on “the company we keep” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 170). Relational resources can be from peers and the adults on campus. These relational resources are crucial in determining whether they have a positive or negative impact on a student’s self-image or self-understanding of one’s group identity.

Finally, ideational resources refer to “ideas about who one is and about what is valued in the setting” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 170). Material and relational resources can
be thought of as the roots to ideational resources, as it is the physical environment and the people within the physical environment that can often determine the ideas one has about one’s self and one’s identity. The overall goal of the MDP program was to counteract negative stereotypes about Black masculinity and expressions of manhood and provide the boys with positive examples of Black masculinity.

MDP promotes a wider, more humanizing view of Black masculinity, something that runs counter to popular culture’s narrow portrayals of Black masculinity, and something that is noticeably absent in school curriculum (Givens et al., 2016). The program empowers the participants to see themselves and encourages them to acknowledge that they are a part of a long legacy of Black leaders, builders of culture, and builders of this country (Givens et al., 2016). In short, a program like “MDP demonstrates how districts can build on community resources to resist internalized oppression experienced by students” (Givens et al., 2016, p. 181).

MDP provides an effective template for how a school-based program focused on exploring participants’ masculine identities and the promotion of healthy masculinity can empower them. Without a place to go and explore their self-conceptions as it relates to masculinity and provide a counternarrative that could expand how masculinity is defined and expressed, many boys tend to shut down (Givens et al., 2016). One of the MDP leaders caught wind of a possible fight between two of the participants. He was able to pull them out of class and engage them in a conversation where both boys were empowered to be vulnerable. They both opened up about their struggles and came away with a better understanding of one another, made a stronger connection, and settled their differences peacefully (Givens et al., 2016). Providing a place for high-school-age boys to have critical discussions can allow for a widening of the understanding of what masculinity truly is and can promote a self-understanding that is literally a matter of life or death (Farrell & Gray, 2019; Givens et al., 2016; Reeves, 2022b). Encouraging high-
school-aged boys to engage one another in dialogues about masculinity, gender, identity, attitudes toward school, and belonging can be empowering and easily replicated (Siscoe & Odermatt, 2022). Looking at the issue of disengagement from school as related to masculinity could provide answers to what influences boys’ attitudes toward school and could lead to a solution that is both effective and sustainable.

**Research Purpose and Significance**

High-school-age male student disengagement is a problem that does not get the attention that it deserves. There needs to be more research on whether in-school programs that specifically focus their attention on male disengagement can effectively engage male students through the promotion of a sense of belonging and healthy masculinity. Local programs like the Manhood Development Project (MDP) and national programs like Men of Strength Club and Men Can Stop Rape, which promote healthy masculinity and a sense of belonging, have a proven track record of engaging boys and young men both inside and outside of school. The purpose of this research was to show how regular participation in a weekly discussion about masculinity with high school-age-boys can promote a sense of belonging, encourage healthy masculinity, and engage boys.

When boys have conversations around masculinity and are grappling with the differences between healthy masculinity and unhealthy masculinity, it can prepare them to challenge the aspects of masculinity that can be harmful to everyone. For example, they can be prepared to address issues in their peer group around sexism, violence, and consent. They can also be role models to their fellow peers and to younger boys who are increasingly turning to figures like Andrew Tate, who cynically exploits male confusion around what it means to be a man and offers counterproductive guidance (Reeves, 2022a).
This qualitative study sought to hear from the boys themselves about their struggles with feeling a sense of belonging, their engagement in school, and their masculine identities. Participants had the opportunity to share their own personal experiences with developing their masculine selves through our weekly discussions. These recorded discussions provided insight into how the boys talk about masculinity, documented their shifts in understanding of masculinity and its expression, and helped me understand if and how such conversations impact their sense of belonging and their thinking about school. Finally, four interviews with four different participants were conducted to determine the efficacy of such a program and to gather feedback from them on what could be developed to better serve male students through reengaging them.

By encouraging them to talk about their own experiences with their developing masculine identity and hearing them open up about issues related to masculinity, they may be more likely to engage outside of the group in such a way as to challenge the ways masculinity has been narrowed. The narrowing down of what it means to be masculine is harmful to everyone, and their work within the group could lead to possible solutions around how masculine expression can be expanded to be both inclusive and less restricting. Hopefully, this research can help to challenge the status quo by identifying unhealthy masculinity and by empowering the younger generation to take on a leadership role in effecting positive change.

Finally, this study was designed to build upon the burgeoning, yet sparse, literature on male-centered programs and their successes in engaging males for possible replication. Improvements in boys’ self-perception has been shown to positively influence their attitudes toward school and promote a sense of belonging (Givens et al., 2016; McGann, 2010; McGann et al., 2020). MDP does this through facilitated discussions that encourage healthy masculinity. It is important to understand the role such discussions could have in our efforts to reverse the trend of male student disengagement.
Research Questions

In order to adequately study the effects that masculinity has on high-school-age boys’ relationship with and performance in school, I addressed the following questions:

1. What aspects of masculinity are the participants interested in talking about, and how do they talk about masculinity?
2. In what ways can regular participation in a discussion group on masculinity shift participants’ understandings of masculinity and of themselves?
3. In what ways do these conversations impact their sense of belonging, and how is it shaping what they think about school?

What the questions explore is whether there is a connection between how high-school-age boys engage with one another, reflect upon, and seek to understand themselves and their own masculine identities through participation in the weekly discussions. The group sought to document their interests in what aspects of masculinity and masculine expression that they wished to explore and how they spoke about masculinity. Additionally, there was an exploration of how our conversations affect their sense of belonging in the group and outside of it as well as how the discussions shape their views of school. The study was predicated on the idea that having these in-depth discussions on masculinity can promote a sense of belonging and positive, active engagement.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL AND CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE

The following literature review examines the literature that relates to the typical ways in which the disengagement of male students in schools is assessed, some possible causes of male student disengagement, possible ways of looking at male disengagement, and some of the proposed solutions. The studies outlined below range from quantitative to qualitative research, and some that use mixed methodologies. The first section focuses on the gender gap. Section two discusses the idea of sex-typing and its connection to male student performance. The third section highlights some of the differences in cultural definitions, expressions, and perceptions of masculinity. Sections four through six focus on the effects of stereotypes. The seventh section speaks to hegemonic masculinity and Whiteness, and section eight speaks to the effects of pathologizing. Sections nine and ten discuss the importance of a male role model and single-gender male discussion groups. Finally, the gap in literature is discussed as it relates to male students and their disengagement in school.

Gender Gap

When the success of boys is being measured against the gains of their female peers, the numbers are pretty stark. The gap between genders grows widest in the subject of ELA (Tables 1–4). From elementary school, girls’ advantages begin around age 6; in middle school, the advantage girls have over boys in ELA is maintained, and the
differences remain steady in high school. A meta-analysis of 10 million public school students’ state verbal assessment scores in grades 3–11 from 16 different states by Peterson (2018) looked for trends that disproved or proved the Hyde (2005) hypothesis about gender similarities. Hyde hypothesized that the two genders are more alike than dissimilar. While Peterson (2018) agreed with Hyde, one exception was that the gender similarity hypothesis is not reflected in the gender gap in writing.

Another meta-analysis by Reilly et al. (2019) looks at three decades of NAEP data of 3.9 million fourth, eights, and twelfth grade U.S. public and private school students, a representative sample size from NCES (National Center for Educational Statistics). They assert that Hyde (2005) does not take into account the effects of the gender differences that exist—i.e., how boys’ falling behind in ELA can have a very real detrimental effect on how they view themselves as belonging to the world of education, nor does she take into account the large variability within the gender groups. Furthermore, Hyde’s tendency to discount differences between genders as small or unimportant is a cause for concern as it discounts those affected by the gender gap (boys) and ignores the large variability within the gender groups.

Because there is more variability of ability levels in the boys and less variability in the girls, “the greater male variability effect…states that males show greater variability in cognitive performance across all cultures” (Reilly et al., 2019, p. 447). This variability points to the very real concern that boys need a particular focus that is more specific to how they learn. Even boys who are advanced in a subject like ELA struggle, and smaller gender gaps exist in developing readers while larger gender gaps exist in advanced readers. Therefore, even if boys show marked success in a subject like ELA, this does not mean they are “out of the woods.” By grade 12, more than twice the number of girls reach “advanced proficiency” compared to male students (Reilly et al., 2019). Aside from the gender gap showing up in ELA, there is also a gender gap in students receiving
special education services (Haddad, 2020), ADHD diagnoses (Farrell & Gray, 2019; Reeves, 2022b), in dropout rates (Berlowitz et al., 2015; NAEP, 2018), graduation rates (Reeves, 2022b), standardized test scores (NAEP, 2018), average GPA (Reeves, 2022b), and in discipline (Piscitello et al., 2021). For example, 12.9% of males are diagnosed with ADHD compared to 5.6% of females (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). The average high school GPA for females is 3.1 compared to males’ 2.9 (ThinkImpact, 2021a). When it comes to high school completion, 94.3% of females complete high school compared to 91.6% of males (American Council on Education, 2017). This falling behind is exacerbated as boys advance grade levels and when they go to college (Farrell & Gray, 2019; Reeves, 2022b). The gender gap can starkly reveal a phenomenon like sex typing.

**Sex Typing**

According to the APA’s definition of sex typing, it is “the process by which particular activities are identified within particular cultures as appropriate expressions of maleness and femaleness,” an idea confirmed by Reilly et al. (2019):

Highly sex-typed individuals are motivated to keep their behavior and self-concept consistent with traditional gender norms…The rigidity of sex-roles may translate into decreased reading interest and motivation for some boys if there is a perceived incompatibility between reading and masculine norms. (p. 447)

If one is to take into account the socialization of boys, how masculine ideals and traits are learned and adhered to, males who are “highly sex typed” are more likely to follow the social expectations of what it means to demonstrate masculinity, in this case, specifically, turning away from reading and language. In the case of reading, interest in literacy is
seen as aberrant and should therefore be avoided in order to preserve one’s place in the social hierarchy of boyhood. The definition of and expression of masculinity can shift and change as a result of cultural contexts.

**Masculinity in Cultural Contexts**

High school is difficult for all teens, especially boys. It is what Michael Kimmel calls a “boot camp for guyland” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 78). He argues that one of the main culprits behind boys’ disengagement from school and their falling behind is “The Guy Code,” a list of traits and expressions of masculinity that are hegemonic (Kimmel, 2018): suppression of softer emotions, anger, extreme competition, keeping a stern mien, not seeking help, to name a few. Kimmel (2018) documents the perilous social world of boyhood that plays out on school campuses across the country and highlights how one of the main reasons boys are falling behind their female peers, or are disengaged, is due to the fact that boys themselves are acting as their own worst enemy. He is right, to a large extent, but this claim overlooks the fact that many boys want things to be different, they just do not know how to shift away from the problematic behaviors that get them into the state of disengagement in the first place; they have to be shown (Givens et al., 2016). The peer pressure and bullying that often go along with rejecting or accepting “The Guy Code” is a very strong persuader, especially when there are no perceived alternatives in place (Kimmel, 2018). Kimmel’s (2018) “Guy Code” is a list of 10 common phrases that sum up the suppression of emotions to the detriment of the individual:

1. “Boys Don’t Cry”
2. “It’s Better to Be Mad than Sad”
3. “Don’t Get Mad—Get Even”
4. “Take It Like a Man”
“The Guy Code” (Kimmel, 2018) is reflected across racial groups (Farrell & Gray, 2019; Givens et al., 2016; hooks, 2004; Kimmel, 2011, 2018; Noguera, 2008; Reeves, 2022b; Sax, 2016).

In her book, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), bell hooks deconstructs Black masculinity in a sweeping view of its history and current issues related to its expression and suppression. As it relates to school, Black boys are actively discouraged from asking questions, their curiosity is viewed as troublesome, and they are “socialized to believe that physical strength and stamina are all that really matter” (hooks, 2004, p. 34). Furthermore, there is an internalized self-hatred and shame that many Black boys feel as a result of being “quite openly taught…White supremacy” (hooks, 2004, p. 36). Oftentimes, Black boys internalize the myth that education is for Whites only: “turning away from education [is seen] as rejecting a world wherein he had been given the message he did not belong and would not belong no matter the degree of intelligence” (hooks, 2004, p. 37). What is created is a negative feedback loop that is typically reinforced by the social, political, and educational environment.

While Asian American boys underperform their female peers, they generally outperform other groups of boys (Lee & Zhou, 2015). In Figure 1, we view findings from Lee and Zhou’s (2015) study of racialized and gendered differences in academic performance. When boys are included in the group, it lowers the performance across
demographics. Interviews of Asian American males reveal the pressure they are under to succeed. These expectations are implicitly understood. Yet while Asian students are associated with positive indicators of school engagement, like a strong commitment to school and some of the strongest academic records, “they exhibit the lowest levels of self-esteem compared to White, Black, and Latino students” (Lee & Zhou, 2015, p. 148). The “achievement paradox” (Lee & Zhou, 2015) reveals how, even if indicators of engagement are present, this does not necessarily mean that positive feelings will follow, as low self-esteem can be a form of emotional disengagement.

Additionally, the success of some subgroups of Asian American boys can mask the fact that other subgroups can “exhibit lower educational attainment than the US average…and have higher high school dropout rates than Blacks and Latinos” (Lee & Zhou, 2015, p. 187). One stark example from a 2019 Census Bureau report shows that, in the demographic of those who are 25 and above with at least a bachelor’s degree, people from the Vietnamese, Burmese, Cambodian, and Hmong communities fall between the 20–35% range, while people from the Indian and Taiwanese communities fall just short of 80% (Jin, 2021). Attainment of a bachelor’s degree is often seen as a marker for the successful navigation of the K–12 schooling system. Complicating things even more is when one begins to look at Asian American maleness and how it is portrayed, portrayals that can have a very real, negative effect on how Asian American boys see themselves and how others see them.
Table 5

*Differences in Performance Outcomes, Self-Reports of Receiving Mostly A’s in High School, by Gender, Ethnicity, and Years in the U.S. (Percentages are Approximates)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (All)</th>
<th>Group 2 (Female Only)</th>
<th>Approximate Percentage Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (1.5- and Second-Generation) 50%</td>
<td>Chinese (1.5- and Second-Generation) 58%</td>
<td>Chinese (1.5- and Second-Generation) 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese (1.5- and Second-Generation) 45%</td>
<td>Vietnamese (1.5- and Second-Generation) 50%</td>
<td>Vietnamese (1.5- and Second-Generation) 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican (1.5- and Second-Generation) 15%</td>
<td>Mexican (1.5- and Second-Generation) 17%</td>
<td>Mexican (1.5- and Second-Generation) 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican (Third-Plus-Generation) 17%</td>
<td>Mexican (Third-Plus-Generation) 20%</td>
<td>Mexican (Third-Plus-Generation) 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (Third-Plus-Generation) 12%</td>
<td>Black (Third-Plus-Generation) 18%</td>
<td>Black (Third-Plus-Generation) 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (Third-Plus-Generation) 30%</td>
<td>White (Third-Plus-Generation) 40%</td>
<td>White (Third-Plus-Generation) 10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Lee and Zhou (2015).

In popular culture, Asian American men are often desexualized (Kung, 2020). While a cult hero like Bruce Lee reflects a stereotypically masculine performance through the use of violence, and pushes back against desexualized Asian maleness, it still conforms to the hegemonic ideals of masculinity. As it relates to school, Kung (2020), a photojournalist, describes how he personally “had always felt a sense of not belonging” and that he finally “began to understand the degree of Asian Americans’ invisibility [when he] visited the Mississippi Delta… the Delta’s Chinese American students still
recounted stories of the bullying they had endured in the school system” (para. 6). While this is one individual’s experience, his observations reflect a wider cultural trend of Asian male misrepresentation.

One obvious example is Elliot Rodger, the Isla Vista mass shooter, and the deconstruction of his aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel, 2014). Specifically as it relates to Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity (2005) and its relation to race, Vito et al. (2017) write,

The discourse on hegemonic masculinity renders Asian-American men as subordinate (and to an extent, invisible), resulting in the denigration of Asian masculinity…the racial assumptions of “nerdy” Asian-American men establishes academic achievement as their defining feature, translating to the “model minority” stereotype, that is mutually exclusive to hegemonic ideals. (p. 5)

What Vito et al. (2017) crystallize is the connection between hegemonic masculinity and its racialization as well as the connection between Asian American masculinity, particularly its stereotyped representations in popular culture, and how these stereotypes play into the idea that success in the world of academia is both unmasculine and taboo at least when it relates to Asian American males. Elliot Rodger’s reaction serves as a reminder that the narrowness of hegemonic ideals, sexual conquest being the most obvious example, can have deadly consequences to the perpetrators of gender-based mass shootings and those caught in the literal and metaphorical crosshairs. Given the above elucidation, it is often the case that stereotypes can play an outsized role in how boys view masculinity and how they behave.
Stereotype Threat

Stereotypes play into the perception of how males see themselves and how others see them. The two phenomena covered most prominently as it relates to stereotypes and the struggles students face in education are class-based stereotypes and race-based stereotypes, like stereotype threat (Allen, 2009; Morris, 2005; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and the model minority trope (Wing, 2007; Yi & Museus, 2016), which is also referred to as a “stereotype lift” (Walton & Cohen, 2003). These stereotypes often intersect with gender and can have a negative effect on boys.

Steele and Aronson (1995) define stereotype threat as “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (p. 797). A study by Hartley and Sutton (2013) from the University of Kent studied the effects of stereotype threat on gender. Their hypothesis that male student performance can be improved through a “stereotype nullification message” (Hartley & Sutton, 2013, p. 1726) proved correct. The nullification message was telling the boys that they are “expected to perform equally as well as girls” (Hartley & Sutton, 2013, p. 1726). The above nullification message had a positive effect on the performance of the boys who received the message compared to those boys who did not receive the same message. Interestingly, the girls were unaffected by the message. These findings suggest that boys need extra support through encouragement. While some of the performance differentials between genders and races in school can be attributed to stereotype threat, more studies need to be done to determine the extent of stereotype threat’s effect on performance. This is especially true given the fact that many boys are assumed to be disinterested in school and may not have as high of expectations placed on them by teachers who buy into the above stereotype.
The Rosenthal Effect

Harvard professor Robert Rosenthal and elementary-school principal Leonore Jacobson randomly identified a sample of 20% of the students in a school and told the teachers that they showed “unusual potential for intellectual growth” (Eliot, 2009, p. 158). The selected students made significant learning gains as indicated by grades, test scores, and teacher feedback, compared to the control group. This study of the effect of teachers’ expectations on student performance is known as the “Rosenthal effect,” more popularly referred to as the “Pygmalion effect.” This effect describes the cyclical nature of how expectations from one group influence the behavior of another group. If one has low expectations for others, these low expectations often influence how one behaves toward them. For example, if a teacher believes the stereotype that boys are less capable of completing a challenging academic task, the teacher may give the male students less challenging tasks than their female peers. The boys given the remedial work will notice right away that their work is different than their peers, and they may internalize the idea that they are unable to complete the more challenging tasks that their peers are doing. But negative stereotypes are not unique in their ability to do harm; positive stereotypes can harm as well.

Stereotype Lift

Varaxy Yi and Samuel D. Museus (2016) break down the history of the model minority myth, a kind of “stereotype lift” (Walton & Cohen, 2003), its resilience, and how this seemingly harmless—some would even argue “positive”—stereotype can be harmful. The model minority myth is a stereotype focused on Asian American success. According to the myth, Asian Americans’ hard work, intelligence, and emphasis on
education and achievement are the sole factors that contribute to their success in U.S. society (Li, 2005; Oshige, McGowan, & Lingren, 2006; Wing, 2007; Yi & Museus, 2016). Not only does this myth negate the experiences of other minority groups, including the many diverse members of the Asian American community, it also promotes the narrative that racism is either non-existent as a barrier to the success of non-Whites or, if racism indeed exists, it is not as insurmountable as marginalized groups insist. Yi and Museus (2016) outline three harms associated with the model minority myth: 1) it provides erroneous “proof” that color-blindness is possible, 2) it presents Asian Americans as “honorary Whites” separate from other minoritized groups, and 3) it renders inequalities within Asian American communities invisible.

Li’s (2005) and Wing’s (2007) articles about the model minority myth argue that the myth invisibilizes the struggles of many Asian American students both within distinct groups and between them. Nationally, in 2016, 54% of Asian American students attended the best-ranked schools compared to 56% percent of White students, 42% of Latino students, and 33% of Black students. However, when disaggregating Asian American students into subgroups, and looking specifically at California schools, one can see that 29% of Laotian, 31% of Hmong, and 42% of Cambodian students have access to good schools (Joo et al., 2016). In that same year, 2016, the eighth-grade proficiency rate in Algebra I in California for Cambodian (35%) and Laotian (35%) students was less than half the proficiency rate of Chinese (77%) and Korean students, who topped the list at 79% (Joo et al., 2016). Central to Li’s (2005) and Wing’s (2007) argument is that, hidden beneath the surface of the success of Asian Americans as a statistically unified whole, there are large swaths of students who struggle. A few examples of hidden struggles are the discipline disparities between different AAPI groups (Washburn, 2019) and differences in performance outcomes on standardized tests and dropout rates (Anderson, 2021; Washburn, 2016). Additionally, there is the tremendous stress and pressure that
many Asian American students are put under in living up to what Lee and Zhou (2015) call the “success frame.” While George W. Bush, in his justification for the national educational policy called No Child Left Behind, spoke of “the soft bigotry of low expectations” (Noguera, 2008, p. 94), the model minority myth offers the soft bigotry of high expectations. The model minority myth makes an entire group serve as a “model” to other minority groups, who are then looked at as deficient, not the system that oppresses them (Li, 2005). Given the disproportionate learning disability designations (Banks, 2017; Coutinho et al., 2002; Farrell & Gray, 2019; Reeves, 2022b; Shifrer et al., 2011), as a group, boys are looked at as deficient as well.

**Disproportionate Learning Disability Designations**

One of the ways in which the underperformance of boys has been handled is by trying to diagnose the problem away. Oftentimes, when boys underperform in school, the assumption is that the cause is neurochemical, developmental, or biological. Boys who fall behind in school are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD (Farrell & Gray, 2019), a phenomenon that is problematic for numerous reasons. While ADHD and other learning disabilities (e.g., oppositional defiance disorder) are real, there is a long history of special education designation and medical diagnoses being used as a cover to perpetuate segregationist policies in U.S. public schools (Blanchett et al., 2009). Moreover, we know that students of color are at greater risk of being identified for special education (Banks, 2017; Shifrer et al., 2011). The tendency to focus only on the child, separate from the context or environment, is a way to guarantee overdiagnosis (Shifrer et al., 2011).

One way to avoid overdiagnosis is to look at the contextual factors surrounding the child rather than solely upon the child. When looking at other factors that determine the likelihood of a student being designated as having a learning disability, Coutinho et
al. (2002) look at nine sociodemographic factors: class size, spending per pupil, “at-risk” designations, non-White students, household income, house valuation, the poverty line, multi-language learners (MLLs) designated as limited English proficient (LEP), and percentage of non-high-school graduates in the environs looked at, which was 15 cities. As the poverty rate increases, the numbers of students designated as having a learning disability (LD) in each racial demographic increases except for White students and American Indian students (Coutinho et al., 2002). Yet, American Indian male students are, overall, overrepresented as LD compared to their male and female peers, revealing the possibility that Native American male students are pathologized and not their White male and female student peers (Coutinho et al., 2002).

Conversely, Asian American male students are, consistently across the different controlled factors, the least likely to be designated as having a learning disability (Coutinho et al., 2002). Looking at the correlation between the percentage of LD designations, poverty as a sociodemographic category, and gender, American Indian, Black, White, and Latino male students are noticeably over-represented in the LD category when compared to their female peers. More recent data from the 2017–2018 school year reveals that males make up 65% of students designated as having a learning disability compared to 34% of females (Pew Research Center, 2023). Coutinho et al. (2002) present their data and extrapolate possible outcomes to alert people to the trends that show a disproportionate number of boys being designated LD, specifically boys of color in some categories, but not all. The gender gap in LD designation presents the possibility that male students are being underserved by the education system.

Much like how the dropout rate highlights problematic differences between genders and racial groups, so are the higher rates of male students receiving special education services, 18%, compared to female students, 10% (Haddad, 2020). Students receiving special education services means all the possible services and support needed
for students to have access to education—support, meaning any services needed (e.g., speech therapy, therapy, counseling, and specialized instruction, to name a few) for a student to have the opportunity to learn. Interestingly, the rate of female students (42%) receiving services for specific learning disabilities is higher compared to their male peers, which stands at 31% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Students receiving services for specific learning disabilities means that special education services are provided that are typically a specialized type of academic instruction. Specific learning disability (SLD) is its own eligibility category, like severe emotional disturbance or autism spectrum disorder; the services provided under this designation generally relate to instruction. Given the differences in numbers, boys tend to be classified as needing more support beyond academic support. One form of support, as an example, is the importance of having a male role model.

**The Importance of a Male Role Model**

The lack of a male role model can negatively affect how boys learn about masculinity and masculine performance. When it comes to school, there is a noticeable absence of male teachers and male teachers of color, which means that many boys can go through years of school without being taught by a man or a male teacher of color (Bristol, 2017; Yu, 2018). It is important that all boys have more than one male role model in their life, especially in school. It can send the message that they are meant to be in school, that school is made for them, and that being a scholar is an integral part of masculinity and masculine expression. This can act as a counternarrative to pop culture, which tends to sneer at educated men and men in education unless at the university level or in administrative positions.
In the OUSD-implemented MDP program, the idea of “identity constellations” is applied to the group as a way to challenge the negative stereotypes of Black masculinity. Identity constellations expand the definition of masculine identity by providing space for the men and boys to openly express their struggles against the negative stereotypes of Black masculinity. These negative stereotypes are encountered in their daily lives and in popular culture (Givens et al., 2016; hooks, 2004). The MDP participants critiqued their own views of Black masculinity and the views from outsiders of their expressions of masculinity, and they learned about the Black men from history who exemplified the idea of “identity constellations” as it related to Black masculine expression and performance (Givens et al., 2016). The boys were encouraged to see themselves as scholars by recalling the contributions of the men who came before them and through the male guest speakers who came to the course to speak with them about their own experiences. The men from the past and present serve as a powerful reminder of the male student participants’ legacy (Givens et al., 2016). The MDP program is an example of how a thoughtful and effective programmatic change can influence high-school-age boys to have a more positive perception of school and feel a sense of belonging.

**Fostering School Belonging**

Developing a sense of belonging in school is one of the most important aspects of a student’s in-school experiences (Allen et al., 2016). Belonging, the authors posit, can be thought of as a series of concentric circles wherein the student is at the center, the level of the individual, and radiating out in the following order are five levels (see Figure 2) which affect a student’s sense of belonging in school (Allen et al., 2016). This system outlined by Allen et al. (2016) is building on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s sociological human development model. In essence, the authors are highlighting the need for a
multi-pronged approach when it comes to fostering a sense of belonging in the student body. The student needs to feel supported at multiple levels—“school belonging [is] a multidimensional construct” (Allen et al., 2016, p. 114)—to feel a sense of belonging. What Allen et al. (2016) do is call attention to the idea that, in order for students to be able to succeed academically, they must first feel a sense of belonging at the individual, school, communal, and socio-political levels. This is something akin to what multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) aims to do. Admittedly, it is much larger in scope, but the theories driving the two ideas are similar.

Table 6

*Socio-Ecological Framework of School Belonging*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microsystem</th>
<th>Mesosystem</th>
<th>Exosystem</th>
<th>Macrosystem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Support</td>
<td>School Policies</td>
<td>Shared School Vision</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Support</td>
<td>Extracurricular Activities</td>
<td>School Board</td>
<td>Social Climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Support</td>
<td>Staff Professional Development</td>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>Government Education Reform and Data Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rules and Practices</td>
<td>Extended Family</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. From Allen et al. (2016).

In California, MTSS is a framework that addresses both parts of a student’s school identity, academic and social, and promotes student success through tailoring these support systems to each individual child’s needs (California Department of Education, 2022). In one study of 58 different schools using the MTSS framework with a specific
focus on positive behavioral interventions, when teachers and staff are properly trained, Bradshaw et al. (2021) found that reactive behavioral interventions (i.e., referrals and suspensions) decreased dramatically across the participating schools. While this is a fairly new framework that has been recently adopted, it shows promising results, as it is reversing some of the trends that have been going on and continuing to occur with regard to exclusionary discipline in schools. Showing students that the adults on campus care enough to provide them the extra attention, support, and care that they need is a way to foster belonging and promote positive outcomes that are both academic and social. Thus, participation in a weekly group discussion for male students is one step toward effectively addressing and attending to the multi-level supports needed by male students to feel a sense of belonging and prevent misbehavior.

**Single-Gendered Discussion Groups**

Research on the efficacy of male-only programs tends to focus on single-sex education (Anderson, 2015; Gonchar, 2014; Novotney, 2011; O’Connor, 2014). Single-sex groups specifically geared toward helping men and boys have been in existence both outside and inside of education. The ManKind Project has a guiding philosophy and curriculum used in prisons called the Freedom Within Prison Project (Seligson, 2018). Similarly, The Good Men Project (Poole, 2013) and Evryman (Seligson, 2018) are geared toward helping men by giving them a place to go and discuss things that they would not normally do in a coed program (Seligson, 2018). MDP, highlighted above (Givens et al., 2016), and the Kingmakers of Oakland (www.kingmakersofoakland.org) are two examples of programs specifically geared toward young Black boys that cross-pollinate with their education. The continued existence of programs like these indicates that they are serving a continuous need for boys and young men. There are not too many studies on
the efficacy of men- and boy-only groups, and the success of single-gender education has mixed results (O’Connor, 2014). This is one gap that this particular study sought to fill.

**Gap in the Literature**

One of the most glaring gaps in the literature is that there is not much literature that focuses specifically on the issue of masculinity when it comes to the study of high-school-age males’ disengagement from school (Heyder & Kessels, 2015). The literature that focuses on male student disengagement does not suggest ways of promoting male student success through focusing on belongingness and discussions around masculinity. When gender is discussed, it is often through an intersectional lens and not treated as a general issue when it comes to male student disengagement. One way gender is discussed is gender-based stereotypes when it comes to the perceptions of male students by teachers, but male students’ perceptions are not really looked into. If looked at from the perspective of male students, perhaps the struggles in school with which many boys contend can be discovered as mostly rooted in their struggles around masculine performance and their masculine identities. The issue of masculinity *needs* to be strongly considered as a possible root cause of school disengagement. Given the fact that boys are not learning, or if they are learning, at least on paper, they are disengaged from learning and merely going through the motions, looking at the issue deeply through the lens of masculinity could provide some answers and possible approaches. Post secondary school, the college dropout rate is 20% higher for males than female undergraduates (ThinkImpact, 2021b). Completion of high school does not end the struggles male students face (Thompson, 2021). Missing, too, is the literature that uses the voices from high-school-age boys in investigating the problems boys face that are largely a result of systemic failures. A qualitative study in which boys could self-report issues that often
interfere with their schooling by disrupting their relationship to school is, therefore, essential.

**Theoretical Frameworks: Multiple Masculinities and Belongingness**

In this section, I explain the theoretical lenses through which this study is framed: masculinities theory and the theory of belongingness and its effects on male student engagement. Using a masculinities theoretical lens allows for an effective way to critique the various ways masculinity can be presented, performed, and understood in this study. Additionally, looking at the effects of belongingness (Strayhorn, 2019) can provide insight into whether feeling a sense of belonging can help boys navigate their understanding of masculinity and make them feel engaged.

**Masculinity in Theory**

One of the most well-known masculinities theorists is Raewyn Connell, whose book *Masculinities* (2005) lays the foundation for looking at masculinity by highlighting four distinct expressions and performances of masculinity. What follows is a brief explanation about the four types of masculinity as outlined by Connell (2005): hegemonic masculinity, subordination masculinity, complicity masculinity, and marginalization masculinity.

**Hegemonic Masculinity**

Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form/expression of masculinity compared to other forms/expressions of masculinity in a given social context (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is “an ideological apparatus that constructs a certain subset of men as the dominant group and their power (defined as the ability to influence others) in society as ‘natural’ or ‘common-sense’” (Vito et al., 2017, p. 2). Expressions of
hegemonic masculinity are nestled within Kimmel’s “Guy Code” (Kimmel, 2018), which emphasizes the importance of physical toughness, a rigid self-reliance, the rejection of emotions aside from anger and aggression, and stoicism. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity is celebrated and reified and has a position of institutional dominance over the feminine and other subordinated forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005). Those who ascribe to the hegemonic masculine ideal are considered masculine, and those who do not fully conform merely operate in its orbit.

**Subordination Masculinity**

Subordination masculinity, existing as the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity, highlights the inherent internal conflict within groups of men. It is an acknowledgment of masculinities’ dominance/submission construction that makes up this conflict (Connell, 2005). Because heteronormativity is seen as the default position of relationships between the sexes, homosexual masculinity and expressions deemed “effeminate” are subordinate to the hegemonic ideal (Kimmel, 2011). That is to say, even heterosexual men can fall under the subordinate position if they are viewed as going against the culturally dominant image of hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2011).

**Complicity Masculinity**

Hegemonic masculinity cannot be upheld and reified without those who are complicit in its perpetuation. Complicit masculinity codifies the “devil’s bargain” made by the vast majority of men who do not fall into the hegemonic ideal. While very few fall into the hegemonic ideal, many men are direct beneficiaries of the power imbalance between men and women (Kimmel, 2011). Because of this, many boys and men are complicit in allowing hegemonic masculinity to be the dominant expression of masculinity due to the benefits that those who are complicit can get from allowing hegemonic masculinity to reign supreme and unchallenged.
Marginalization Masculinity

If hegemonic masculinity is a socially sanctioned and authorized form of masculinity, masculinities of marginalization refers to the kinds of masculinity expressed by marginalized groups. Marginalized forms of masculinity are usually race based or class based or relate to the LGBTQ+ community. Masculinities of marginalization generally serve to authorize the hegemonic ideal (Connell, 2005). For example, White hegemonic masculinity is seen as acceptable, whilst Black hegemonic masculinity is marginalized, viewed as a threat (hooks, 2004) and often punished.

Masculinities Studies Post-Connell

The above forms of masculinity and their critiques (toxic and hegemonic masculinity, misogyny, misandry, homophobia, sexism, etc.) can also be harmful and destructive to boys and young men (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2012). Multiple masculinities’ constructions and performance often act as constrictions for boys and men, wherein conflicting ideas about masculinity can often result in many boys and men feeling marginalized, silenced, and shameful (Connell, 1996; Connell, 2005; Farrell & Gray, 2019; hooks, 2004; Kimmel, 2011; Vito et al, 2017). Masculinities theory highlights the complexity of masculinity and its performance. One of the ways in which it is complex is in its intersectional nature.

Masculinities theory acknowledges this intersectionality by integrating concepts of masculinity within multiple identities like race (hooks, 2004), class, political affiliation, immigrant status, education level, religious affiliation, nationality, ethnicity, and ability (Farrell & Gray, 2019). It also critiques the assumption that patriarchy and patriarchal systems are inherently beneficial to all boys and men in the same ways. Using a masculinities theoretical lens can help to complexify the idea of masculinity (there being multiple masculinities). It can also clarify how notions of masculinity
can act as a barrier to school achievement, engagement, and belonging or could lead to actions that disrupt the unequal outcomes of high-school-aged boys and promote opportunities for them.

After Connell’s groundbreaking work on masculinities studies, scholars following in her wake have expanded the four types of masculinity Connell (2005) documented by adding more theoretical models, or categories, different from what Connell first proposed: inclusive masculinity, mosaic masculinity, hybrid masculinity, and sticky masculinity (Waling, 2019).

**Inclusive Masculinity**

Anderson (2009) defines inclusive masculinity as working from the assumption “that masculinity is structured through the negation of the Other (gay men and women)” (Waling, 2019, p. 94). Inclusive masculinity deliberately turns away from negating “the Other” through the acceptance/inclusivity of other expressions of masculine identity such as homosexuality and femininity. Inclusive masculinity rejects homophobia and misogyny. A group that adheres to this form of masculinity would accept women and people from the LGBTQ+ community and condemn the use of homophobic and misogynistic language and behaviors.

**Hybrid Masculinity**

Hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) occur when masculinity takes on facets of identity associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities, and even femininities, and includes them “‘into privileged men’s gender performances and identities’” (Waling, 2019, p. 95). An example of this is Chuck Liddell or Drake, the former UFC fighter and the musician, prominently displaying their painted toenails and fingernails.
**Mosaic Masculinities**

Mosaic masculinities (Coles, 2008) is a term used to describe how men who may not reproduce traits that fall under hegemonic masculinity use other forms of social capital like class, religion, or race to gain some other form of social hegemony (Waling, 2019). This mosaic structure, meaning made of multiple parts, is a nod to the fact that there are intersecting identities and other social structures that move beyond gender identity and gender expression when it comes to achieving social hegemony.

**Sticky Masculinity**

Finally, sticky masculinity (Berggren, 2014) is “a post-structural approach to masculinity that considers how subject positions are constructed, engaged with, and negotiated in discourse” (Waling, 2019, p. 95). Or, as Berggren (2014) says it: “‘masculinity is not the only ‘discourse’ positioning ‘men,’ and so there is a conflict between the fiction of a fixed, ‘real me,’ masculine self, and more fluid, alternative selves’” (Waling, 2019, p. 95).

The upside about the addition of these other forms of masculinity reveals that both the idea and expression of masculinity are nuanced and complex. Masculinity is a socio-political phenomenon that is used to delineate a marked distinction between qualities that are defined as effeminate versus masculine. What these categories seek to do is both complexify masculinity and reflect reality by making space for the wide spectrum of masculine expression.

Finally, one way to reconceptualize masculinity, among many others, is to consider the role that space plays in the conception, performance, and reception of masculine expression (Abelson, 2019). This is particularly important to consider given the fact that the environment, a school or classroom for example, plays such an important role in how one sees oneself and others as it relates to masculinity. In her book,
Men in Place: Trans Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality in America, Miriam J. Abelson (2019) dedicates a chapter on the role that region, or space, plays in how masculinity is defined or redefined based on her interviews with people identifying as transgender in the regions on which she focuses: the West, South, and Midwest. She focuses on three dominant stereotyped masculine figures she calls “Thugs, Rednecks, and Faggy Men.”

She interviewed trans people from the different regions in order to see how the definition of masculinity can change depending on the impact of space and stereotypes—namely, how these intersections play out in how masculinity is conceived and performed by the interviewees.

Abelson found that many of the trans men that she interviewed shared a common idea about there being what she called a “Goldilocks masculinity.” She defines Goldilocks masculinity as “the regular guy ideal in the middle of the spectrum” (p. 27) as opposed to the extreme figures of the “Thug” and “Redneck,” representing urban Black and rural White hypermasculinity, and “Faggy men,” representing effeminate masculinity at the opposite extreme of the former two:

Trans men’s narratives of the continuum of ideals show that they most valued the regular guy ideal in the middle of the spectrum…. This hybrid masculinity holds somewhere between a domineering violent masculinity and an overly emotional or weak masculinity—not too hard and not too soft—that is fundamentally shaped by race, sexuality, and gender. This regular guy ideal is constructed in opposition to controlling images of excessive raced and sexualized others. (Abelson, 2019, p. 27)

The trans men and how they conceive of and perform masculinity along with its emphasis on a “just-right” expression of masculinity has to do with the flexibility of masculine expression that is inherent in the hybridity of “Goldilocks masculinity,” which
can be a boon to those moving around different social contexts. The emphasis is on the ability to adapt while also challenging the extreme examples of stereotyped images of masculinity that are tied to race, class, and social status.

Common to each conceptualization of masculinity is the idea that “regularity” is wielded as an effective way to oppose the stereotypes that exist along the continuum of masculine expression. With that being said, the idea of regularity is subjective, and things become even more complicated given the fact that trans men tend to be marginalized and thought of as irregular. Important to the conversation around masculinity is the sense of belonging, as it is in belonging that one feels a sense that one’s unique expression of masculinity is acceptable.

**Belongingness**

Like the definition of masculinity, the definition of belongingness differs depending upon whom you ask. Strayhorn (2019) defines belongingness as dealing “with an individual’s psychological experiences and, importantly, their subjective evaluation of the level of integration in a particular context such as family, school, or college” (p. 4). A sense of belonging is contextual and conveys a sense that one matters, is important, and is worthy of love and affection. Belonging is subjective, and an individual’s self-assessment as to whether they belong depends on the context. For this particular study, the following definition for belongingness is adapted from Strayhorn’s definition:

students’ perceived support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

In order to engage male high school students in school, they need to be engaged through a sense of belonging. In this study, I propose that a sense of belonging may come from
individual participation in a group that explores ideas as it relates to their own masculine identities and promotes self-understanding through active discussion.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the design of the research study and includes a description of the methodological approach, the research setting, a description of the research participants, the research instruments and data-collection process, data-analysis methods, evaluation of the design, and a description of my positionality as a qualitative researcher.

Research Design

During the 2021–2022 school year, I was approached by a small group of boys from the school to lead a weekly discussion group about masculinity. The boys felt that there was a need to have critical conversations about masculinity in order to make sense of the confusion about masculinity in the current, pop-cultural zeitgeist. The group formed organically, and the boys who showed up weekly were voluntary participants. The topics for discussion were decided by the group and related to whatever aspects of masculinity they wished to explore and discuss. Thus, the boys played a central role in continuing, maintaining, and running the meetings in conjunction with me. Ultimately, the design of the research tested the efficacy of such a group on exploring masculinity and encouraging school engagement and belonging.

This study used a qualitative approach to data gathering: group discussions and four interviews (one each with four different participants). The research was done as a case study, an in-depth look into the group members and their dynamic, as they relate to
the research questions. It is important to hear from the boys themselves. The absence of boys’ voices in the existing literature is one of the most noticeable gaps in the research when it comes to the problem of male student disengagement and their opinions about masculinity.

The purpose of the study was to understand how weekly participation in a discussion group for public high-school-age male students in 9th–12th grades impacted them and to what extent it fostered greater school connection and a healthy understanding of masculinity. The research questions allowed the participants to fully explore masculinity and a sense of belongingness in the context of the group. Additionally, the classroom space encouraged individuals from the group to learn from one another through their exploration of masculinity and critical engagement. The study’s design was intentional. It was organized as a discussion group wherein the research participants (e.g., the students) and I were fellow participants and co-researchers. It was important that the members of the group were validated and engaged in co-inquiry, because a sense of validation and engagement are crucial aspects of belongingness (Strayhorn, 2019). Finally, descriptions of the instruments, data collection, and analysis of the data are included in such a way so as to encourage possible replication for future studies.

**Research Questions**

Boys rarely get the chance to speak about their own experiences with other male peers. Programs like the Manhood Development Project in OUSD show that groups for high-school-age males that occur within the boys’ own socio-educational context have positive effects on the boys’ perceptions of their own masculine identities and the masculine identities of others (Givens et al., 2016). Furthermore, such a discussion group/program could promote a sense of belonging. This study extends the work of the
Manhood Development Project to a diverse group of boys in Northern California and asks three questions:

1. What aspects of masculinity are the participants interested in talking about, and how do they talk about masculinity?
2. In what ways can regular participation in a discussion group on masculinity shift participants’ understandings of masculinity and of themselves?
3. In what ways do these conversations impact their sense of belonging, and how is it shaping what they think about school?

In order to answer the above questions, three units of analysis were used: recorded conversations with the boys that were transcribed using Rev.com, researcher field notes from the conversations, and interviews with four of the group members that were also transcribed using Rev.com. The audio-recorded conversations document the participants’ understandings of masculinity, which aspects of masculinity both interest them and they wish to discuss, and how they talk about masculinity. Additionally, the four interviews examine questions about masculinity and belongingness and provide insight into how conversations about belonging, masculinity, and identity shape what the participants think about school, themselves, and their roles in society.

Research Setting

The setting wherein this research was conducted is a suburban public high school in California. The school has around 900 students in grades 9 through 12. The racial composition of the student body is 62% White, 11% Asian, 9% Hispanic/Latino, 1% African American, and 17% two or more races. According to the latest WASC report, approximately 13% of students are designated as eligible for special education
The percentage of EL-designated students, fluent English proficient (FEP), and reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP) students is approximately 13%. Ninety-four percent of caregivers have at least a bachelor’s degree.

The school has a reputation for being a wealthy community in the area. However, as is generally the case with reputation and notoriety, this assumption of wealth belies a deeper truth. For example, there are students who live in multigenerational or multifamily households because it is so expensive to live in the district. There are multigenerational families that live in the community, most often under the same roof, for the same reason of affordability, or lack thereof. Despite the wealth of the parent community, I have to purchase materials for my classes, and the classrooms are not well appointed. I’ve had the same broken chairs and desks for the 5 years that I have taught at the school, and I have to fight vigorously to get resources, like new textbooks, for my classes. Subject to the same infernal law that starves California public schools from funding, Proposition 13, the yearly budget shortfall is mostly supplemented by generous donations from students’ families.

Research Participants

The participants were 12 male students from a public high school located in Northern California. The demographics of the group are summarized in Table 5, along with their researcher-generated pseudonyms. While the participants were a sample of convenience for the study, their demographics closely matched the school’s demographics, although the racial/ethnic makeup of the group was somewhat more diverse than the school. While the school was 62% White, the discussion group was 50% White. The school’s population of students identifying as Asian was 11%; the group members identifying as Asian was 25%. Participants identifying as Latino comprised...
16% of the group compared to the school’s 9%. There was one African American participant, and no Native American participants. Of the 12 participants in the group, eight, or 66%, received special education services through an IEP or 504 plan, compared to the school’s rate of 13%. Finally, two participants were reclassified English Learners (17%) compared to the school’s reclassification percentage of 13%. While there is no official school-wide or district-wide data on the number of GATE students, the percentage in the group was 25%. Two of the three GATE students also received special education services.

Table 7

Discussion Group Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School Demographic Information</th>
<th>Learning Supports?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phelps</td>
<td>18</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>504 Accommodation Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>English Learner RFEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>504 Accommodation Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Che</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>504 Accommodation Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>GATE/SPED</td>
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<td>GATE/SPED</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rahul</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>GATE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instruments and Data Collection

Since I was a discussion participant in this study, our weekly conversations were audio recorded using the HT Professional Recorder software application. All audio recordings were transcribed using the Rev.com recording transcription service. The Rev.
com-generated transcripts were then checked against the audio recordings by me. The transcripts were also member-checked by the group participants and interviewees for further clarification, especially when parts of the conversation or interviews were unclear.

The interviewees were given the opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences inside and outside of the group as well as share ideas they may not have brought up in the group discussions. I conducted four separate interviews with four group participants, or four total interviews. Before interviewing, I went through the interview protocol outlined in Appendix B. The interviews lasted between 25–35 minutes, depending upon the interviewee. I asked 35 questions, also detailed in Appendix B, related to interviewee background and to the research questions. Like the group discussions, the interview transcripts were member-checked with each interviewee for clarifications and to ensure accuracy of what was said.

**Strengths and Limitations/Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness, I made transcripts of the recorded conversations, the interviews, and recorded discussion, through the Rev.com audio-transcription service. To make sure that there were no inconsistencies, I read through the transcripts while re-listening to the recordings to ensure complete accuracy of the content in the transcripts. If there were any questions that came up, I was sure to member-check with the individuals by showing them the transcript and asking them to clarify when needed. Before the participants gave their consent to be recorded, they understood and agreed to complete anonymity, which was protected through researcher-generated pseudonyms. This ensured that their privacy was protected and followed ethical research guidelines. The strengths of this method of data collection lie in the fact that there are two records of data, and, in checking between the two data sets, there is no room for mischaracterization or bad-faith
interpretations of the participants, nor is there any opportunity for someone to take what was said out of context, as the full discussion is transcribed.

The first limitation is the number of study participants. While this can be a strength in that I can get a better depth of understanding based on encouraging them to offer insight, it is an obvious limitation in the sense that this study is not one that can be applied more generally to other populations. Second, the setting—an affluent, suburban community—is also a limitation in that the participants are part of a small, insular community that is not common to the surrounding areas. Adding to that, the lack of diversity in background from the group related to social class, race, and religion could also skew the results in that there may be a lack of diverse worldviews and experiences that may exist if the group were a lot more diverse. Finally, given the fact that I have been working with this group of boys for over a year and a half, and that I had them as former students, this could also influence their responses and my findings. Their openness in the group setting reveals that they are willing to trust me and be honest about how they feel and what they express, so my familiarity with them can also be a strength.

**Positionality**

I have been a public high school teacher in California for 15 years. I taught at my alma mater, a Title I school, and at one of the highest-performing high schools in California. My passion for teaching began with the fact that I wished to make the schooling experiences of boys different from my own.

From kindergarten and throughout middle school, I got into trouble for being too “unmanageable.” I had a great deal of pent-up energy due to the fact that I grew up in a household where it was expected that the three of us, my older brother and sister and me, be quiet, less active, and more mature than our actual ages. Because I couldn’t be a
kid at home, I released all my energy at school. I was always too much for my teachers
to handle. I had behavioral intervention plans, and so did most of my friends. By high
school, things began to change. My maturation reached a level that enabled me to see my
performance in high school as a means to an end, an entry ticket into college. College
was a non-negotiable familial expectation, and so I performed well above average in
high school. I attended a private university, St. Mary’s College of California in Moraga,
California, and earned a teaching credential.

I went into teaching because I wished to make an impact in the lives of male
students. I figured that, if I could replicate the passionate desire to learn that I felt later
on in my schooling—during college—earlier, it would encourage my male students
to see school as something more than a space where they did not belong. This feeling
of not belonging and not being engaged was felt most keenly when I would get into
trouble in school from kindergarten through middle school. Similarly, many boys feel
this same feeling of not belonging and disengagement when their behaviors are seen as
disruptive, and they are harshly punished because they cannot conform to the narrow
strictures of how a student is “supposed” to behave: sit still, quietly, and don’t be over-
active. More often than not, I felt disengaged from school. I acted out for attention, due
to disengagement and because I did not feel a sense of belonging. Add onto that the layer
of trying to figure out my changing body and what it meant, as well as this new, strange
notion of masculine expression.

The only reason I did well at all is due to parental pressure. Throughout my
K–12 schooling experience, I found myself wavering between wanting to do well in
school to please my parents and turning away from school because, like my male peers,
I felt disengaged. In hindsight, I was never formally taught what it means to be a man
by my father, not explicitly and directly, and I felt that I would have benefited from
having conversations around masculinity during high school when I was beginning to
develop my masculine identity. This would have benefitted me and my male peers. I began teaching in 2007 and returned to school in 2008 to earn a Master of Arts degree in English from California State University, East Bay, in 2010.

As highlighted in the introductory section, male student disengagement is reflected in the literature and in the data. One way to engage male students is to make them feel a sense of belonging. The times in school when boys feel most engaged are when they are doing things in school that they feel are relevant, and one particular issue of relevance that does not get a lot of attention in schools is masculinity and discussions about masculinity. Oftentimes, when masculinity is discussed, it is done in a critical and harsh fashion. One of the ways that a male student can feel engaged and a sense of belonging is if the school, teachers in particular, makes an effort to make students feel like they belong through offering support and through providing them a space where they feel that their voice and opinions matter. Additionally, there could be a space that is opened up wherein the idea of masculinity and its expression can be properly and critically explored.

In reflecting on my journey, I see how a great number of my male friends ended up working in good, blue-collar jobs, not going to college, dead, or in prison. The question of why it was so difficult to engage male students really came to the fore as I struggled to engage the male students in my class. I heard from many of my past male students through the years about the impact I had on them, and this made me recognize the complexity of engagement and male student disengagement. This is the central question I have been grappling with for 15 years. What is the root cause of male disengagement from school?

Growing up in school, one learns to adapt one’s own identity to peers’ expectations. In reflecting upon how I came to understand my own masculine identity, I have had no real role models of what it means to be a healthy man. Initially, I took my
cues from pop culture and from my peers. My male peers were disengaged in school, and I took that to mean that a part of expressing one’s male identity is to disengage from school. Mostly all my male peers were disengaged—at least the most popular ones were. This left me feeling bereft, lost, and looking for role models in peers that I perceived as “correct” expressors of masculinity. I would act out along with my male friends, having competitions about who could get into the most trouble in a school year.

In high school, I began to get into less trouble, because the academic stakes were much higher. I wanted to finish high school and go to college. Still, it was difficult to navigate the world of maleness in high school, and there was a severe lack of role models to guide me. Having a space to talk with male peers about masculinity would have done a great deal to assuage some of my confusions about masculinity, masculine expression, and masculine identity. Being a part of a group similar to the one in this study would have made a great deal of difference in how I felt in school and would have influenced my sense of belonging. I believe that encouraging boys and young men to begin formulating a masculine identity that is healthy can help them successfully navigate the education system and the perils that face them as boys and young men: violence, ridicule, nihilism, murder, addiction, suicide, imprisonment, alienation, marginalization, and the loss of self. Given all of that, it is incredibly important to recognize that the young men I work with came to me with this need and that, together, we fill this need. And as a result of their reactions to the positive changes that they have undergone as a result of our meetings and discussions, it makes me feel like I am finally making progress on the reason I got into teaching in the first place: to make a positive difference.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter begins with an overview of the study’s purpose, the research questions guiding the study, a description of the discussion group participants—with a more detailed description of the interviewees—as well as a discussion of the findings, organized by theme, as they relate to the literature and to the theories of multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005) and belongingness (Strayhorn, 2019). Each finding relates to one of three research questions. The findings explain 1) the aspects of masculinity described by the discussion group participants and interviewees, 2) how both groups talk about masculinity, and 3) the ways in which participation in the discussion group shifts participants’ understanding of masculinity and of themselves. Finally, I describe how participation in the discussion group impacted participants’ sense of belonging and shaped their beliefs about school.

The aim of this research was to study how high-school-age boys’ participation in a weekly discussion group on masculinity promotes a deeper understanding of themselves and of masculinity, gauge whether or not these discussions promote a sense of belonging in school, and determine if and how discussion group participation may shape what they think about school.

Three research questions guided the study:

1. What aspects of masculinity are the participants interested in talking about, and how do they talk about masculinity?
2. In what ways can regular participation in a discussion group on masculinity shift participants’ understandings of masculinity and of themselves?

3. In what ways do these conversations impact their sense of belonging, and how is it shaping what they think about school?

Data were collected through six recorded conversations with the discussion group and four recorded interviews with four different participants from the group of 12 discussion group participants. The design of the data collection was intended to use a one-on-one discussion format with me in order to delve deeper into the thinking of some of the group participants and get a more nuanced understanding of masculinity, highlight possible struggles with belonging that may map onto boys as a cohort, and find out if school disengagement is a reality for many of the boys in the school.

**Participants**

The majority of the discussion group participants were 18-year-old seniors, with the exception of one junior, who was 17. All the participants were male. The demographics of the participants closely matched the school’s overall demographics, although the group was slightly more diverse when it came to the category of race/ethnicity and special education designation. Participation in the discussion group was voluntary. All the participants in the study continued to participate in the weekly discussions at the conclusion of the data-gathering phase of the study.

I interviewed four students who participated in the discussion group. When considering potential interviewees from the 12 discussion group participants, I looked for a common factor in the pool of possible interviewees. One obvious, telling factor that three of the four chosen interviewees had was chronic absenteeism and tardiness. This
was one of the other criteria I used to determine possible school disengagement or as a possible manifestation of the lack of belongingness. I selected four interviewees who had made statements regarding their struggles with feeling a sense of belonging in school, their struggles with feeling engaged in school, and from revelations they shared with the group about how they defined masculinity and/or sought to define and understand their own masculine identities. Overall, I felt that the four interviewees offered unique insights that would be helpful in giving voice to the experiences that many of their peers were navigating as well as giving voice to their own unique experiences.

Phelps was a senior at the time of the study. He is a White student who was originally from Pennsylvania, attending elementary school there until the fourth grade, before moving to California, where he finished elementary, middle, and high school. He received a full-ride scholarship for swimming for an out-of-state college his junior year. He had no learning supports in place for his 4 years of high school. His cumulative GPA was 3.67 at the time of the study. As of senior year, his state test scores, assessed during his junior year, were level 2 in English language arts (ELA), standard nearly met, and level 3 in math, standard met. His Lexile (reading) and quantile (mathematics) levels for that same year were 1215/1600 and 1340/1600. This means that he is performing at grade level in these areas and is considered to be college ready. He had no behavioral issues in high school aside from being designated as chronically absent due to his excessive absences and tardiness. One of the main reasons for his absences, which occurred during his morning classes, was due to the fact that his onerous swimming schedule deprived him of sleep. He responded to sleep deprivation by sleeping later into the morning, after school began. He has been an active participant in our weekly meetings for over a year, and he still attends the weekly discussion group.

Ward was a senior at the time of the study. He is a Black student who began his schooling in Las Vegas, Nevada. He moved to California to finish his schooling, attending
two different elementary schools and his local middle and high school. He had a 504 plan throughout high school. His cumulative GPA was 2.5 at the time of the study. As of senior year, his state test scores from his junior year were level 1 in ELA, standard not met, and level 1 in math, standard not met. His Lexile and quantile levels for that same year were 920/1600 and 590/1600. This means that his Lexile (reading) level is at the eighth grade, 4 years below grade level, and he is approaching competency in math. He had no behavioral issues in high school aside from one referral due to “excessive talking” his freshman year. His file also noted excessive tardies and chronic absenteeism beginning in his freshman year, a trend that continued into his senior year. Ward’s attendance issues were reflective of a school-wide trend of excessive absences and tardies, ranging from being over stretched with extracurriculars and schoolwork to a general lack of time management. When asked, Ward did not explain his past attendance issues; however, one possibility is his strict boxing training schedule. Beginning the 2022–2023 school year, he started meeting his trainer in another city that is far from where he lives. A second possible explanation is the conflict with his father about which he confided in me. They had made amends by the conclusion of this study. He has been an active participant in our weekly meetings for 6 months and continues to be active.

Jordan was a senior at the time of the study. He is an Asian American who was born in, grew up in, and received all his education in the affluent community in which the study takes place. His cumulative GPA was 3.82 at the time of the study. He was reclassified from an English Learner to Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) during middle school. As of senior year, his state test scores, which were completed during his junior year, were level 3 in ELA, standard met, and level 1 in math, standard not met. His Lexile and quantile levels for that same year were 1380/1600 and 770/1600. This means that his Lexile level is at grade level and he is college ready, and he has achieved basic competency in math but not college readiness. He had no
behavioral issues in high school but was given 10 lunchtime detentions for a fight during middle school. His attendance is near perfect. He was also an active participant in our weekly meetings.

Che was a senior at the time of the study. He is a Latino student who was born in San Francisco, where he attended a private elementary school before moving to the community and attending middle and high school here. He had a 504 plan in place throughout high school for ADHD. His cumulative GPA was 3.45 at the time of the study. His Lexile and quantile levels were never tested, nor did he take the state’s standards-based tests, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), in high school. The most recent test scores were completed during his eighth-grade year. He scored level 4 in ELA, standard exceeded, and level 4 in math, standard exceeded. He had one behavioral issue in high school, a referral for using his phone in class, and another for excessive tardiness and absences. During his sophomore and junior years, he underwent multiple hand surgeries that caused him to miss a lot of school. He was my longest, most consistent participant, having been a part of the discussion group for a year and a half. Like the other three interviewees, he continued to attend the weekly meetings after the study’s conclusion.

What follows is a detailed exploration of the findings and how they relate to the current theorizing about masculinity and belonging. The theoretical foci relate to the writings of Connell (2005), Kimmel (2018), and Strayhorn (2019). Connell’s (2005) theory of multiple masculinities focuses on the complexity of masculinity in that there are multiple masculinities, or multiple ways to express and perform masculinity, and how it affects the socio-political world. For Connell (2005), masculinity is intersectional, performative, relational, social, political, separate from the body, multidimensional, and dynamic. Kimmel’s (2018) critique of masculinity focuses on the individual effects of socialization into the masculine, on boys and men mostly, but also on women and society.
While Kimmel (2018) and Connell (2005) agree that the way boys and men are socialized can cause great harm, where they choose to center the harm makes each distinguishable from the other.

Additionally, Strayhorn (2019) defines belongingness as universally a fundamental need, as motivating and driving behavior, contextual, expressing the desire to be seen, identity driven, evolving through changing conditions, and driven by outcome. Focusing on belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) can ensure that the needs of boys and young men are met to promote a healthy sense of masculinity and healthy relationships and provide a counterbalance to the negative aspects of masculinity that tend to rear their ugly heads to the detriment of boys and young men, individually, as a collective, and across the socio-political sphere.

Based on the findings, from the words of the boys themselves, it is prudent to theorize that the proper critique of masculinity and promotion of healthy masculine expression could result from focusing on how the collective and the individual engage in meaning making with regard to masculinity. This meaning making can engage boys by promoting a sense of belonging through an exploration of their social-emotional health, specifically as it relates to masculinity, as they turn toward criticality and personal health, which could affect the social orthodoxy (Kimmel, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019) and the socio-political orthodoxy (Connell, 2005). In short, theorizing in this way could allow for the eight ways of belonging that Strayhorn (2019) writes about to come to fruition.

Findings

The following findings are based on an analysis of the transcripts of the recordings from six Socratic-style group discussions with the 12 participants noted in Table 5. The taped discussions were coded using inductive coding, where codes emerge
based on the data also known as grounded theory or emergent coding (Saldaña, 2013). This method of coding was effective in seeing what themes emerged as the participants’ understandings of masculinity and of themselves developed across the conversation sessions. Furthermore, the aspects of masculinity that the participants were interested in talking about and how they talked about masculinity revealed themes that related to the complexity of masculinity that Connell’s theory of multiple masculinities acknowledges. The four interviews were coded using deductive coding: codes previously identified and defined based on theory (Saldaña, 2013). Using two different coding methods, two different filters, captured the essence of the stories they told, formed clearly developed patterns, and highlighted connections across the different data sets and to theory (Saldaña, 2013). The first four themes—Strength: Distinguishing Between Weakness and Failure, Critiquing Violence, Healthy Masculinity, and Healthy Relationships—are discussed as they relate to the first research question: What aspects of masculinity are the participants interested in talking about, and how do they talk about masculinity? The next two themes—Sharing and Applying Personal Knowledge and Experiences and the Engaging in Self-Awareness and Self-Care—relate to research question two: In what ways can regular participation in a discussion group on masculinity shift participants’ understandings of masculinity and of themselves? Finally, research question three (In what ways do these conversations impact their sense of belonging, and how is it shaping what they think about school?) is discussed through the themes Struggling to Feel a Sense of Belonging and Commiserating by Sharing Schooling Experiences.

**Strength: Distinguishing Between Weakness and Failure**

The first research question attempted to identify what aspects of masculinity the 12 group participants and four interviewees were interested in talking about and describe how they talked about masculinity. Throughout our discussions, the group participants
were interested in discussing masculinity through an exploration of strength, failure, and weakness. They defined strength in many ways—as the ability to persevere through failure, being self-aware, being goal oriented, achieving personal growth, and embracing fear and uncertainty. They often talked about and defined strength through discussing its opposite: weakness. They made a clear distinction between weakness and failure. Failure allows one to be vulnerable and to admit vulnerability, while weakness allows one’s vulnerability to restrict progress toward a goal or personal growth. The literature on masculinity describes the struggle with failure as a way to work toward positive personal growth. For example, Connell (2005) traces the beginnings, growth, and evolution of the personal growth movement and its effects on masculine identity. Similar to the discussion group in the study, change comes from the collective effort wherein members of the group talk to one another openly and honestly in order to critically discuss the “traditional male role” with the direction toward improving upon the aspects of masculinity that are harmful to the individual and to the collective. This is one of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity was being challenged that Connell (2005) highlights. Also, this is where the focus lies, on the individual, in the writings of Farrell (1993), Farrell and Gray (2019), Kimmel (2018), and Strayhorn (2019).

One aspect of hegemonic masculinity is that it is to be expressed as an outward showing of forceful strength (Connell, 2005), the opposite of weakness. Having a discussion group of young men that critically discussed the “traditional male role” was one way to push back against hegemonic masculine traits through encouraging vulnerability. Through their willingness to openly and honestly discuss how they felt, the boys were willing to be vulnerable in front of one another. Interestingly, this willingness to be vulnerable was counterbalanced by their emphasis on the importance of being strong and showing strength.
The boys in the discussion group emphasized the importance of strength, which they defined individually and in opposition to weakness. Phelps said, “Weakness is an okay thing to have, or a good thing to have…. You want to attain weakness.” He added, “Weakness and failure are kind of correlated where it’s okay to fail…. Weakness is failing and staying down.” Ward added, “If you build your failures in a positive way and you’re striving towards your goal, failing means you’re trying…. You want to have fear because fear towards your goal will help you grow.” Phelps and Ward believe that failure and weakness are correlated but can be distinguishable in that weakness is what one does as a result of failure—giving up on that which one has failed to do. It is a weakness to allow failure to defeat you. In this instance, the participants are engaging in meaning making: masculinity can be associated with failure and weakness, and that is normal, but it should not be acceptable to stay in a position of weakness for very long. In the above example, staying in a position of weakness is giving up after failure.

Our second group discussion began with me asking the group how they know the difference between failure borne out of weakness and failure that results from an underdevelopment of a particular strength. Their argument for the differences between these two types of failure was accurately nuanced. Failure borne out of weakness was defined by the group as an individual’s desire to give up as a result of failure. Failure borne out of the underdevelopment of a particular strength was defined as an individual’s desire to keep trying until success or growth is achieved. Overall, their responses built on our discussion from the previous week by providing more detail about physical and emotional strength—particularly, strength relates to weakness and failure. Their definition of weakness and failure conform to the social pressures many boys and men feel about presenting a strong façade. For the group, failure is acceptable as long as one is failing toward something. This is an example of presenting a strong façade. Failure is temporary, while wallowing in it, which the boys defined as an expression of weakness, is not.
Phelps and Ward elaborated on the idea of strength by adding specific qualities of strength: self-reflection and being open and communicative with those around you, especially in relationship to the men in their lives who are mentors. In one exchange, three of the group participants outlined, through their dialogue, what they feel one’s personal goals should be when it comes to gaining strength and how to model that for their peers:

Ward: No one really truly ever wants to feel weak. So, if you ever feel like, “Oh, I’m weak. I want to stay that way,” you’re lying to yourself, because everyone wants to be strong. But me personally, I would talk about sort of how I used to be compared to how I am now.


Phelps: Then, that’s basically just self-improvement...[and] self-reflection, how to take a moment to verbalize what you’re discontent with or what you can actually physically do and interject places of change in your life...if you want to make improvements, sometimes you feel like you’re trapped where there’s no real way you can actually do anything or make any movement. But if [you] can step back and keep seeing it one by one of how you can get to your vision, your goal, then you can know what that is.

In this exchange, Ward described strength as the ultimate goal that everyone wants to reach, not just males. Hegemonic masculine ideals do not only affect males. According to Connell (2005), hegemonic masculine ideals serve the purpose of “the defence [sic] of patriarchy” (p. 77). Patriarchy can set up a hierarchy that is based on unrealistic standards of gender performance. This kind of hierarchy can prove harmful to everyone, but to differing degrees. The boys in the group are not unaffected by the cultural expectations
to show outward strength. The cultural idealization of always showing strength, whether physical, emotional, or both, can pressure anyone, including the boys in the group, to suppress weaknesses and not reveal their whole, true selves out of fear of appearing weak. What the boys articulated was the struggle of the individual with the social expectations of masculinity, what Connell (2005) and Farrell (1993) call the public versus the inner world of masculinity. For Farrell (1993), one of the main drivers of masculine malaise is the private struggles of individual boys and men as a result of social pressures. Connell’s (2005) main critique of Farrell’s argument is that Farrell “redefined power by shifting from the public world to the inner world of emotion” (Connell, 2005, p. 208). In Connell’s view, one can feel individually powerless all they want, but this has little to no effect on the unequal power dynamic inherent in a patriarchy. This is not a zero-sum game, however; one can focus on both the effects of hegemonic masculinity on the “public world” and “the inner world of emotion.” Furthermore, one can also critique the effects of hegemonic masculinity across genders. Focusing on the effects of hegemonic masculine traits individually can reveal a larger problem. It is crucial to focus at the individual level in order to make a larger impact on the aspects of culture that affect boys and young men.

Ward’s definition of physical and emotional strength is a good example of how cultural, or “public world,” expectations play out on the individual, emotional level. According to Ward, one is physically strong when one is pushing the boundaries of physical growth and stamina. Emotional strength was defined by Ward as being stoic, not showing emotions that can be perceived by someone else as conveying weakness. In this sense, stoicism takes on the air of performance. The term performance indicates that a person is masking what they truly feel or who they truly are. It is a way of pretending. As long as one pretends to be stoic, due to social pressures, it adds a layer of distortion that can prevent one from knowing oneself.
Both physical strength and emotional strength, or stoicism, as defined above by Ward, connect to hegemonic masculinity—specifically, the idea that “hegemonic masculinity embodies a ‘currently accepted’ strategy” (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Ward’s assumption that “No one really truly ever wants to feel weak” reveals the cultural messages that he gets—namely, how showing physical strength and emotional strength are unquestionably necessary. According to Ward, weakness is who he was or “how I used to be,” and strength is who he has become or “how I am now.” This is an interesting idea in that he sets up what he claims to be a universal ideal, something that is self-evident: the old self is weaker, and the new self is stronger. One can see improvement through comparing one’s old self to where one is at in the present. This awareness of the old self and the new self comes with self-reflection.

Phelps used self-reflection to bring about an awareness of his failures and how to move forward through the failures in order to grow into someone better. It takes a great deal of courage to be self-reflective, to look honestly at one’s failures without denying them or distorting them, and to admit weakness. Like many in the group, Phelps had no problem with admitting to failures and to personal weaknesses. To Phelps, failure and reflections on the root causes of failure can lead to setting achievable goals toward personal growth. Throughout the conversations, Phelps referred to his participation in competitive swimming, often using swimming as a metaphor for personal growth and improvement. The boys in the group saw competitive sports as a way to develop into better versions of themselves. Sports were a positive force in many of the boys’ lives, because it provided for them a template for how to deal with failure, work through personal weaknesses, set goals, and self-improve.

Additionally, sports, according to the participants and the interviewees, are important in demonstrating their physical prowess. In this sense, this importance relates to Connell’s observation that, when it comes to some schools, the one the boys
attended included, “masculinity exalted through competitive sports is hegemonic…. Sporting prowess is a test of masculinity even for boys who detest the locker room” (Connell, 2005, p. 37). Yet, to say this about sports is too simplistic. Sports is a much more complex tradition than the mere demonstration of masculinity. Sports provides an environment, governed by rules and fair play, wherein the participants can safely test their mental, physical, emotional, biological, and social limits. Participation in a sport, or any competitive endeavor for that matter, can make personal change and personal growth both tangible and observable.

Bart, a senior who has a mother who works in the district, agreed with both Ward and Phelps. He argued that personal change is a good marker for how to determine personal growth. This idea is similar to one of the main ideas of the personal growth movement, highlighted from Connell’s (2005) work above—the idea being that personal growth, when it comes to masculinity, is one of the key ways to become more critical of the aspects of masculinity that are harmful and counterproductive. Rather than seeing change as a kind of weakness, something that defies the hegemonic idea of being steady and unwavering, Bart believed that change should be thought of as positive—change as it relates to changing oneself, changing one’s mind, for example. He added that growth is akin to self-improvement. The discussion concluded with the participants agreeing that it is fundamentally important to check in with yourself to figure out what you are discontent with and to make positive changes and improve based on these self-check-ins. Aside from discussing masculinity through a dialogue on the relationship between strength and the differences between weakness and failure, they also discussed masculinity through a critique of violence.
Critiquing Violence

The group’s participants took great interest in discussing national and global events, past and present, focusing specifically on critiquing the expression of violence. While their criticism of the use of violence was not a direct discussion about masculinity, it was centered around one of the toxic aspects of hegemonic masculinity, the free expression of and acceptance of violence. The boys in the group discussed violence through the state’s use of violence abroad, militarily, and at home, through policing. As Connell notes, “Violence on the largest possible scale is the purpose of the military; no arena has been more important for defining hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture” (Connell, 2005, p. 213). To the participants, violence as an expression of strength is not to be revered.

In our third discussion group, the discussion was centered around American foreign policy, specifically the subject of jingoism or extreme patriotism. The critique of American foreign policy was yet another way the boys illustrated their critique of violence. The participants were highly critical of U.S. foreign policy, especially as it related to support for Ukraine against Russia’s invasion. In one exchange, the group members acknowledged key distinctions between the media’s coverage of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and its support of Ukraine.

Che: It’s a proxy war. That’s what it is. It’s an opportunity…we’re extending war to a point where we can actively hurt Russian geopolitical influence. That’s why we’re continuing this war. Realistically, we’d probably end this war right now…

Steven: Well, it’s not very hard to see the difference in support of Ukraine and support in the Middle East.

Jordan: Oh yeah, for sure.
Steven: I think, partially, somewhat due to the fact that Ukrainians are White.

Che: Yeah. That’s literally it. And the media is so biased. You never see anything on the media about... People being killed in Iraq, Afghanistan... That’s not propaganda material. Ukraine versus Russia is propaganda material... And there’s not as many human rights abuses...

Steven: Well yet, that we know of.

Jordan: Yeah, that they’re showing. That can be proven easily.... They’re not allowing journalists there. They’re not making the same mistake they made in Iraq and Afghanistan by letting journalists go there. So, it’s a better tool.

Researcher: Used by whom?

Jordan: The military industrial complex and the media.... If you ever watch MSNBC, there’s not a single, single thing ever criticized in war.

In this exchange, three of the participants expressed cynicism about the United States’ involvement in the war in Ukraine. The participants were critical of U.S. involvement in the war in Ukraine, only because they felt that it was for the wrong reasons, not for moral ones as claimed. Their criticism of war stems from the differences between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the world’s response, as compared to the war in Ukraine. They did not disagree with the war on moral grounds, nor did they disagree with the U.S. involvement, they just do not like to be lied to about the motives behind U.S. involvement. Furthermore, they reserved a lot of their criticism for how the media covered the different wars, exposing obvious bias that they felt many people do not seem to be aware of or notice. The participants did not buy into the idea that American involvement in the war in Ukraine was because of a moral high ground or in defense of Ukraine’s sovereignty, but as a way to show that the United States is stronger than Russia.
The group members believed the United States used the war to declare its hegemony to the world. The boys critiqued the media coverage of the war, arguing that the media was a medium for U.S. propaganda through its clearly biased coverage. Given that observation, they did not fall under the sway of believing that violence is necessary to achieve one’s aims, militarily or otherwise.

According to Connell (2005), hegemonic masculinity makes a “successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports hegemony)” (p. 77). As the participants observed, the idea of being a warrior as being tied to hegemonic masculinity still exists, both in film and world events. Connell highlights this tendency for “bearers of hegemonic masculinity…may be exemplars, such as film actors” (Connell, 2005, p. 77). The boys critiqued violence, especially during warfare. Their critique included both fictional war—the latest Top Gun film—and the very real war in Ukraine. Steven, a proud GATE and SPED student, explained, “Many people I knew…loved that movie who I thought were primarily anti-war, and they saw the movie and they just put quotes of it with their Instagram bio.” In this example, Steven highlighted the power of a war film like the new Top Gun movie to transform the violence and suffering of warfare into something to be celebrated as glorious. So powerful were the appeals to emotion, Steven observed, that it swayed those who usually identified themselves as anti-war into Top Gun: Maverick fans. Other participants agreed with Steven’s characterization of the irony of the blind acceptability of some forms of violence, like warfare. Che added, “The first week [of the war in Ukraine], all these people were posting Instagram stories…. Literally in a month…people talking about it went down so much.” What both participants were highlighting was the fact that war, whether treated as a subject in fact or fiction, encourages a fervor of support before being forgotten so suddenly. Such a devastating event can be reduced to a trend, leaving those who were actually victimized by war to suffer under a perverse silence. The
observations by these two participants highlighted how the idea of war as a way to prove valor, something worthy of celebration, did not have the same staying power as it had in the past.

Steven connected the celebration of fictional accounts of war to our nation’s waning warrior culture. He observed, “War now is just excessive…warriors and veterans aren’t treated with respect. They’re not…really heralded…. There’s Veteran’s Day… but we don’t give them any programs to help them or anything…. It’s just pity.” In his critique of veterans’ treatment by society, Steven specifically named how war veterans were once “treated with respect” and “heralded” but are now treated with “pity.” This change in treatment goes against the celebration of war in popular culture. Essentially, he was highlighting how one of the traditional, narrow roles men have in society is no longer considered worthy of celebration except in fiction.

Men’s role in society have historically been and still are limited to roles that Farrell (1993) describes as indicating male disposability. Indeed, the literature regarding masculine roles, and the pop culture images of masculine roles, shows the ultimate expression of masculinity as patriotically serving one’s country. Harris-Perry (2011) describes masculine patriotism in a lecture she gave in 2011 on University of California Television (UCTV), a video made available on YouTube:

If you think about the height of citizenship, how you know that someone is a great citizen, it is typically male when they have served their country in the military, voluntarily, during a time of war. I know this because if I go to the National Mall…most of the monuments to our great citizens are either to presidents who have served at the highest level of elected office or, to the extent that they are to ordinary persons, they are to men that have served primarily in foreign wars. That’s the ultimate citizenship duty. (YouTube, 2011)
Harris-Perry’s comments on the connection between male citizenship and warfare is deeply critical, as it should be. Firstly, the connection between male citizenship and warfare removes women’s contribution and erases/makes invisible the contribution of women of color. Secondly, she is highlighting how the war memorials provide a distorted reflection of the nation as it is by glorifying what it was assumed to be. Americans’ relationship to war has shifted the past 20 years. There are no current monuments to the veterans of the post-9/11 wars on the National Mall, but not for lack of trying. The request for a memorial was blocked in the Senate in 2021 (Wentling, 2021). Harris-Perry is trying to encourage her audience, and the nation, to move beyond that definition of citizenship and into a definition of citizenship that celebrates all those who contributed to trying to make the nation better by living up to its national creed, many of whom were killed in the process. She is encouraging a pulling away from the seemingly inextricable link between masculinity, patriotism, and warfare.

The belief that masculinity and violence are linked, specifically as it relates to serving in the military, is still around, but it is not as pervasive as it once was. The last time a draft occurred, many who avoided the draft were called “draft dodgers,” a term that was meant to degenerate their manhood and question their loyalty to the U.S. The participants no longer ascribed to the idea of proving one’s manhood through defending the nation by using physical violence against any adversaries; it is no longer expected or demanded. Yet, they still live in and pledge allegiance to the flag of a nation that still valorizes war and justifies its free use to achieve its ends. The group participants are keenly aware of this, and they ardently described other ways that the U.S. could resolve its conflicts. “Cutting defense funding is a start,” said Che. His argument, which the participants nodded to in agreement, was that one of the ways for the nation to get beyond the idea of using militarism to solve its conflicts would be to stop making militarism so profitable by removing a great deal of the funding. The boys engaged in criticality,
or applying a critical lens, to violence in order to push back against its normalization and the assumption that violence is an inevitability. In this example, meaning making encouraged a criticality that challenged one harmful aspect of masculinity, its connection to violence, in order to redefine masculinity in a way that encouraged construction rather than destruction. Sharing out individually, with one another, bridges the distance between individual and group, something that promotes belonging and connects the two ways that the expression of masculinity can be modified, individually and as a group.

Given the discussion around war and the use of violence by the participants, it is no longer as taboo to criticize American foreign policy as it relates to the use of warfare and violence. Even when serving in the military was seen as a young man’s rite of passage into manhood, the boys in this particular group did not agree. This, however, can change depending upon the environment and the particular group of boys. The boys in this group were quick to condemn violence as it relates to American foreign policy; however, this condemnation against violence became more complicated during the discussion we had about police brutality in our sixth recorded discussion.

In that discussion, violence was less abstract. Violence is easy to talk about in the abstract, as an idea, but it becomes more difficult to decode or understand when it is real. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1973) explains, “A person who is not inwardly prepared for the use of violence against him is always weaker than the person committing the violence” (chapter 1, para. 49). What Solzhenitsyn means is that individuals must be vigilant, steeling themselves against the possibility of the use of violence against them. When Solzhenitsyn said this, he was not speaking in the abstract. He was one of many millions of Russians and Ukrainians swept up in Stalin’s purges, which used violence as a tactic to control, manipulate, imprison, and murder on a mass scale. Solzhenitsyn learned about the reality of violence the hard way. The two different understandings about state-sponsored violence, which compared the use of violence abroad to violence committed
within the United States’ borders, revealed that the group’s critique of violence is not consistent, because the context frames whether it is acceptable or unacceptable. For the boys, the use of violence is acceptable when used in self-defense, like in the case of Ukraine, and when there are objectively moral justifications behind it as a tactic, the stated reason for the U.S. and European involvement. The association between violence and masculinity is only questioned or criticized when the group members feel violence is being unjustly applied, like in the case of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The discussion shifted to talking about the use of violence by the police in the United States. Aside from making the discussion of violence more real and less abstract, as opposed to discussing war overseas or in film, something happening “over there” or on screen, the criticism toward police was much more pointed and condemning and made the participants feel like violence can sometimes be necessary when defending against the violence of the state or violence applied by government agencies (e.g., police, FBI, DEA, CIA, military, etc.). The distinct difference in their critique of state-sponsored violence is important to highlight, as the participants, like many who are critical of state-sponsored violence, are sometimes willing to accept that violence can be necessary. The participants agreed that an individual has the right and the freedom to defend oneself using violence if the state is using violence against them. This idea was articulated most concisely for the group by Jordan, a senior and unapologetic critic of government overreach. He explained, “We probably need guns for stuff like that because the police are just becoming more and more militarized and acting more kind of authoritarian.” Where things became particularly difficult was when violence is used preemptively. When war was more abstract, overseas, or fought by other countries, it was easier for the group members to condemn it. When violence is perpetrated closer to home, in the United States, then some of the group members were more likely to support its use in defense against an oppressive government. In the quote above, for example, Jordan introduced the justification for
the second amendment, a bulwark against the authoritarian use of state-sanctioned violence against members of its own citizenry. In agreement with Jordan’s claim about authoritarian-style policing, Che added, “The force of the police is inherently… It’s like a fist of the state. It’s not for the people. Police act as a more civilian branch to pacify the population.” Che felt that the way the police are used, as the “fist of the state,” puts them in the position to be tyrannical, something that is to be guarded against either through protest or, as a last resort, through violence. Another way that policing came up, this time in a metaphorical sense, was when they discussed how they and their peers dealt with bullying.

The pressure to police themselves is a direct result of the messages they get in society on what it means to be a man: take care of your problems yourself, do not seek help. The topic of bullying as a type of emotional and physical violence came up across the four interviews, as did the expectation that the boys police one another when it comes to dealing with bullying, shunning the help from others, especially the adults on campus. While not usually as extreme as war and state-sponsored violence, bullying is severe, extreme, and abusive.

Bullying is important to the boys’ critique of violence because of its role in how boys perform masculinity in a setting like a K–12 school (see Kimmel, 2018). In my one-on-one interviews, all four boys said that there is a problem with bullying among male students; however, they varied in their beliefs about how to deal with it. Some believed bullying should be only dealt with between the boys involved. Other participants believed an adult on campus should mitigate the bullying problem, and some believed the problem should not be dealt with at all. How the boys addressed bullying depended upon their perceptions of the severity of the bullying. Like the other three interviewees, Phelps’ reasoning for not alerting the adults on campus to bullying adhered to the code of silence Kimmel described in the Guy Code (2018). Kimmel (2018) explains that it
is a violation of the Guy Code to seek out the help or attention from an authority figure if witnessing or being bullied. Phelps agreed, “You would never see a guy going to the upper authority to help with being bullied…. It’s embarrassing to go up and ask for that kind of help…. It’d make your life worse in a way.” In this statement, Phelps described a sense of shame that he and the other boys felt in taking one’s problems that they could deal with on their own to an authority figure. According to this logic, boys and men are the ultimate authority in how they need to handle bullying, not an authority figure. A man should be his own authority. That expectation is reinforced among the boys on campus, almost instinctively, and is not challenged or even questioned. He added that peers would get involved if bullying got really bad. The boys claimed to police themselves and handle it on their own without the help of any of the adults on campus. Yet, their claim belied a crucial reality: Given what we know about the roots of school violence and shootings, the high incidences of depression, behavioral issues, and dropping out for male students, they do not self-police. If they do, they do not do so effectively.

What the boys speak to, something that Kimmel (2018) highlights in his book, is the Guy Code is strictly policed by peers. They do not police one another’s behavior when it comes to bullying, at least not effectively. The behavior they do police, however, is the tenets of the Guy Code, some of which are “Boys Don’t Cry;” “Don’t Get Mad—Get Even;” “Take It Like a Man” (Kimmel, 2018, pp. 51–52). In the above three tenets lies the pressure for boys to not report bullying, the expectation to handle it on one’s own, and, if the bullying is severe enough, to seek revenge. In their minds, the boys in the group speak to policing the behavior of other boys when it comes to bullying. In actuality, they police behaviors that are opposite to effectively dealing with bullying and that may in fact make the problem worse.

Che explained the practice of “Take It Like a Man” as rooted in ideas of manhood. He said, “I don’t think that many male students get to the point where it’s with staff…”
because society expects you to just deal with it as a man. But I disagree.” Che conveyed the sense of powerlessness that boys may feel when it comes to the social pressure to leave the issue of bullying unaddressed. While he expressed his disagreement, he did not indicate that he was willing to challenge the status quo. This often allows bullying to perpetuate itself and become worse. The social pressure for boys to handle bullying by internalizing it and not seeking help can have a detrimental effect on their sense of belonging and on their sense of masculinity if they are unable to handle the bullying on their own. Multiple members of the group shared that they had never talked about bullying until our discussion. This realization made them aware of how little bullying gets talked about. However, rather than see this as a problem, they treated bullying as one more topic for discussion of the larger pool of discussion topics that helped to make them feel more connected to one another and to the campus. Rahul, a GATE student who has east Indian heritage, said, “Each time we meet on Thursday, it helps me through the week.” The meetings were considered the one place where they could work together as a group, each individually contributing to the discussion, to grapple with the questions that came up, questions that tended to stem from the challenges that they were personally experiencing.

Ward told the group, “The bullying environment here is terrible.” He was one of the only participants to really acknowledge the issue of bullying so bluntly. He admitted to being a part of the bullying culture, and he said that he did it to fit in with others. “I’m getting out of it. I used to be a part of it. And it’s also kids just wanting to fit in.” This personal growth in Ward’s character was a result of his self-reflection, his realizing the root causes behind his participation in bullying: “just wanting to fit in.” Bullying is seen as a way to feel a sense of belonging while making someone else feel that he does not belong. In this example, one’s feeling of belonging comes at the expense of another’s feeling that one does not belong. Ward’s view of bullying was different from much of
the others. While the others in the group argued that bullying should be handled among the boys, “in house,” Ward felt like the staff should take a more proactive role in dealing with bullying. He associated the staff’s willingness to be available to students with one of the ways in which staff could encourage students to seek help when bullied, among other issues: “...[B]oys, they don’t talk about their issues like that to staff...maybe because the staff don’t make it so available…. They don’t say, ‘My door is open for you.’” Ward highlighted the connection between a sense of belongingness and safety, how the adults on campus need to make a point to make themselves approachable so that the students on campus feel safe to speak to them about any problems that the students may be going through, crucial in promoting a sense of belonging. This connection that Ward made is one of the criteria Strayhorn (2019) defines as belonging, specifically the idea that it is universally a fundamental need. In his critique, Ward offered a fundamental solution that might help boys who experience bullying reach out to school adults. Staff need to make more of a point to have their door open to kids. The door is both the physical door to their classroom and also the door to greater emotional intimacy between student and teacher as a way to make bullied students feel comfortable enough to open up about what they are going through, including bullying.

Jordan’s view of bullying was that it is not as bad as it could be. He described a different kind of bullying culture from the other examples. In his case, the bullying was directed toward those who may not share the same point of view. He described this kind of bullying as a strategy to silence or diminish what a person says or feels and linked it to acceptable expressions of masculinity:

It’s not really the bullying that you think is bullying. Not like, “Oh, give me your lunch money or I’m going to beat you up,” or whatever. It’s more like what we were saying before, like he has an opinion that’s against or maybe can be seen
as negative towards females or towards societal norms, and then they just get shut out for it and they’re not allowed to talk about how they feel. For example, traditional masculine values and stuff, a lot of us still believe in those values, but we can’t really express them because then we’ll be seen as, “Oh, toxic masculinity.” “Oh, well, why do you want to be strong?” “Why do you want to go to the gym 24/7?” “Why do you want to improve yourself?” “You should be a submissive little boy.”

In this example, Jordan explained/described the difficulty of trying to navigate the line between acceptable and toxic expressions of masculinity. He was bumping against those who deemed certain masculine traits as “toxic”: improving oneself, being strong, working out. Jordan felt like the term toxic masculinity was applied too liberally, while Ward said, “Toxic masculinity, that’s not real.” Their different experiences with the term toxic masculinity, as defined by those around them, left Jordan feeling like the term was not applicable to him, to how he defined masculinity, and Ward to say that it does not exist. On the surface, the language Jordan used for the opposite of masculinity was not gendered. The way many boys would describe the opposite of masculinity would be to use denigrating terms for behaving in a fashion that is not manly—for example, “being a bitch” or “being a pussy.” Jordan said, “submissive little boy.” In his view, the idea of dominance as an expression of hegemonic masculinity is still present, and submissiveness is still linked to weakness and femininity, hegemonic masculinity’s perceived opposite. He did not expressly associate femininity with weakness or submission, but he still did so through implication, a reflection of the culture in which he was growing up.

Jordan’s association of the opposite of manliness with immaturity, with boyhood and submission, relates to Kimmel’s (2018) writings on how “the Guy Code” trains boys to suppress their emotions, disconnect, handle conflict on their own, usually through
violence, not complain, and present a façade of competence, to name a few. Based on his contempt for what he saw as the pressure to be a “submissive little boy,” it is safe to suggest that Jordan adhered to “the Guy Code” criteria, and he did so due to social pressure, which he described as trying to dictate how he should behave. In his example, the social pressure he faced was turning him away from how he had been taught to define manhood and toward what he felt was immature: submissiveness and boyishness. He was aware of traditional masculine values and even listed some of them, and while he adhered to them, or wanted to, his being told these traditional masculine values were wrong merely solidified his understanding that he was on the right track. In this example, social pressure could work in two ways. The first way is to convince someone, through social pressure, to think a certain way and modify his behavior based on that enforced thinking. The second way is to convince someone to think and behave in opposition to the social pressure that the person deems unacceptable. Either way, social pressure is applied in how a person thinks and behaves. One of the powerful ways that conversation can change an individual’s views is to critique how social pressures influence one’s behavior so as to discover where the person is separate from the pressure and to encourage the individual to be his unique self through raising awareness of social pressure. The third theme that came up in the group discussions when it came to their discussions of masculinity was the importance of healthy relationships.

**Healthy Relationships**

The boys defined healthy relationships as being reciprocal, respectful, encouraging growth, and they included having a healthy sense of one’s own self. One form or reciprocity as it relates to having and maintaining a healthy relationship is around the issue of consent. The school that the boys attended has done a lot of work around the importance of consent, especially when it comes to romantic relationships. One of the
activities that the school engages in is an assembly on consent and healthy relationships. This began 20 years ago as a response to the drinking culture in the community and to the sexual assaults that were occurring at the off-campus parties. The focus on consent is intended to educate the students on what healthy relationships and consent look like and what they should not look like. Two of the critiques from the group participants that came up in the discussion around consent and masculinity were the failure of the assembly to address what they called the real problem of the drinking culture and the fact that there was not enough emphasis or education on healthy relationships.

During the group discussion, which happened months after the consent assembly, it was clear that they felt like there needs to be more done by the school around the issues of consent and healthy relationships. The conversation around consent and healthy relationships began when Phelps was telling us about what his girlfriend’s school does, provides classes on healthy relationships, something that he felt the school he attended should do. He began by explaining one of the challenges he saw to developing healthy relationships. “Guys really don’t know what healthy relationships look like. Or, why they’re actually important and why you should strive for that as opposed to manipulation, fooling around, doing stuff like that.” To Phelps, many young men are not aware of what a healthy relationship looks like, because unhealthy relationships are glorified through a sense of false validation. This false validation comes from other boys and men who ascribe to the idea that manipulating someone to get what they want, the ability to “fool around,” is glorious: a “bros before hos” attitude (Kimmel, 2018, p. 52). Phelps added, “It’s important to teach young men that there’s value in having a good partner in life.” In Phelps’s opinion, a “good partner” practices reciprocity, is an equal in a relationship built on trust and mutual respect. This opinion runs contrary to the behavior encouraged by the “bros before hos” attitude (Kimmel, 2018, p. 52).
Ward agreed with Phelps on the definition of a good partner and expanded the definition of a healthy relationship by adding complexity. While on the one hand a relationship can be built upon the expectation of mutual respect, there can exist a layer of imbalance on top of a relationship that is a result of social expectations when it comes to how men are expected to behave in relationships. Ward said, respect is “the foundation of pretty much every relationship you’ll ever have.” Layered on top of this statement was more detail and complexity that added more clarity to Ward’s views of heterosexual, romantic relationships:

Women get more unconditional love, but men are loved under the condition that they’re providing something. And that puts certainly tremendous amounts of pressure. Even on me…. I’m still…I don’t want to be in a relationship, because I feel I have to do all of these certain things and it’s just…. That’s my perspective of relationships and everything.

Ward believed that women are inherently valued and given unconditional love, whereas men are loved as a result of what they provide. This claim is not new; it is one of the main theses in Warren Farrell’s book *The Myth of Male Power* (1993) and his more recent book *The Boy Crisis* (Farrell & Gray, 2019). The fact that Ward was unfamiliar with this idea and came to this conclusion on his own is a testament to his criticality. One may assume that this was merely an expression of cynicism on the part of Ward, but he did hit upon a largely unspoken yet understood truth. In the United States, the term “value” gets thrown around quite a bit when human relationships are being discussed, especially when it comes to the more traditional role that men were, and continue to be, expected to play. Additionally, Ward’s conclusion was felt to such an extent that he felt great pressure, something that encouraged him to forgo romantic relationships altogether. This idea that men need to be worth something as demonstrated by what they do or what they provide,
Farrell’s (1993, 2019) critique of how society treats boys and men, parallels Ward’s observation about an imbalance in romantic relationships.

Complicating relationships between men and women even further was the idea of social value. Many group participants perceived an imbalance in the social value between men and women. To them, social value was defined by the value placed on men and women in relation to how much they contribute to and serve the social good. One way women contribute to a social good was outlined by Steven: “Women are born with the ability to give birth, they choose their partners based off of how their partner can support them to have that baby.” To the participants, as articulated by Steven, women’s biological ability to bear children makes them inherently valuable to society, and this responsibility encourages them to be judicious in their partner choices. Women must consider how their partners will best support them when it comes to sharing the responsibility of raising children. This connects to a statement by Danny, an Asian-American senior with a 504 plan since middle school, during the fourth conversation. He highlighted how women tend to gravitate toward the top 20% of men. This difference in social value is also highlighted by Farrell (1993) when he discusses the tendency for the United States’ socio-cultural messaging around males’ social value to be equated with male disposability.

Two of the ways that the participants defined social value was in the ability to bear children and the ability by women to be more choosy in who they pick as a mate. In response to Phelps’s assertion that women are more valued socially than men, Jordan said, “Well, that’s sad. He [Phelps] was saying that women are born with value and men are born without value. We have to earn our value?” to which Ward responded,

But men love idealistically and women love opportunistically. So, when I say opportunistically, I mean they look at what a man can provide for them. And then a man would look at, “Do I want this as the mother of my kids?”
While Jordan commented that Phelps’s general view of the differences in value between men and women is “sad,” he ended his contribution with a question to see if Phelps wanted to clarify what he meant. Before Phelps could respond, however, Ward added his own clarification. Ward defined the social value of men as being opportunistic, being a provider, and the social value of women as idealistic, bearing children. In their articulation of their understanding of social value, the boys in the group understood social value as uneven to the disadvantage of men as well as the causes for this unevenness in social value. This exchange is an example of how, when given a space to have discussions that explore a complex topic like social value, how uneven social value can affect relationships, active participation can help to provide insight to others, and open a pathway to challenging the aspects of society that they feel are needing to change. Given the participants’ comments and critiques of the inequality in social values between men and women, one can see the beginnings of the yearning to challenge the status quo, to ensure that social value does not favor one group over another and assigns social value co-equally. Discussions like this, while fraught, are designed to get to the core of the issue, the truth of the claim itself. This is done through dialogue, and dialogue can often start broadly and become more refined as the discussion continues. This was not the only time that members discussed romantic relationships, procreation, and marriage.

During the fourth recorded discussion session, members were critical of how popular culture seemed to actively discourage healthy relationships. From a social standpoint, the group understood that the lack of healthy relationships could stem from the differences in social values between men and women. In the group analysis, women have the power to say “yes” or “no” to a potential mate. This connects back to the importance of consent as well as the desire by many of the participants to be driven toward personal growth and progress. Danny explained, “It’s mainly women setting these standards that these men that can’t really meet them. They want what? The top
20% of men or something like that.” Danny’s point is that women set the high standards for men that many, 80% of men in Danny’s estimation, cannot meet, thus demonstrating his understanding of women’s hypergamy. According to this logic, the impossibly high expectations of young men (and women) contribute to their “checking out” of the dating scene, a phenomenon Julian (2018) calls a “sex recession.” The harbinger of this trend is the increasing number of young men who participate in the Incel community. Incel stands for involuntary celibacy. Incels are men who cannot attract a mate, feel hopeless, and in the worst cases become embittered, violent toward themselves or others, and misogynistic because of their lack of romantic success with the opposite sex. The boys in the study understood the harsh reality they faced when it comes to attracting a mate. The vast majority of women are drawn to 20% of men, the result of women tending to be hypergamous, or dating men who are of equal or above socio-economic status compared to themselves. Ward said the “top 20% of men hardly try to settle down…[and] women who want the top 20% say, ‘I don’t like men because they treat me like this,’ but they’re seeking out these men.” Ward identified a vicious cycle in mate selection/male-female relationships. The majority of women pursue a minority of men. These men tend to check most of the boxes for hegemonic masculine ideals, the top 20% socio-economically, in education, in physical attractiveness and physical qualities like height, and in leadership status. According to the group, hegemonically masculine men have their pick among women and often use their social advantage to engage in polyamorous relationships rather than settle down. This behavior, in the boys’ estimation, was said to contribute to women’s demonization of all men. As Ward pointed out, however, women cannot have it both ways. Women cannot choose for hegemonically masculine traits and expect the men who have these traits to not behave in hegemonically masculine ways, ways that women feel are personally harmful to them. Furthermore, the boys felt like it was ultimately
The boys in the group believed schools need programs that teach about healthy relationships. This could help address the issues around unequal social value between men and women, the dismalness of young people’s dating lives, the sex recession, and the negative pressures young people face to behave in ways that are not conducive to personal and relational health. Phelps explained that his girlfriend, who attends a different school, has to take a mandatory “class where it’s [teaching about] marriage and family relationships…. They care for a baby for a month. They learn how to manage finances equally.” A course like this could teach “how to cooperate with a partner…tackle issues before they even arise…. If you’re able to stop the problem before it happens by learning beforehand, that’ll make everyone’s life a lot easier.” The group members all agreed that there are not enough healthy role models in popular culture. Especially lacking are role models that teach what a healthy relationship looks like: “we learn from trial and error, and a lot of people look at role models who aren’t necessarily good for both female and male.” Steven added, “If you learn how to have a relationship from shitty parents, people you see that are just broken, you won’t learn how to fix that and then you’ll put it onto your kids.” Boys need examples of healthy relationships that emphasize how these types of relationships should function, to break the cyclical pattern of “broken” people and relationships.

Even if one wishes to marry and raise children, another barrier was discussed, one that is economic. Francisco, a reclassified English language learner and a senior, said, “You can’t have a kid anymore without living paycheck to paycheck…. No one can really afford to have a kid.” The participants viscerally understood that it has gotten to the point where having a child is becoming more and more impossible because of the costs. It is incredibly demoralizing for a high school student to recognize that the fundamental
compact between a society and its citizens has broken down: The next generation is not doing better than the previous one. This dilemma about whether or not to have kids, as dictated mostly by the constraints of socio-economics, completely destroys what it means to be a boy/man, girl/woman, citizen, parent, a living organism. The participants’ understanding of this is so early, and it is disheartening to hear them realize this before they have even begun to have long-term relationships. They were bearing witness to how one of the fundamentally traditional ways that a man has been defined, being a provider, is no longer as relevant or salient as girls and women overtake boys and men in educational achievement, in the workplace, leaving many boys and men retreating more and more into the virtual world (Reeves, 2022a,b)—good for girls and women, bad for boys/men; yet, the success of one group should not come at the expense of the failure of another. Again, it is not a zero-sum game.

Another kind of reciprocal relationship that was discussed in the sessions was the mentor/mentee relationship or role model. The participants emphasized the importance of having a healthy role model. Role models can include parents, friends, coaches, pop culture figures, or public personas. In the discussion, students shared examples of both positive and negative role models. Like many of the participants, Ward had a positive role model. Ward trained as a boxer, and his primary male role model was his boxing trainer. He described his relationship with his role model as having a positive effect on his life. “He’s a really big masculine figure in my life, talks about how being uncomfortable is the perfect thing that you need to grow. He gives me boxing quotes that have a deeper meaning.” Both Ward and Jordan agreed that a role model should have a positive influence on one’s life. Jordan emphasized the impact of negative role models to draw attention to their impact on behavior. He explained, “A lot of people look at role models who aren’t necessarily good models of femininity and masculinity…. They’ll glorify destructive behavior, and people may be encouraged to then follow that path.”
Ward defined a role model by what he should do, Jordan defined a role model by what a role model should not do.

Much of the literature does not specifically address the importance of role models, specifically what a healthy male role model can do to improve the lives of boys and young men. If anything, there are hints at what a healthy male role model can do, providing a plausible, causal link between healthy male role models and the success of boys and young men (Givens et al., 2016). The participants in the group were able to discuss the effects that role models have had in their lives. The findings reveal that they were keenly aware of the roles that the males in their lives have played in providing good examples for them of healthy masculinity and how to conduct oneself in a relationship that is conducive to good health. One of the criteria they used to judge a healthy role model is in the behavior that the role model exhibited, which they defined as signs of maturity for a healthy role model and immaturity for an unhealthy role model.

Steven linked the conversation about negative role models to immature ideas of what it means to be a man or woman. Using the example of sexual promiscuity, he described it as a characteristic of an immature person. Such a person would not be a role model/would be a negative role model.

The problem in this country is the things that are glorified are immature. Sleeping around is a sign of immaturity. The sign of maturity is to be committed to a person and work on yourself and grow and stick together.

Steven was highlighting how a lot of the things that are glorified in public spaces, like promiscuity, are harmful to society and to individuals because they are promoting immature and destructive behavior. The members of the group agreed that one of the typical behaviors that is encouraged, especially for males, sexual conquest, is destructive in the long run, as it does not encourage an individual to forge a healthy relationship
with another and can reduce a relationship to something that is merely transactional. The harsh criticism of promiscuity as a marker of immaturity by the participants mirrors the criticism by Michael Kimmel (2018) of the tendency for hegemonic masculine traits to value sexual conquest of women by men. Kimmel (2018) criticizes this and connects it back to the importance of a male role model: “The awesome insecurity that underlies such juvenile blustering remains unacknowledged…. There are virtually no trustworthy adults willing or able to talk honestly about sex with young people” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 215). Kimmel’s observation was similar to what the boys acknowledged as a sore need, a class that teaches such things in the context of healthy relationships. The participants acknowledged the problem with this kind of immature behavior, “juvenile blustering,” being modeled for them, and were willing to go against it by not lying to themselves about the importance of intimacy in a relationship with a co-equal partner. Sex and relationships are not about conquest, but convergence. One other aspect of healthy relationships that was primarily covered in the four interviews was the connection between healthy masculinity and the relationship to one’s self and to others.

**Healthy Masculinity**

Masculinity is a way of performing a socially conditioned set of gendered behaviors that can be helpful or harmful to the individual and those in the individual’s orbit or sphere of influence. Because of this, having a sense of what healthy masculinity is compared to unhealthy masculinity is important to understand, as it can promote healthy relationships to oneself and to others. The four interviewees had some clear overlaps. During his interview, Ward focused on control over emotions as an indicator of healthy masculinity:

Not being emotional at all, ever. I mean not lashing out. Crying. Yeah. I believe in the man-up part. If you want a man to be emotional, you got mass shooters, you
got school shooters, you got bombers you have, et cetera. The list goes on. Yeah, man should never be emotional. You should always be grounded. Yeah.

In Ward’s view, men should not be emotional “at all,” or ruled by emotions, which he defines as “lashing out” and “crying.” He valued rationality over emotionality, being able to “man up,” for example. This definition of masculinity is listed in Kimmel’s (2018) “Guy Code.” Kimmel’s (2018) list, described above, is done out of concern that this kind of relationship with emotions is ultimately harmful to boys and men, something to which Ward ascribed. Crying is a healthy emotion, while lashing out is not. However, for Ward, any expression of emotion is unacceptable. Emotional expressions make a person “ungrounded” or off-balance. To avoid becoming ungrounded and subject to emotional vulnerability, Ward proposed that men “man up” or avoid emotional expression. To illustrate the perils of emotion, he used the most extreme examples—violence. He used the above examples as cautionary tales of what could happen when men express masculinity in its unhealthy form, lashing out toward others and using violence (e.g., bombing, shooting) to express it. Interestingly, Ward did not see a correlation between forcing oneself to always be “grounded,” “not being emotional,” and the suppression of emotions like sadness with what it could ultimately lead to—violence.

Similarly, Phelps described unhealthy masculinity as “…just generally putting others down, being unreflective, unable to take accountability, hating the world. And then generally succumbing to what the others want you to be,” and added, “being resentful… taking out your anger on the weak.” His definition of unhealthy masculinity was similar to Ward’s in that he saw the dangers of “hating the world,” resentment, and using anger to cause harm. All three of these ways of thinking and behaving are common indicators of the potential for future violence.
Jordan’s definition of healthy masculinity related to “self-improvement. Working on yourself…being a good man…use your strength and your power to protect people…[and] not use your power to rip on people or to show off your strength.” Also, it was “not being sexist or racist or just anything to show your dominance that’s making people feel bad.” This definition was similar to the previous two interviewees’, as they all focused on the individual and how the individual’s expressions of masculinity, if healthy, could have a positive effect on the individual and on society.

While Che’s definition of healthy masculinity was similar to Ward, Phelps, and Jordan, he added something more which the others did not mention or touch upon, the issue of consent. He said,

I think the discussion around consent needs to…I know it’s overwhelmingly women, or not overwhelming, but the majority. As someone that’s had experiences with that, as a male, I feel very, very unrepresented. I remember the first consent assembly we had, I just felt awful because I’m like, wow, no one else can empathize with me in this way. They don’t care if it happens to me because they’re not talking about it. Which I know isn’t their intention, but I think they definitely need to consider that one…. But I’m also kind of a larger dude, and so I think some people expect you to be fine.

While he didn’t go into detail about what he meant by having “had experience with that [consent],” his emphasis on consent as being inextricably linked to having a healthy relationship, as being linked to a healthy expression of masculinity, illustrated how each interviewee’s definition of healthy masculinity is informed by personal experience. Particularly telling was his belief that the issue of consent solely related to females. Regarding sexual consent, if males are mentioned, they are usually not the victims, but rather the perpetrators. What Che highlighted was that certain issues like consent
or emotionality are linked to femininity and are not seen as masculine issues. If boys aren’t given the space to fully express their lived experiences, including issues around consent or expressing the full range of emotions, they will continue to bottle up their feelings and continue to suffer in silence. If they cannot be vulnerable, they can be open to exploitation by unscrupulous “masculine gurus” who promote unhealthy masculinity and toxicity. If males can’t talk about consent because their experiences aren’t visible, or it’s seen as a “girl’s issue,” it could leave someone like Che, who experienced an issue around consent that left a harmful imprint, to suffer in silence. Thus, it is not just personal experience, but a deeper problem of what society defines as “masculine issues” compared to ones that are not considered masculine issues. The issue of consent is one salient example.

Che ended the interview with the idea that the feelings of men and young men tend to be discounted, not mentioned, erased, or completely unseen. Che felt that the belief that males must be able to bear harm and pain without complaint sets males like him up to carry around a heavy burden that can be crushing. It is no wonder that rates of suicide among men between the ages of 25–45 are so high (Reeves, 2022b). Indeed, it seems like the only acceptable expression of pain is violence toward oneself or to others. This paradigm presents the expression of emotions by boys and men as a catch 22: on the one hand they are discouraged from expressing emotions, and on the other there is an expectation that men should be able to bear a larger amount of pain and harm without verbalizing how they feel about it. All this does is magnify the damage.

Phelps had a similar view of healthy masculinity. He highly valued the willingness to “say when it hurts,” take ownership and not shift blame or responsibility, being accountable, being one’s own self separate from outside influences, and not putting hate into the world. This matches with Kimmel’s (2018) definition quoted above. All the interviewees and the participants agreed that ways of being masculine and performing
masculinity should not cause harm or encourage hate. This came through in their criticism of the culture, how it rarely provides positive, healthy role models and healthy examples of masculinity. The legitimacy of such a culture or society, according to the group, comes from the healthy behaviors that they promote, behaviors that encourage healthy relationships with oneself, with others, and with masculinity.

Overall, the three interviewees expressed similar ideas on how they define manhood: stoicism, self-development, valuing strength, self-reliance, gentlemanliness, being secure in oneself, etc. They also agreed with what Kimmel describes as healthy masculinity when he discusses the importance of a reimagining masculinity: “a real man means doing the right thing, standing up to immorality and injustice…[not] being a passive bystander, going along with what seems to be the crowd’s consensus” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 295). The participants and interviewees all felt a sense of duty in promoting fairness and “standing up to immorality and injustice.” Furthermore, they expressed the importance of defying what is popular if it bumps against one’s own sense of what is right.

The interviewees’ ideas about emotions and violence were largely informed by their upbringing, what had been modeled for them. Many boys in the group had shown some of the classic characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: the primacy of mental and physical toughness and suppressing emotions, to name a few; they also value qualities that are non-hegemonic: self-care, being a good man, being a gentleman. Yet, they all agreed in defining unhealthy masculinity as being a bully, trying to establish dominance out of insecurity, and what Ward bluntly called being an “asshole.” The participants and interviewees did not like the term toxic masculinity because they felt like it was a way for people to shame or bully men for being men. One of the reasons the more negative aspects of masculinity and masculine expression can be difficult to change is that these traits are often thought of as men being men, like Ward said, similar to the idea of “boys
will be boys.” This kind of attitude prevents a critical, clear-eyed look at masculinity. Connell’s (2005) and Kimmel’s (2018) points, along with other masculinity theorists and writers, is that a critical accounting of what it means to be masculine must be taken seriously in such a way to remedy and minimize the damage that the more harmful aspects of masculinity can cause to boys, men, and society. The next theme relates to how the participants and interviewees felt comfortable enough to share and apply their personal knowledge and experiences.

**Sharing and Applying Personal Knowledge and Experiences**

During our weekly conversations, the participants shared personal information about themselves and about their personal experiences. Their sharing encouraged them to make connections with one another and encouraged learning about themselves, one another, and their masculine identities. Research question two asked how regular participation in a discussion group on masculinity shifted participants’ understandings of masculinity and of themselves. What follows is the topics the participants and interviewees were most interested in discussing: the influence of peer pressure and social media, the power of collective exploration through discussion, and raising a son.

**Peer Pressure**

In order to better understand their own experiences with peer pressure, the participants felt that sharing their knowledge and personal experiences could help themselves and other members of the group. Sharing their experiences with peer pressure acted as validation for themselves and for others in the group. Phelps discussed his experiences with peers who were trying to pressure him away from doing well in school and in sports, articulating how he dealt with peer pressure:
In my experience…a really big turning point in kind of de-associating myself with people that were going to hold me back…. They’re like, “So why can’t you just come hang out and drink with us this one night?”…the same people that are telling me, “You got so lucky on the college apps”…those kids need to know that the short-term satisfaction of doing all that stuff right now is not going to be worth it in the future.

The discipline of sports allowed Phelps to recognize the differences between short-term satisfaction that his peers encouraged him to pursue and the short-term sacrifices he made for a long-term goal. Now that his sacrifices and discipline bore fruit, his peers looked at him as if he did not work hard to get to where he was at. Sports was a way for Phelps to feel successful and to gain wisdom through experience to be shared with his peers. Jordan added, “Work now so you can have fun for the rest of your life, not have fun now so you can work for the rest of your life.” Now that they were finishing up high school, they were taking a moral inventory on how their social sacrifices could benefit them in the future. They were sharing the common experiences of facing peer pressure to make short-term sacrifices that could have affected their long-term goals. The ability to acknowledge one’s wisdom, gained through experience, is a way to come to a better understanding of one’s self and one’s motivations and serves to reinforce that the decisions they made were ultimately worth it to them. Furthermore, experience could be used by the participants to make better decisions for themselves and encourage their peers to make good decisions as well. Similar to their experiences with peer pressure, their experiences with social media and the negative pressures it can promote were met with equal trepidation.

**Social Media’s Pressure**

Their discussion of social media and the pressures of social media encouraged them to reflect on how their parents raised them, using how they handled social media
exposure as a barometer of effective parenting. This also made them think about what they would do for their own children. When the participants discussed their upbringing as it relates to social media exposure, they reflected on what did and did not work for them and drew conclusions about what they would do differently. Joseph said, “I’m not really giving my kids phones until they’re 15 or 16 years old.” Steven, speaking from experience, disagreed: “My mom didn’t give me a phone until the end of eighth grade… I don’t know which route would’ve worked better, but I don’t think this route was the best option.” He added, “I think there’s a way you should ease them into it. Even though the obvious solution is wait.” Jordan came up with a compromise: “Just block the social media until they’re older,” while Phelps said, “Or just educate them on what’s real and what’s not.” After this exchange, Steven acknowledged that he “missed out on a lot of dumb social media stuff from middle school,” a positive result of his mother’s decision. He added, “It’s still nice to be exposed to it in a way where you know what it is and how you handle it.” Ward used his experiences with his own upbringing and with social media to inform how he would raise his own children. Steven disagreed with Ward, but he did so respectfully and with evidence for why he felt like Ward may have had the wrong idea. While both students spoke from a place of understanding, their different experiences informed their opinions on how to navigate social media as young men. Admittedly, he did not know another way of how the effects of social media exposure could have been mitigated. It was an expression of humility on the part of Steven to admit to the group that he did not have an answer as it related to what alternatives should happen regarding social media exposure. Social media was used as a way to understand how they were raised and parented, as a gauge to determine whether or not their parents made the right decisions. They all agreed that social media exposure can be harmful and that education is the best way to mitigate the harm. Their agreement is an example of how their collective exploration of a topic could yield plausible solutions.
**Collective Exploration**

The weekly meeting provided a space that was not normally given to them. Their weekly participation revealed a need that many boys may have for a communal space to explore their identities. The space offered them the opportunity to see the power of allowing oneself to be vulnerable. The space that they co-created also allowed them to explore different versions of themselves, an important part of growth and maturation, and try on new selves/identities in order to learn who they ultimately wished to become. Finally, the space allowed them the freedom to talk and say what they want without censoring, shame, or fear.

When describing the strengths of the weekly discussion group in his interview, Phelps said, “It intrigues me to explore other parts of my life that I wouldn’t necessarily do, and it helps me think about how I can lead others in the same direction.” Che said, “I think it helps me come to new opinions and think of what can we do to make this easier for everyone and easier for other kids in the future.” Both Phelps and Che viewed attendance and participation in the weekly meetings as an opportunity to explore themselves and their lives and figure out ways to apply it to their younger peers, a way to pay it forward. Jordan said,

We can talk about pretty much anything we want. Nothing we say is disregarded or we’re shamed for it. It’s a breath of fresh air that we’re not being censored…. Not everyone agrees all the time, but that’s part of it. I don’t want everyone to agree all the time. We want to have these discussions…. I want to be able to talk about it without fearing that I’m going to get canceled.

Ward said he likes that “you can voice your opinion on a topic that is controversial.” Ward and Jordan continued to participate in the discussions because it allowed them to feel a freedom to discuss whatever issues they wished to discuss without fear of being
shut down or saying something that someone else disagreed with and engage in debates without the fear of being “canceled.” Their openness and honesty in the group was something that they all maintained together, naturally, and was an unspoken expectation. While the group was rather informal—there were no ground rules set out at the beginning of our meetings—they all understood that the number one reason they were there was to learn from each other and to arrive at deeper truths that they can apply to themselves and to others.

**Raising a Son**

To gauge how they would take their wisdom and impart it on someone for whom they are responsible, I asked the four interviewees what they would teach their son if they had one. The interviewees generally had similar responses: they all valued teaching stoicism and discipline, having them learn through experience and failure, and would encourage them to participate in sports. Whatever differences they had were informed by their experiences. Phelps said,

I would expose him to all the cruelties of the world and how to problem-solve at an early age. I don’t think I would directly verbally teach him unless it would be like a few things here and there…and then let him fail on his own. I would guide him back on the path after he has learned from that failure. I would encourage him to participate in some sort of physical sport that’s not necessarily with a team. So, the pressure is on yourself…. You have to take ownership. And also, be with a team so you can work with others and learn how to compete as a unit…. I think nature is one of the biggest things that can humble any human. And being exposed to that and being exposed to earth’s glory is something that every man should be in.
Phelps would take more of a hands-off approach, seeing his role as a father to be more like a guide and support system for his son. His value of participation in sports was a tool to teach his son how to be responsible for one’s own performance as well as to teach his son how to work as a team toward a common goal related to his experiences as a competitive swimmer. One of the responses that set him apart from the others was the emphasis on the importance of the connection between nature and man. Nature can teach humility, something that he felt would be important for his son to have.

While sharing the idea that his son should be disciplined—Ward called it stoicism—Ward’s response was notably different from Phelps’s:

> If I were to have a son, I’d teach him that life is your canvas. And don’t let even me or your mom or whatever tell you something wrong. You have your own independence. So yeah, I teach them to be a very masculine individual as well. Being a gentleman of course. Being respectful. Being stoic. Always treat everyone with respect.

In his response, Ward gave his definition of masculinity, which included stoicism, respectfulness for all, and being gentlemanly. He felt that his son should have complete independence to define his own life and have the ability to challenge his mother or father if they are wrong about what they are trying to get him to think or do. This speaks to the value of having a son who is independent. This, too, is informed by his experience. Ward and his father had a pretty severe falling out wherein they stopped talking for almost a year. Ward even changed his name from sharing his father’s name to taking on a new name of his own choosing. At the time of this interview, they had reconciled, but he still kept his new name, separate from his father’s legacy.

Jordan’s response was similar to Phelps’s in the emphasis on the importance of participating in a sport, but he made sure that his approach would not be overly forceful
in encouraging his son to play a sport. There is no choice but to participate in a physical activity, as Jordan shares the idea that this is a valuable way to learn how to be a good person who is helpful and productive. He said that his son must
do something physical…. You have no choice but to do that. You’re not going to live under my roof and not have some sort of skill or physical activity. I’m not going to force you to be in the NBA or anything, or tell you to train your life away, but you have to have a physical skill, and obviously, I would probably make him read, give him a good education, teach them right from wrong, so how to properly treat a woman, how to be respectful towards others.

Unlike Phelps and Ward, Jordan made a point to say that his son would learn about how to treat a woman with respect. He also emphasized reading and education, teaching right from wrong, and, like the other two interviewees, respect toward others. Jordan’s experiences in playing sports as well as the pressure that he gets from his family, not as much pressure as many of his peers in the community face, informed his choices in rearing a son. The pressure he felt was not overbearing or burdensome, but more like a guide on how to successfully navigate life.

The fourth interviewee, Che, said his son would be given the opportunity “to figure out what he’s comfortable with and try to work around that.” He added, “For me, I’ve never been good with getting information from just reading and notes on a board. So, build your habits around that so you take some stress out of your daily life.” His experiences from both of his parents were not like many of the peers in the school. His parents taught him how to self-advocate, that the pressure and stress of school is not to be a crushing burden, the pressure of high grades was not so overt from them, but more like an expectation that he put on himself. In his experience, school had been difficult because of the one-size-fits-all approach many of his teachers practiced, a way of learning that he
struggled with. His goal for his son would be to prepare him for the way schools operate and the way teachers teach so that his son will be able to successfully move through school with fewer struggles compared to his own. The ability to do so begins with the ability to value self-awareness and what it can teach as well as valuing self-care.

**Engaging in Self-Awareness and Self-Care**

Most masculine theorists and writers do not really cover the importance of self-awareness and self-care, let alone define what they mean and what they look like for boys and men. In his description of young people, Kimmel (2018) observes, “They perform to please grownups—parents, teachers—but exhibit little capacity for self-reflection or internal motivation. They have high self-esteem, but often little self-awareness” (p. 48). The definition of self-awareness is literally the awareness of self. This means how one is consciously aware of who they are, how they define themselves in relation to and contrary to others, an awareness of one’s own beliefs, feelings, purpose, drives, and motivations. Self-care is easier to define, as this means the ability to make healthy choices and have access to the means to care for oneself from the very basic of necessities at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, to the very top of the pyramid, self-actualization (McLeod, 2023). If hegemonic masculinity is defined by “never showing emotions or admitting to weakness...that everything is going just fine...is under control...nothing to be concerned about...Winning is crucial...Kindness is not an option, nor is compassion” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 53), then self-awareness aims toward hiding or denying what is really going on inside, and self-care is taboo. The interviewees and group participants did not adhere to this taboo, not wholly. They defined self-care and self-awareness as inextricably linked.

Phelps, through his own experiences with self-care, demonstrated the differences between his attitudes toward self-care, a form of self-awareness, and what he observed
with most men. He pointed out that “men have to get better at self-recovery or taking care of themselves.” Phelps assumed that men do not take care of themselves, and one way to get better is to prioritize “self-recovery.” This, however, cannot happen if one is not self-aware. Che responded that one of the barriers to self-care is that “sometimes you’re just encouraged to work and never care about yourself because that’s something soft.” Che was aware of the fact that self-care can often be construed as “soft.” Despite that, he felt that self-care is needed by individuals even if it is not supported by the current system that we have. In this sense, Che, like Phelps, was not likely to prioritize work over his own well-being. Both Phelps and Che used their own experiences to push back on the idea that self-care is a sign of weakness and felt like it is incumbent upon men to take care of themselves, to look after their own well-being in order to counteract the forces that may make one feel unhappy. This awareness, however, is learned behavior. Phelps added,

A lot of guys just don’t understand why they are feeling constantly uncomfortable. You have to learn how to acknowledge that and actually make progress in changing something…learning how to find the balance of pushing your body, but taking care of it as well.

Phelps highlighted how a lot of what ails boys and men is the inability or unwillingness to admit that they are feeling uncomfortable and look inward to figure out why they may be feeling uncomfortable. He used his own experiences as the evidence for reaching this conclusion and highlighted how his practices of self-improvement were a result of his becoming more aware of what he needed in order to ensure that he was performing as best as he could. While he had a history of being concerned with his health, his emphasis on self-care was a result of getting COVID-19 and the long road to recovery that needed to follow. It took Phelps 2 months to feel healthy again, a result of the COVID symptoms
affecting his ability to swim for long periods of time during practice and meets. In hindsight, he commented that sometimes it takes a struggle with an illness in order to do some self-reflection as it relates to one’s own personal health and well-being. Speaking to the experiences of the group participants and interviewees, they all shared out on their struggles in school to feel a sense of belonging.

In the interviews, they showed the self-awareness of their need for self-care. Their self-awareness was often tied to their masculine identities and their treatment as a result of being defined by their maleness above their individuality. They highlighted how their treatment along with their male peers could have a negative effect on how they viewed themselves. Phelps made a point to highlight how the conversation around masculinity had become less and less nuanced, and this affected how he viewed his own masculine identity, an effect that he suggested affects more than just him. He reasoned,

I just want to say how much of a misrepresentation toxic masculinity has, like the general outline of masculinity. It just has stuck with me so much about how, even in our conversations last year, some girls have said now pretty much all of masculinity has been toxic. And people don’t actually know how to identify masculinity in society and how to pick it apart and give it its rightful validation in a way. And I think having no validation has caused a lot of toxic masculinity just more and more and more. So, if there’s a way that people can agree to not be resentful towards masculinity, it can be a lot of steps forward to having true equity.

To Phelps, the lack of nuance in the discussion around masculinity highlighted for him how many don’t understand the needs of boys and men; nor do critics of masculinity understand what it is like to be male. He identified the conflation of masculinity with toxicity, which he was critical of and disagreed with. To him, this was unhelpful because
it prevented any kind of real, true, and genuine understanding of masculinity from entering the public discourse. Phelps highlighted how the lack of a nuanced discussion around masculinity has had an effect on the localized conversations around masculinity. The lack of a clear dialogue around which aspects of masculinity should be encouraged and which ones should be challenged and discouraged led to many of the boys feeling that masculinity was generally something that should be challenged. He also highlighted how the culture seemed to have resentment toward masculinity, a resentment that he experienced first-hand with many of his female teachers. When asked what he meant by resentment, he described female teachers who were condescending and stern when boys exhibited stereotypically masculine characteristics. The teachers made many negative assumptions about the boys compared to the positive assumptions the teachers made about female peers. He described the negative beliefs teachers had about male students. “If a teacher leaves the room for a second and something happens and she comes back, she immediately looks towards the boys.” The differences in treatment made many of the male students hyper-aware of their own masculinity. This can affect one’s self-awareness, as it can make boys feel like their expressions of masculinity are wrong, are “toxic.”

Much like Phelps’s self-awareness being tied to his masculine identity, Ward’s was as well. He discussed the negative effects of the discourse around masculinity more broadly, however, as well as the lack of more self-care that can harm men:

It’s sad because suicide rates of men are just through the roof, and part of it, of course, is a depression thing. It could be a number of things, family problems, whatever. But women, I’m not saying that women’s suicide rates should ever be discounted, but the reason why it’s far less is because women don’t understand what it is to be really fucking alone…. Guys feel like we can’t talk to anyone. So,
we’ll either go to the gym and try to work through our issues through our body, some of us will go to therapy, but we feel there’s no true way out of it.

His awareness of the spike in suicides among men older than him spoke to his awareness of the problem many men face: feeling utterly alone and like there is no one with whom to speak. He acknowledged that men try to deal with their isolation through working out, a physical outlet, and he also acknowledged that there are men who go to therapy, but this does not account for the general malaise that many men and boys feel. Male loneliness, according to Ward, is different from female loneliness: “women don’t understand what it is to be really fucking alone…. Guys feel like we can’t talk to anyone.” Male loneliness, it can be argued, is a self-inflicted wound, especially given the fact that many boys and men bow to the pressure of what Kimmel’s (2018) “Guy Code” (discussed above) demands. It does not help that male loneliness is scoffed at and ignored by society; it rarely shows up in the social discourse, leaving men with no place to put their loneliness. The difference, according to Ward’s self-awareness, his experiences and observations, lies in the fact that many men feel like they cannot talk to anyone, whereas women feel like they can talk to someone about their problems. He was aware of the loneliness that many males face and aware of the ways in which some men try to treat it through self-care, but this is not enough to reverse the trend of the spike in male suicide. The root cause in this instance is loneliness, not the broad discussion of masculinity that can devolve into an outright condemnation of masculinity.

Che spoke to his own personal struggles: “I’ve got anxiety and depression…. If I’m having an issue and I bring it up, I’m expected to deal with it. I think because I’m a larger male, people think I’m tougher.” Che described how the stereotypes of male behavior, specifically the taboo of showing emotion and being vulnerable, can force young men like him, who struggle with mental health, to be discounted, ignored, and not
given the tools to deal with his struggles. He was self-aware enough to admit to what he suffers from, but when he would tell others what he was struggling with, they discounted it and expected him to be able to handle it on his own. This is another way that male loneliness can creep in. If society deems men perfectly able to handle their struggles on their own, this will discourage them from being open and honest about what they are going through, and it will be assumed that they will be able to handle their struggles without any kind of extra care or support from others. Many young men, and men more broadly, are expected to deal with their burdens on their own, when many don’t have the tools to do so. Without the tools to handle their burdens, many men are driven to find ways on their own, ways that can be deadly. “Deaths of despair” have spiked, including the rates of suicide among men, which was three to four times the rate of females from 1999–2019 (Reeves, 2022b). Included under the umbrella of the term “deaths of despair” is drug overdose deaths. Reeves (2022b) writes,

Opioids are just as much a barometer of social problems as they are a cause…..
[Opioids] numb the pain—perhaps physical pain at first, then existential pain…..
[They are drugs] of isolation and retreat. (p. 62)

Whether trying to escape the loneliness and pain though drugs, alcohol, or suicide, the solution to male loneliness is severely lacking. These popular “solutions” do not mirror the solutions that the boys in the group discuss, solutions that work for them. Indeed, the most common tool the participants mentioned for dealing with emotional difficulties is physicality. All the interview participants stressed the importance of having a physical outlet. Physicality was one of the few acceptable ways that males were able to bond with other males and work on themselves by pouring their energy into an activity. “Men use sports to both hide feelings and to express their feelings” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 137). This observation by Kimmel came through in how they discussed participation in
sports. They all saw sports as a way to grow both individually and with other teammates. To them, physical activities were a way to release endorphins and relieve stress. This, however, was temporary. After the practice or the game ends, the comedown tends to be much steeper. “Sometimes, sports serve as the only way for men to talk, to connect, or the only way they can express their emotions at all” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 151). This is not to imply that the boys in the group did not see the male expression of emotions as a sign of weakness. In fact, they saw it as a sign of strength. This was why many of the boys saw having a space to talk about their burdens as another way for them to depressurize and feel a sense of belonging.

**Struggling to Feel a Sense of Belonging**

Finally, the third research question was as follows: In what ways do these conversations impact their sense of belonging, and how is it shaping what they think about school? This question was designed to learn if participation in the weekly discussions had an impact on the participants’ sense of belonging and helped to make them feel more engaged in school. In our second discussion, the group participants shared their experiences with trying to find a sense of belonging in school. To them, feeling a sense of belonging generally meant that they felt supported by teachers who were sensitive to their needs. Che’s negative experiences in school began in middle school. His being diagnosed with ADHD, instead of a signal for extra support and attention from his teachers, he found the opposite happening:

I have ADHD and I didn’t get it diagnosed until I was in seventh grade…. If teachers don’t see you immediately doing work, they think you don’t care and they don’t invest any more time with you. That’s a super big problem…. Like Ward was saying, they want to only be nice and care about you if you’re doing the things they want you to do and putting in your work, but not everyone can do that
immediately. And so that can start a whole chain reaction through people’s lives like, “Well, even though I’m trying, no one’s helping me.” So, that’s why I don’t like school.

Che’s negative experiences in school began in middle school. Instead of getting the support he needed after being diagnosed with ADHD, his experiences with many of his teachers were negative due to a lack of support. Instead of his efforts being seen as him trying hard, it was seen by some of his teachers as a sign of disengagement. While a majority of Che’s experiences with his teachers were negative experiences, which made him turn away from school, Ward had a more positive experience with schooling. He said, “Besides [a directly named teacher], my teacher experience has been great here. You are a pretty good example ‘cause we’re having discussions.” Here, Ward made a connection between his participation in the group and having a positive experience in school. Ward’s sentiment was echoed by other participants.

Rahul explained that he feels that the discussions that we had been having in the group “prepared him to speak more in class.” When asked if that preparation made him feel more engaged in his classes, he said, “Oh, definitely. I feel more comfortable speaking now compared to earlier in the year [before he began coming to the meetings].”

Cyrus, a senior who is White and has a 504 plan, and Bryan, a junior who is also White and has a 504 plan, agreed. They both added their own personal experiences to Rahul’s observation. Cyrus said, “I used to be comfortable in the background of discussions, now I feel kinda like a leader. I feel more confident, for sure.” Bryan said, “Kinda like what Cyrus said earlier, I definitely feel confident when I talk in class. I actually look forward to discussions now, and I feel more comfortable there.” The others nodded in agreement, making the connection between group participation and their willingness to participate more in class. Willingness to participate is an expression of comfort and
belonging. Furthermore, participating more in class discussions is an expression of active engagement.

Adding to the comments by his peers, and in direct contradiction to what Phelps said about how school is supposed to be challenging and force one to grow, Bart said,

I feel like school for me has always just been something to fight back against. It’s always an uphill kind of fight, because for most subjects they just throw stuff at you. Most teachers, if they see you’re not engaging with the content, they’ll either just not care and just keep going or they’ll actively try to make your life harder for you, because they think that’ll make you better at it. For me, I’ve had to really catch up on a lot of stuff just ‘cause I’ve had a bunch of injuries the past few years that just make it inconvenient. And that just makes it harder. ‘Cause I have to really excel in the things I’m good at to have a good GPA. Then, I have to constantly be playing catch up to get at least a B in all the subjects that I’m bad in.

A lot of the group members expressed frustration with the fact that many of their teachers were either unaware of, or not sensitive to the things in their lives outside of school that made it more difficult for them to do well in school. Che’s experiences mirrored that of three other participants in that they all felt that their lives outside of school, particularly their struggles with sports-related injuries, time spent on extracurricular activities, or their own, unique personal struggles, often prevented them from performing well in school. As a result, many of their teachers assumed that they were doing them a favor by challenging them, working them harder, as that was associated with making them grow. This, however, did not have the intended effect. In fact, if anything, it made them want to fight harder against what was required of them in their classes. There is a personal connectivity that was missing, wherein many of the teachers they had did not take the time to check in with them to see what they needed
or how they could be best supported to succeed in school. This lack of connectivity contributed to a sense of not belonging for many of the group participants. By contrast, the weekly meetings served as a space for belonging where students checked in with each other and discussed topics that were of interest to them without self-censorship or being shut down. In this sense, the group acted as a place where they could feel like they belonged. This commiseration among the participants was an important factor that encouraged them to show up voluntarily on a weekly basis and encouraged them to feel like the meeting place was a place to feel a sense of belonging in school.

Of the four interviewees, three of them were born in other cities, two from out of state; they have lived in the community for 9 years (Ward), 10 years (Che), and 7 years (Phelps). The fourth interviewee (Jordan) was born and raised in the community. Even after living in the community for 7 to 10 years, the three interviewees not born and raised in the community still struggle with feeling a sense of belonging. When asked if they feel like they belong in school, Phelps said, “Not particularly;” Ward said, “Kind of not;” Che said, “Not really, no.” All three expressed a sense of feeling like outsiders. Even though they have lived in the community for close to a decade, they still feel like they do not belong. Unlike his peers, when Jordan, who was born and raised in the community, was asked if he felt a sense of belonging, he said, “Yeah, I would say so.” While Jordan was born and raised in the community, and he did not feel the same kind of outsider status as the group members who were born and raised in the community, he did highlight other forms of social exclusion. Later in the conversation, Jordan said that he does not like “the hierarchy thing in student life where you have a group of people who think they’re the shit, and then people who are in the middle and at the bottom.” Even though he was born and raised in the community, there was still a strict hierarchy of students that was upheld and promoted a sense of feeling left out.
When asked why they felt like they do not belong, the answers were similar: being thought of as different from their peers. Ward said, “I don’t like the kids in the school…[they are] ignorant, spoiled, and have no real awareness of the real world…. I like to surround myself with people who already understand that.” Che said, “I just have a very different attitude than most of my peers and a different life experience…. I think I rub some people the wrong way.” Phelps said, “I’ve always sort of felt as like a new kid…just because I didn’t grow up…and have the elementary school experience…. I just don’t necessarily feel like it’s my home in a way.” If they do not feel a sense of belonging after living in the community for years and establishing some friend groups, the feeling of not belonging carries over into the experiences in school. This is one of the main complaints about the community and the school in particular, that if one isn’t born here and attended the schools since elementary school, one often feels excluded from the social world of the students and the community.

With the exception of the weekly discussions, the boys were unable to have conversations within school about their own experiences, their struggles, and masculinity. They agreed that the best aspects of school were social: collaboration in classes, school-sponsored social events, sports, and class discussions. Their agreement highlighted the importance of having more opportunities in school to have students socialize, work together toward a common goal, and discuss critical issues and controversial topics as opposed to the ways in which schools make them struggle or tune out: subjects that feel “kind of useless,” “sitting in class just copying notes,” “curriculum that is too linear,” and the inability to adapt to teaching styles. What the participants agreed upon is the high value they placed on “classes where we have more discussions.” Also, the participants agreed that the discussions we had in the group helped them improve their skills, which they applied to their class discussions. Even though they felt disengaged when certain pedagogical practices were being used, some of which are mentioned above, their
engagement in classes where discussions and group work happened more frequently appealed to their interest and promoted engagement. What occurred during the group discussions often transferred over into their in-class experiences. One of the main draws for the group participants to show up each week was to have a safe space where they could honestly share out what was on their minds and in their hearts, a place where they could commiserate by sharing their school experiences.

**Commiserating by Sharing Schooling Experiences**

The following section is about the importance of individual group participation in providing a space for participants to commiserate with one another as they discussed their experiences in school. The ability to openly share about one’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings about topics that are meaningful is a way to promote belongingness through what Strayhorn (2019) identifies as being seen. When a person listens to another, they feel seen, like they are important and worthy of attention. The boys would often share personal experiences in the group. One example was when Danny got choked up when he was describing the influence his father had on him in shaping his positive view of masculinity. The others in the group respected his vulnerability and were moved by it. Allowing oneself to be vulnerable in front of others is a powerful way that one demands to be seen and is worthy of attention and respect. Danny’s willingness to open up like that inspired other members to engage more fully in the following week’s meeting. Although they did not acknowledge the impact Danny’s willingness to be vulnerable had upon them, two members of the group, Rahul and Cyrus, were more open, vulnerable, and engaged in the subsequent conversations.

The participants’ sharing of their experiences detailed their struggles in school and their critiques of the education system. One of the important pieces that was missing in a lot of the group participants’ schooling experiences was the adequate communication
of school’s relevance to their lives, specifically how what they were getting out of school could be applied to the world outside of it. Thus, it is incumbent upon the schools to communicate that more effectively to students. Phelps said, “You know kids complain about ‘School’s so hard’…. Good. It’s meant to be hard. You’ll become stronger because of that.” In Phelps’s experience, echoed by a few of the other participants who nodded in agreement, the challenge of school is worth it because it makes one “grow stronger.” Ward viewed school differently, a view that Rahul and Francisco shared, and said, “When I look at my GPA and I look at how I articulate and how I can talk about certain issues, I don’t see a correlation.” If given a choice, Ward said that school should be loosely based around how college would feel…. I like that idea, because in San Francisco…my mom was talking to me about this for my little brother. They have this school for autistic kids where they can focus on one subject basically and they get to choose and whatever. But I really like hearing that idea.

Ownership over what one wants to learn is important, as that makes the subject matter relevant to one’s own life. Comparing his own experiences to his brother’s, Ward felt like the school that they both attend does not adequately attend to their own unique needs. Ward was adamant about not wanting to go to college, so comparing what an ideal school would be like to college, particularly speaking to the freedom to choose what one wants to study, is interesting because it reveals that he is more than capable of succeeding in college, but he thinks of it as a “total scam.” Many of the participants, including Ward, felt like what Phelps described, “it feels like being drowned by the wave instead of riding the wave.”

When asked if there are connections to be made between attendance at the weekly meetings and their feeling of a sense of engagement and belonging in school, all four interviewees said that the weekly meetings helped them feel more connected to school
and a sense of belonging. Phelps said, “I go through a lot of self-reflection…. It’s been nice for me because it gets the brain flowing in a way that you wouldn’t otherwise get in school.” Ward said, “I’ve said things in the group that I could never ever say in class, and it felt like a release. It literally felt like therapy.” Jordan said, “If we had this club earlier, I probably would’ve been more in tune with myself, more understanding of masculinity, and be a healthier version of myself.” Che responded, “My peers are dealing with the same stuff that I’m dealing with…. I take away something and they take away something. I think that has an overall positive impact on my experience in school.” Their weekly participation helped the group members feel a sense of belonging through the discussions we had about masculinity, their overall well-being, and other topics relevant to them. It promoted connection, encouraged debate, and gave them a space to have discussions about topics that they may have shied away from in an environment like a classroom.

If schools do not provide more structured programs on campus, programs that are aimed at connecting students to school outside of the classroom, then the feelings of disengagement from school, and from one another, will continue unabated (Givens et al., 2016; Reeves, 2022b). If more teachers and staff were willing to do so, it is quite possible that all students could have the opportunity to find a space wherein they could meet and connect in order to engage with one another on topics that are relevant to their immediate experience.

**Conclusion**

The boys come into the group already mindful of how their peers and the culture generally portray masculinity (Kimmel, 2018; Orenstein, 2020), how both their peers and popular culture promote a narrow form of masculine expression and performance based on their personal experiences (Connell, 2005). The four categories of
masculine expression and performance (i.e., hegemonic, complicity, subordination, and marginalization masculinity [Connell, 2005]) are designed to highlight the main types of masculine expression that are present in the socio-political environment and permeate a school’s culture.

Given the outsized influence of popular culture and of negative peer pressure that can exist within male peer groups, defining masculinity, especially healthy masculinity, can be very difficult. Human beings are social creatures and work not to alienate oneself to such an extent that one is considered an outcast. The strictures inherent in a social hierarchy, wherein the group defines expectations of comportment, especially as it relates to masculinity, can become confining and dissuade anyone within the group from really challenging that which they may individually deem as unhealthy. Over the course of the six recorded group discussions and the four interviews, the male participants in the study were interested in discussing masculinity by defining for themselves what they thought of to be healthy expressions of masculinity. They did so in their discussions on strength, their critique of violence, and their definitions of healthy masculinity and healthy relationships.

**Discussing Masculinity**

Strength was defined by the group as being able to persevere despite failure, having self-awareness, being goal driven, personal growth, and being comfortable with fear and uncertainty. Generally, weakness and failure are to be hidden, at least with regard to the expression of hegemonic masculinity. The group participants were open about their own failures and weaknesses, and they were comfortable being vulnerable in front of one another. This was one reason why active members in the group returned each week. Their discussions around the “traditional male role” allowed for them to both critique it and define masculinity for themselves. They were participating in what Connell (2005)
identified as the personal growth movement. The members of the group challenged the strictures of hegemonic masculinity through their willingness to be vulnerable and share about their own personal experiences in order to teach others, all done through collaborative discussion.

The group’s participants collaboratively defined healthy masculinity through their critique of violence. The use of violence, according to Connell (2005), defines and undergirds hegemonic masculinity in American and European culture. Therefore, the critique of violence—in the participants’ case, the critique of state-sponsored violence through war, policing, and authoritarianism—is a critique of hegemonic masculinity. To the group participants, violence is not to be celebrated, but is taboo, something that demonstrates weakness and not strength. The only time violence should be used is in “standing up to immorality and injustice,” authoritarianism, and “[not] being a passive bystander” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 295). Their condemnation of violence included a condemnation of bullying. Most of the boys adhered to the hegemonic masculine expectation of being able to handle their own bullying, policing one another’s behavior without involving an authority figure, and behaving as if bullying was not as big of a problem as it actually was. One boy, however, suggested that one way to mitigate bullying is to encourage the staff on campus to open their doors to students who may need support. He did this during the interview, not in the group discussion. The opposite of an antagonistic relationship that can be defined by bullying and/or violence is a healthy relationship.

The group discussed the importance of healthy relationships by how they treat themselves, how they treat others, and how others should treat them. Healthy relationships were defined by the participants as encouraging reciprocity, mutual respect, a healthy sense of oneself, and a relationship that encourages growth. Their definition runs contrary to the one-sided, domineering relationships that hegemonic masculinity
tends to promote (Connell, 2005; Farrell & Gray, 2019; Kimmel, 2018; Orenstein, 2020; Reeves, 2022b). Their definition of a healthy relationship also included defining healthy masculinity, which they were more detailed about as the subject came up across discussions and in the interviews.

When it came to defining healthy masculinity, many of the boys adhered to hegemonic masculine traits, but not wholly. For example, multiple participants defined healthy masculinity as being disciplined and stoic. Stoicism can be an exemplar of hegemonic masculinity when this stoicism is a result of suppressing normal emotions. Not outwardly showing emotions, which, according to hegemonic masculine traits, could make one be perceived by another as weak, can cause great harm. The epidemic of male loneliness and males’ “deaths of despair” are a testament to this (Reeves, 2022b). One clear way that the participants challenged hegemonic masculine ideas and behaviors was in their condemning resentment, racism and sexism, and taking one’s anger out on the weak, to name a few. The sense of entitlement that comes from hegemonic masculine ideals is often used to justify cut-throat and hateful behavior toward those who threaten one’s status or position (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2018). The findings reveal that young men of this current generation have moved the needle of masculinity away from traditionally hegemonic ideals toward a healthier masculinity that encourages maturation through self-awareness and self-care.

**Shifting Self-Understanding of Masculinity and the Self**

The group meetings allowed for the participants to share their knowledge and experiences with one another, teaching one another how they were able to navigate social pressures from their peers, especially as it related to defining masculinity for themselves. Additionally, participants discussed the importance of self-awareness and self-care, which are linked; being aware of how one defines one’s masculine identity plays an important
role in combating the aspects of masculinity that can be harmful, the ones that society tends to promote. Self-care is inextricably linked with self-awareness, as one aspect of self-awareness is to know when to put oneself before others as a way to self-preserve. The importance of self-awareness and self-care runs contrary to the hegemonic masculine idea of suppressing emotions, pretending everything is okay, and suffering in silence (Kimmel, 2018).

**Belongingness and Engagement in School**

Finally, the two themes of struggling to feel a sense of belonging and commiserating by sharing schooling experiences were expressions of comfort by the participants and interviewees both within the group and in their schooling experiences. The participants showed up every week because they got a lot out of our discussions and from one another. Ward compared it to “therapy,” something the other participants agreed with. “I like to show up each week because I feel like I am listened to, and I don’t feel judged,” Phelps agreed. Rahul added that participation in the group made him “more willing to participate in class discussions.” Francisco compared himself to the previous year, before joining the group, saying that he felt that “the skills I use in the group sessions are helping me open up in class. I feel more confident and engaged. I am a better listener, too.” Che said that he is especially passionate in class discussions when the issues of gender relations come up, “particularly masculinity.” He added that he feels like “a stronger advocate for the male perspective.” Jordan mentioned,

> You [the researcher] remember how I was freshman year. I was kind of just drifting, getting work done for the grades, ’cause I was expected to. I get a lot from the group. Wish it was around when I was in ninth.

Like the other members in the group, Jordan is making the connection between group participation and the discussions and how it translates to him feeling more comfortable
with himself and more engaged in school. Overall, by sharing their common experiences, and being open and honest, they felt a sense of heaviness lifted off them. It was a place where they could feel safe to speak from a place of authenticity on the topics we all agreed to cover. A group like the one outlined and described in the study is pushing aside the hegemonic masculine ideal that a man has to handle things on his own, that sharing how one feels, expressing the range of human emotions, is a sign of weakness.

Oftentimes, when the group discussions end, the boys continue to discuss the topics afterward as they walk to class—“especially when the discussions are controversial,” Danny said. He added,

I feel like a lot of class discussions get killed before they get interesting because a lot of people, in my opinion and from what I hear from friends, are afraid of offending people or are afraid of saying the wrong thing. We like to have discussions. I want to know what my classmates think about the topics that are being discussed in class. But I feel like we don’t get that. I feel like we hear the same stuff over and over. Isn’t that what class discussions are not supposed to do?

A lot of what the participants are missing in class they get from the discussion group. They feel like they can express their opinions honestly. Danny’s observation resonated with the other members, as they were nodding in agreement. While they feel more engaged in class discussions and in school, they still feel like they hold themselves back. This speaks to the chilling effect that many students in the group have felt and experienced. Therefore, establishing a shared space wherein the group of participants could show up for a discussion and not hold back on their opinions was crucial to making them feel a sense of belonging and engagement. Additionally, discussing masculinity allowed for a deeper, more nuanced look at the subject, as whenever men and masculinity gets brought up, it’s usually “called toxic,” according to Jordan, or
“completely disregarded,” observed Bart. “When kids say toxic masculinity, especially boys, I just laugh inside because I know they aren’t seeing things like what we talk about,” said Bryan. Part of the power of the group is that it promoted connection between the participants and provided a space where we tried to arrive at some conclusions to the discussion topics and to the questions that came up during the discussions. They discussed identity and revealed something about their own identities through their social commentary and how they engaged with complex ideas. In the attempt to arrive at self-understanding as a result of having their ideas validated or challenged, they grew, learned, and reconnected to school and the skills the education system wishes to impart.

In essence, it was a demonstration of how making connections in school, to one another and to what they knew and were learning, could lead to them feeling more connected to school. When given a space to be autonomous, and when provided the opportunity to voluntarily show up rather than through mandate, the boys in the group were able to discuss masculine expression and performance in an attempt to better define it. They defined it in such a way so as to push back against the narrow confines of how masculinity is defined.

The idea behind masculinities theory (Connell, 2005) and using it as a critical lens is to “recognize more than one kind of masculinity…examine the relations between them…and scrutinize the gender relations operating within them” (p. 76). This theory provides the language needed to articulate the complexity of masculine performance and expression. Furthermore, it provides a complex, realistic definition of masculinity in order to properly and accurately critique it.

The purpose of the study was to see how boys talked about masculinity, what aspects of masculinity the boys were interested in discussing, and how this participation contributed to their sense of belonging and engagement in school. Critical discussions about masculinity are incredibly important for young men to have as they seek to better
understand identity and their own, unique authentic masculine selves. They need to challenge the “man box” (Porter, 2019) that society attempts to lock them in before they are left there to languish. It is crucial for boys and young men to have a space wherein they can have critical discussions, because there is an incredible need. As these narratives reveal, boys have been suffering in silence for too long. Their voices need to be heard; they need to feel a sense of belonging. They need encouragement. The prevailing narrative about masculinity and its narrow definition needs to be changed and challenged so that the sounds of alienation and isolation do not come out as gunshots, but as confident voices.

In the following chapter, I discuss how the findings of this research relate to the research questions that guided the study, how the findings answer the questions, the connection of the study to my theoretical frameworks and the literature, and possible recommendations moving forward. Finally, I discuss research implications as it relates to high-school-aged boys’ engagement and sense of belongingness in school and make suggestions for practice and future research.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For many high-school-aged boys, school disengagement and the lack of a feeling of belonging can negatively impact their performance in school. Engagement typically comes in three ways: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Oftentimes, disengagement can be identity based (Farrell & Gray, 2019; hooks, 2008; Kimmel, 2011, 2018; Morris, 2005; Noguera, 2008; Sax, 2016). One of the key parts of identity that high-school-age boys are in the midst of developing is their masculine identities (Kimmel, 2018). Any kind of identity crisis has the potential to have negative repercussions. It is no different when boys struggle with their masculine identities (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2018; Reeves, 2022b). Male student disengagement is often identified or measured through male students’ negative performance outcomes: dropping out of school, disproportionate exclusionary discipline for male students, lower standardized test scores compared to female peers, and lower grades (Berlowitz et al., 2015; Haddad, 2020; Kim et al., 2010; Lee, 2014; Piscitello et al., 2021; Sax, 2016; Scheidler, 2012; Skiba et al. 2002; VanDeWeghe, 2006; Whitmore & Bailey, 2010). If boys are not engaged in any one of the three forms above, or, in the worst-case scenario, all three (Fredricks et al., 2004), their performance in school will suffer, which can compound the feeling that they do not belong (Strayhorn, 2019).

If some boys become disengaged due to the lack of a sense of belonging, which can be reflected by their in-class performance, a vicious cycle can be set into motion. Poor performance in class acts as a form of confirmation bias: “I must not belong if I
am struggling so much compared to my peers.” This feeling of inadequacy can lead to emotional disengagement, quickly spiraling into behavioral disengagement and/or cognitive disengagement. Yet, as it stands, the expectation falls squarely upon the male student to figure out a way to navigate out of disengagement, when it should be the school and the adults on campus who should be doing more of the grunt work. One way to begin to address this need is for the adults on campus to be more proactive in engaging boys emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively. One example of this is having a weekly meeting with boys wherein they can do some self-exploration and co-construction of knowledge as it relates to their masculine identities and masculinity.

Given all the above, the review of the literature does not specifically address the issue of masculinity when it comes to trying to promote a sense of engagement and belonging for male high school students, nor does it mention high school male identity formation—two notable gaps in the research. Therefore, I conducted this study to see if male high school students’ participation in a weekly discussion group about masculinity could help the participants better understand their masculine identities and themselves and to see if our discussions resulted in feelings of belonging and more engagement in school. This chapter discusses how the findings relate to the study’s research questions. The research questions are directly addressed through a summary of the findings, findings that are also connected to the existing literature. Following this are implications of the study’s findings for future research about the role that discussions about masculinity with high school age boys can have on identity formation, fostering belonging, and engagement in school. I suggest future research and practice, clearly delineate the limitations of the study, and end with final reflections.
Discussion of the Findings

The findings highlighted in the previous chapter will be discussed as they relate to the three research questions that guided the study and to the existing literature. The driver of the study was the participants themselves. Initially, three boys approached me about forming a male student discussion group. We met weekly to talk about masculinity and masculine identity formation. The boys saw the group as a way to connect with their peers and feel a sense of belonging. The group connected them to one another, encouraged a sense of belonging, and even helped to make them feel more engaged in school. Given the continuing participation of the group members, I believe that the weekly meetings filled their needs.

It was during the group meetings that the members engaged one another in discussions about masculinity, masculine identity, belonging, and their experiences in school in relation to the aforementioned topics. During the discussions, the participants grappled with the complexity of masculinity and the complexity of their own identities and created their own sense of belonging with the group that translated to their experiences outside of the group as well as encouraged them to become more engaged in their classes. The multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005) and belongingness (Strayhorn, 2019) theoretical lenses allowed for a better understanding of how critical discussions about masculinity with high school boys could promote healthy masculinity, belongingness, and engagement in school.

The three research questions guiding the research were the following:

1. What aspects of masculinity are the participants interested in talking about, and how do they talk about masculinity?
2. In what ways can regular participation in a discussion group on masculinity shift participants’ understandings of masculinity and of themselves?
3. In what ways do these conversations impact their sense of belonging, and how is it shaping what they think about school?

What follows in this next section is a review of the study’s findings as they relate to the research questions and the literature.

**Research Question One: How Masculinity Is Discussed and Which Aspects of Masculinity Are Discussed**

The first research question was designed to highlight which aspects of masculinity the participants were interested in discussing and how they talked about masculinity. This was important to know, because trying to understand the complexity of masculinity could lead the participants to properly critique those aspects of masculinity that can cause harm. The participants were primarily concerned with the pressures associated with masculine performance and the effects of this pressure on the individual and groups. Their discussion of the pressures of masculine performance on the individual related to Kimmel’s writings about the effects of living in “Guyland,” which he describes as “a set of institutional arrangements in our high schools and colleges, in our military and workplaces…[where] gender equality…can be undermined and thwarted by cultural forces” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 7). The participants in the study were interested in discussing and exploring these “cultural forces,” particularly in how they challenged the notion that strength is both the absence of failure and an expression of violence. They challenged the above idea through their discussions around (and redefinitions of) healthy masculinity and healthy relationships. They felt that healthy masculinity and healthy relationships are necessary for one to feel fulfilled. Their group exploration of each topic was centered around the effects of masculine performance on themselves and on groups.

Additionally, the participants in the study used healthy masculinity and healthy relationships as a way to discuss masculinity’s effects on the group and the
individual. These two themes differ from how Kimmel (2018) and Connell (2005) discuss masculinity, because the two thinkers primarily focus on the detrimental effects of masculinity on relationships and on the social order, while the group participants discussed how relationships on an individual and social level can be positively or negatively affected, depending upon which aspects of masculinity are encouraged. Unlike Kimmel (2018) and Connell (2005), the boys discussed masculinity in a way that was not focused solely on harsh criticism.

**Redefining Strength and Critiquing Violence**

One of the central tenets of hegemonic masculinity is the ability to hide weakness and failure, along with the expectation that males outwardly show strength and competence (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2018). For the study participants, strength was defined as the ability to use failure for self-improvement and for personal growth. They expressed an acceptance of failure, but not of weakness. They defined weakness as allowing failure to define a person, wallowing in failure, taking on failure as a part of one’s character. They are teetering between hegemonic masculinity, which values strength, and subordinate masculinity, which goes against the dominant cultural practice of not accepting or admitting failure (Connell, 2005). Masculinity exists in a cultural context as it relates to boys’ experiences in high school (Kimmel, 2018). These cultural contexts often dictate how males behave and how they are perceived, whether positive or negative, by themselves and by others (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2014, 2018; Vito et al., 2018). Thus, masculinity can be defined and redefined by the surrounding context. To the participants, failure, which allows for vulnerability, should be leveraged to one’s advantage by promoting personal growth. Turning failure into an asset rather than a liability can be a way of masking vulnerability while adhering to hegemonic masculine values. The group members did not see expressions of vulnerability as weakness either.
In fact, they were all too willing to express how they felt and what they thought about the topics. They were always willing to open up about personal struggles and personal experiences to illustrate their points and to be listened to or seen.

One of the ways that the group opened up about their own personal struggles and their personal experiences was through individual check-ins. When we met weekly, these check-ins were often the drivers of our conversations. They felt that these check-ins were important in that it made them in tune with what they were struggling and discontent with, the first step toward self-improvement. While they shared their personal struggles, it was not to ask for help, at least not directly, but to merely acknowledge what they were going through. To many in the group, it is incumbent upon males to handle things on their own with limited or no help. This does not mean that they did not give one another comfort, advice, or aid. They accepted these things willingly, but they were not actively soliciting comfort, advice, or aid.

Generally, the group’s views conformed to the hegemonic masculine idea of the rigidity of self-reliance (Kimmel, 2018). In Kimmel’s view, self-reliance is defined as the ability to figure things out for oneself, without help from others. This new definition, which has entered the popular lexicon, is reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s definition of self-reliance. “Imitation is suicide…. The great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (Emerson, 1841, NP). Emerson’s definition of self-reliance emphasizes the power of the individual, whose power lies in the ability to be uniquely oneself, outside of the influence of “the crowd” who would have everyone conform. Somewhere along the way, the “sweetness” of “the independence of solitude” has morphed into a romanticization of the “lone wolf,” or the fiercely independent man. The participants balanced the two forms of self-reliance deftly. Their participation in the weekly discussion groups wherein they openly discussed what they were struggling with and trying to understand what confused them went against the
notion that they had to figure things out for themselves. They sought the help of peers and pushed back against the hegemonic masculine idea that men should only rely upon themselves. The group was a way for the participants to redefine masculinity in such a way to challenge aspects of masculinity’s expression that can cause harm.

The study participants highly criticized one of the main aspects of hegemonic masculinity, the idealization and acceptance of violence. This criticism came through their critique of war, violence of the state at home and abroad, and bullying. The boys in the group and in the interviews did not see violence as an expression of valor, courage, or of manliness. Rather, their critique of war, violence of the state at home and abroad, and bullying portrayed violence as contemptible. To the group, violence is only acceptable if it is being used to respond to authoritarianism. This acceptance of violence, even in the narrowest of cases, is a form of complicit masculinity (Connell, 2005). Complicit masculinity is “constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy” (Connell, 2005, p. 79). Complicit masculinity allows for the perpetuation of violence to be upheld as an expression of hegemonic masculinity. For example, when discussing bullying, the participants agreed that it was incumbent upon males to police themselves without the involvement of an authority figure. Going to an authority would be a sign that a boy cannot handle conflict on his own. The tendency to endure bullying is an example of the expectations of what Kimmel calls the “Real Guy’s Top Ten List” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 52). On this list are the expectations that “Boys Don’t Cry,” they need to “Take It Like a Man,” and present that “It’s All Good” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 53). When bullied, according to the group, boys cannot show emotion, must endure it, and pretend that it does not affect them.

While the boys did not closely adhere to the hegemonic masculine ideals outlined by Kimmel (2018), listed above, most evident in their discussions around bullying, they
did reveal one of the crucial ways that hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated: complicity. Not adhering to hegemonic masculinity is insufficient as a challenge to its primacy. For example, by allowing bullying to continue, under the excuse of an ability to “self-police,” bullying is perpetuated and institutionalized. Openly challenging hegemonic masculinity is one of the only ways to ensure that masculinity remains non-toxic. Yet, the boys did openly challenge hegemonic masculinity as evidenced by their calling for a need for themselves and their male peers to abide by what they defined as healthy masculinity. To them, learning about and exhibiting healthy masculinity was in direct conflict with hegemonic masculinity, further elaborated upon below, and was a good way to openly challenge hegemonic masculinity.

Despite some of their ideas being closely aligned to hegemonic masculine traits, the boys co-created a safe environment wherein a discussion group could act as a support network. This support network was made up of boys who forged connections and friendships as a result of meeting and talking about the issues with which they were struggling. Some equated it with therapy in that it was helpful for them to be able to talk about how they were feeling and what they were thinking. The third way that the group and interviewees discussed masculinity was through their discussions of healthy relationships and healthy masculinity.

**Healthy Relationships and Healthy Masculinity**

Masculinity is relational (Connell, 2005), an idea that was evident across the discussions and interviews. The group participants defined what they felt a healthy relationship should be by outlining the qualities that should comprise it: reciprocity, mutual respect, growth orientation, and a healthy view of oneself. This definition of a healthy relationship by the group runs contrary to what hegemonic masculinity encourages, a ruthless pursuit of one’s own self-interest to the detriment of any
relationship (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2018). The study participants in both the group
discussions and the interviews discussed the importance of healthy relationships, not just
a relationship between two potential mates and to peers, but most notably the relationship
with oneself and to the larger society.

The discussion group participants and the interviewees all emphasized the
importance of having a healthy relationship with oneself, beginning with a healthy view
of oneself. This went beyond physical health, but emotional and psychological health,
too. For example, the boys were critical of the corrosive effect of social media on their
psyches, and many expressed regret at having been exposed to social media in middle
school. With the exception of two boys, they all had social media in middle school.
The two boys who did not say that, in hindsight, they were glad that their mothers did
not allow them to have a smartphone or social media access until they were in high
school, although, at the time, they did feel frustrated with their mothers’ decision. Now
that they were older, they felt that it was the right decision but said that they would do
things differently with their own children. One boy said that he would be more hands-on
in teaching his kids how to use social media, particularly how to escape from its more
harmful effects like encouraging body dysmorphia, how to detect fake news, and how to
deal with cyberbullying. When asked about their fathers’ role in limiting social media, the
two boys said that their fathers were not involved in that aspect of their social-emotional
development. What their fathers did help them with was to teach them how to navigate
personal relationships offline.

Regarding their views of men’s relationship to society, many of the boys believed
females were deemed more socially valuable than males. One of the examples of
this belief is the disposability of males in U.S. culture (Farrell, 1993; Farrell & Gray,
2019). The idea of male disposability came up in the discussion on war and violence,
as an example of the unequal social value between males and females. At issue is the
assumption that a male has to perform in a fashion that is deemed socially valuable in order to be considered worthy of being deemed a “real man.” Aside from male disposability, another example of a social value that has been traditionally associated with manhood is being a provider, or “breadwinner” (Horrell & Humphries, 1997). In the social world of high school, the socio-political and socio-economic expectations of manhood, which many boys are fated to grow into, are primarily social. One such characteristic of being a “real man” that was brought up by the group members was popularity, especially with female peers. When it comes to male self-sacrifice, either in war or in economics, the failure to measure up to the idea of “real manhood” can discourage many men from actively participating and could encourage them to retreat into fantasy (ManTalks, 2023; Reeves, 2022a, b). Similarly, the social expectation for high-school-aged boys to be popular with their female peers places added pressure on males, which often encourages cynicism and discourages some males from even wanting to participate in the social world of dating or high school in the first place. Kimmel (2018) adds, “[Guys] need the adults who orbit their world—their parents, teachers, counselors, bosses, coaches, administrators—to understand…the pressure they feel to live up to unattainable ideals of masculinity” (p. 50). It is precisely this silence from the people operating in guys’ orbits that allows for the pressure that goes with hegemonic masculine ideals, inherently unattainable by design (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2018), which can ruin the relationships males have with themselves, with their partners, peers, and society.

Many of the boys did not feel a great deal of support from the adults on campus; a lot of the social-emotional support on campus had given way to an emphasis on academics and academic support. Given this lack of social-emotional support and their not having very many opportunities to have the discussions we were having in their classes or among their peers, participation in the discussion group allowed the boys to
establish a space free of judgment to have discussions about masculinity and masculine identity. The group was a way to offer them the opportunity to gain social-emotional support from their peers, something that they found lacking. The group members expressed a need to feel more support from the adults on campus and the adults in their lives, and many of them either had or sought male mentors as a way to help them navigate the difficulties they were experiencing.

All the participants in the group felt that it was crucial to have older men as mentors who could act as a guide through what Kimmel calls the “more hazardous shoals” of “Guyland” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 50). “Guyland” is dangerous precisely because it is dictated by the narrowness of hegemonic masculine ideals: being unemotional, perilous risk-taking, and ultra-dominance to the point of bullying. These ideals, which no one can really live up to, leave males feeling doubtful, anxious, and ashamed (Kimmel, 2018). Having conversations that allowed space for the boys to openly discuss their feelings of doubt, anxiety, and shame around their masculine identities created a progression away from the “hazardous shoals” of hegemonic masculinity toward a healthy relationship with oneself, a partner, peers, and society (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2018).

When the discussion around healthy and unhealthy masculinity occurred, many of the boys either conformed to or challenged the expected behaviors of hegemonic masculinity that are socio-culturally determined. Since masculinity is a way of performing a socially conditioned set of behaviors (Connell, 2005), either helpful or harmful to the individual and society, it was not very surprising that the ways that masculinity was defined by the study participants mostly adhered to hegemonic masculine performance. Some of the ways that members of the group conformed to hegemonic masculinity were in the suppression of emotion and the valuing of stoicism by the study participants (Kimmel, 2018). Despite this, many of the participants were adamantly opposed to some of the most egregious traits of hegemonic masculinity—the
expression of violence, the use of force against the vulnerable, and sexism. Another way that they did not conform to hegemonic masculinity was their value for self-reflection and honesty. Generally, self-reflection and honesty are discouraged within hegemonic masculinity, for hegemony stems from the assumption that one is always right and should not be challenged even if one is egregiously wrong (Connell, 2005).

The meaning of stoicism has become long divorced from the original meaning of the word and from the Hellenic philosophical tradition. In the United States, stoicism’s modern iteration became firmly rooted in ideas like the “Protestant work ethic” and in transcendentalist writers like Emerson and Thoreau. Currently, stoicism means the ability to endure hardships with restraint and without emotion. The idea has taken on an air of romanticism in its association with a kind of rigid, warrior-like existence compounded by the popularity of pop-figures like Batman. Part of the difficulty in navigating hegemonic masculinity is that many of the qualities that are generally valued, like stoicism, especially among boys and men, can become onerous when taken to an extreme. Thus, the boys’ valuation of stoicism is not necessarily an adherence to hegemonic masculinity per se. Rather, their valuation of stoicism stems more from the ability to meet challenges and burdens head on with minimal help from others (i.e., self-reliance) and the ability to be level-headed when needed by others. It can be safe to say that the line between hegemonic stoicism and stoicism as the boys defined it is in the emotional burden that can come from the suppression of emotions. The boys veered away from hegemonic masculinity in their valuation of stoicism, because they would allow themselves to be open, honest, and emotional in our weekly discussions.

The boys revealed that there is a lot of personal pain in the expectation of performing masculinity in the narrow and confined way that hegemonic masculinity promotes. This limitation of the self when it comes to masculine performance often stems from the outward and inward effects of masculine stereotypes. For example, Jordan,
Ward, Phelps, and Francisco all shared the common experience of being in class and having many of their peers broadly bash masculinity due to the toxicity of hegemonic masculinity and the stereotypes that hegemonic masculinity promotes. They spoke of classmates and teachers throwing the term toxic masculinity around as a synonym for masculinity. This left them feeling frustrated, wanting to defend the good qualities of masculinity, ashamed, and cowed. They did not, however, feel empowered to speak out. Without the discussion group, their expression of this pain was limited to relatively few spaces and a handful of trusted individuals.

Research Question Two: Group Discussion Participation and Shifting Understandings

The second research question, asking about the ways regular participation in a discussion group on masculinity shifts participants’ understandings of masculinity and themselves, centered around how regular participation in the weekly discussion group shifted the participants’ understandings of masculinity and of themselves. Participants were able to trace how their understanding of masculinity and of themselves evolved across discussions. They did this through sharing and applying their own personal knowledge and experiences to the issues brought up in the discussions.

Sharing and Applying Personal Knowledge and Experiences

For the most part, the study participants challenged hegemonic masculinity. They did so through rejecting oppressive power structures like sexism and racism. They also rejected unequal power dynamics in personal relationships, along with two of the primary tools for maintaining these dynamics: violence and bullying. These characteristics are inherent in hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) and are the stock and trade of “Guyland,” which “sells most guys a bill of goods—tells us that such [hegemonic masculine] behavior is the distilled essence of manhood, while in reality it is nothing
of the sort” (Kimmel, 2018, p. 31). For example, the participants were highly critical of the unhealthy behaviors and ideas associated with masculinity that can flourish on social media. One example is the popularity of Andrew Tate, a social media personality whose misogyny is unabashed, who has become a role model to many boys and young men because he cynically exploits male confusion around what it means to be a man and offers counterproductive guidance (Reeves, 2022a). Despite their rather healthy views of what masculinity should be, and the desire to be healthy men, the participants lamented the fact that there is little to no formal education on what it means to be masculine.

They all agreed that education would be a good solution, and since they could not get this education formally, in school, they used the group to get the education they desired. The group became a space to explore, learn more, and change how they viewed themselves and masculine performance. The ability to acknowledge one’s wisdom, gained through experience, is a way to come to a better understanding of one’s self, one’s motivations, and serves to reinforce that the decisions they made were ultimately worth it to them. The weekly meetings were a space for learning, for filling the need for education through creating an atmosphere of learning through discussions. The space that they created allowed participants to open up about themselves, what they knew, and what they had experienced in order to make connections with one another and draw conclusions about their masculine identities and themselves. They were sharing their common experiences of facing peer pressure to make short-term sacrifices that could have affected their long-term goals.

**Engaging in Self-Awareness and Self-Care**

The ability to become more self-aware through discussion and reflection and to engage in self-care were two of the reasons the weekly participants continued to show up to the meetings; it was one more place where they could develop themselves. Some of
the participants even equated the discussions with therapy. One of the socially acceptable ways that the boys in the group, and young men more generally, develop themselves is through participation in sports. For many of the boys in the group, playing sports was a way for them to develop themselves by pushing their limits and learning how to deal with failure and weakness. Their understanding of the importance of sports was different from Connell’s (2005) and Kimmel’s (2018) view of sports as the only arena wherein it is socially acceptable to show emotions that may be deemed unmasculine. Given this social acceptance, boys and men get a kind of “hall pass” to behave in ways that are stereotypically homo-erotic and effeminate (e.g., slapping one another on the ass and being moved to tears, to name two obvious examples). However, the boys’ views of the importance of sports were much more complex. For them, sports helped them grow into the kind of men they wanted to be, and sporting activities were places where they felt more free. The participants felt like there should be spaces beyond organized sports that allowed for them to express other parts of themselves without fear of judgment. Multiple participants acknowledged that the group space that we co-created in my classroom was safe for them to be themselves. They described the group as “refreshing” because it offered them things that the classroom or the sports arena could not—“a safe place to grow.”

For the weekly group participants, the ability to have a space where they could come and reflect with others was one of the only opportunities they had to explore themselves and also help others. They were very conscious of how the group could benefit them, but they were also desirous to use their growth to benefit others, to ease others’ struggles. Che said that he attended the group to counteract the idea that to be a man one should “work and never care about yourself because that’s something soft.” He wanted to be “a better role model” for his younger brother and friends by “taking steps to take care of me.”
One of the main strengths of the group was that the participants felt the complete freedom to talk about themselves and topics that were meaningful to them, using their own experiences and wisdom to inform their ideas and contributions to the discussions. Furthermore, they did not feel censored or ashamed or have the feeling that they or their ideas were discounted and not taken seriously. Many of the participants were raised and socialized to believe that self-care is soft, but their willingness to “buck that trend” shows a paradigm shift in thinking among the group participants. There was a general sense among the group that the true needs of boys and men were not understood by the adults on campus or in the larger society.

The participants all described experiences of hearing their peers and teachers discuss masculinity in such a way to associate it with toxicity, even using the term toxic masculinity as a synonym for masculinity. The boys felt like the cultural conversation around masculinity was largely responsible for this trend. This left many of the boys feeling frustrated, unwilling to challenge the group-think, mostly due to their feeling like they could not mount an adequate, nuanced argument in defense of masculinity.

The criticisms leveled at certain aspects of masculinity, which can often be directed at all men, at least from the participants’ point of view, blur the line between masculinity and toxic masculinity. The lack of a clear boundary between masculinity and toxic masculinity acts as a barrier to a genuine understanding of masculinity and often leads to a lack of resolution to the kinds of problems that boys and men face regarding their masculine identity, self-care, and emotional well-being. If boys and men are concerned with others judging them to be toxically masculine, they will be less likely to suppress emotions that they fear may be mislabeled and judged. Suppressing emotions can lead to longer-term psychological effects like depression and anxiety. Depression and anxiety, if ignored or untreated, can lead to suicide ideation. The boys in the group were aware of the high rates of suicide among men, the epidemic of loneliness men are
going through, and the message men get sent from boyhood that they are expected to deal with their isolation and the resultant feelings on their own. Ward summarized the issue succinctly: “Suicide rates of men are just through the roof…. Guys feel like we can’t talk to anyone…. We feel there’s no true way out of it.” One of the ways to stave off a feeling of loneliness is to promote a sense of connection, a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging was one of the main reasons the boys showed up every week. As Jordan wrote in a thank-you card to me, “Thank you for giving us a safe space to express opinions, and allowing for free thinking without judgment.” The group was providing a space that allowed them to feel safe, express how they felt and what they thought, and a place where they could feel a sense of belonging and feel less alone.

**Research Question Three: Conversations Promote Belonging and School Engagement**

Finally, the third research question asked, In what ways do these conversations impact their sense of belonging, and how is it shaping what they think about school? While question two focused on the results of the discussions regarding how the participants’ understandings of masculinity and themselves shifted, question three focused on the results of the discussions as well. The key distinction between the two questions was that question three focused on the results of the discussion as it related to their sense of belonging and engagement in school. Two themes emerged in the analysis: the struggle to feel a sense of belonging and commiserating through sharing their schooling experiences. The first directly addressed the topic of belongingness and engagement, while the second theme addressed the power of conversation to bring participants together through discussions about their schooling experiences.
Struggling to Feel a Sense of Belonging

Due to the importance of developing a sense of belonging in school, it is important to hear from boys about what makes them feel like they belong in school and what makes them feel engaged in their schooling. The group meetings helped to make the participants feel a sense of belonging through building a small community of critical thinkers. Given that high school can be such a tumultuous time for boys as they discover their masculine identities and try to make sense of masculinity, it is important for high-school-aged boys to develop themselves through being critics of the aspects of masculinity that prove to be harmful.

One of the ways that the boys in the group connected was through their being culturally different from other boys in terms of how they performed masculinity (i.e., refusing to be violent and enablers of toxic masculinity). At times, they felt like outsiders precisely because they did not, or could not, go along with the higher status boys on campus who would often bully, be overly boisterous, and be rude and disrespectful toward their peers and the adults on campus. The school’s environment is a microcosm of what Connell highlights as the use of violence “to enforce reactionary gender politics” (Connell, 2005, p. 83). Hegemonic masculinity is reinforced through a social hierarchy that uses violence or bullying in order to force compliance. One form of bullying is ostracism.

Developing a sense of belonging in school is one of the most important aspects of a student’s in-school experiences (Allen et al., 2016; Bradshaw et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2019). While research on the efficacy of male-only programs tends to focus on single-sex education (Anderson, 2015; Gonchar, 2014; Novotney, 2011; O’Connor, 2014), single-sex groups specifically geared toward helping men and boys have been in existence both outside and inside of education (Givens et al., 2016; Poole, 2013; Seligson, 2018): the Boy Scouts of America, fraternities, and organized sports programs. For many of the
study participants, one of the barriers to feeling a sense of belonging was the adults on campus. According to Strayhorn (2019), one of the ways to promote a sense of belonging is related to a sense that one matters to others. The adults on campus can promote the sense that a student matters through offering academic and social-emotional support. The participants expressed frustrations with the adults on campus and with school and discussed how their experiences with teachers made them feel like they were not as supported as they needed to be. Their frustrations included adults who were not providing sufficient/appropriate/supportive accommodations for diverse learning needs, trying pedagogical practices that engaged the boys, or aware of their students’ hectic schedules and sensitive to them, and particularly the participants’ physiological (e.g., sleep and down time) and psychological needs (e.g., anxiety and depression).

The boys were able to articulate the things that made them feel a sense of belonging and engaged the most. In the classroom, they felt like they belonged during teacher-facilitated class discussions as well as group projects and activities. Both the group participants and interviewees stated that some of their best experiences came from being able to socialize with their peers in and outside of class. Peer-to-peer socialization not only helped the boys grow, but it also made them feel more connected to one another, the teacher, and the school. Some of the study participants made a direct connection between the weekly discussion group and the classroom. The weekly group discussions hosted by me helped them become more comfortable opening up in class and facilitated greater engagement in the classroom. They connected their in-class participation with their sense of engagement and taking a more active role in their classes. For some of the boys, a weekly discussion group facilitated a willingness to be more vulnerable in in-class discussions, which led to a greater sense of engagement and belonging.

The weekly group meetings helped the participants feel a sense of belonging, connecting to what Strayhorn (2019) writes as crucial for encouraging students to feel
integrated into the school community: on-campus support, connectivity, a feeling that one matters and is cared for, acceptance, respect, and feeling valued by the campus community. The participants showed up because they felt some, if not all, the above crucial elements of integration into the school community. The data show that providing a space to show up on a weekly basis where they could engage in conversations on topics that mattered to them helped the boys to feel a sense of belonging that carried over into their sense of belonging in school. Moreover, the data show that engaging in conversations made the boys “feel more confident,” more “willing to engage in debates in class,” and “more likely to actively participate in [class] discussions.” The facilitated weekly discussion group encouraged the students in the group who felt disconnected or disengaged to feel a part of something in school that they may not have gotten anywhere else.

Unlike any school years before it, high school is “boot camp for Guyland,” unique in that it has “new problems, greater pressure, less supervision.” The new problems stem from several factors—the upsurge in hormones, a social pecking order that is hard to decipher, on-campus “jock culture,” and “the sudden importance of girls,” to name a few (Kimmel, 2018, p. 78). Additionally, the greater pressure many boys face stems from the expectations that they “advertise their masculinity” through performing along the lines of the narrow standards set forth by hegemonic masculinity as reflected in popular culture: sternness, rigidity, bravado, brawn, athletic prowess, popularity with girls, and the eschewing of specific “effeminate” emotions. As this socialization plays out, parents are concurrently pulling back to give their sons more independence, while school adults focus more on the boys’ academic lives rather than their social-emotional ones. The emphasis on academics prepares high school boys to seamlessly integrate into the patriarchal structure of the world that Connell (2005) is so concerned with, one that promotes the “ideal man” as stoic, hardworking, economically successful, and
status driven. Again, stoicism, being hardworking, and being able to take care of oneself economically are positive on the surface, but when that is coupled with the cut-throat, status-driven nature of the socio-economic world of “winners take all” (Giridharadas, 2018), one that discourages emotions and self-care, those who are left behind languish, stew, and can become violently resentful (Kimmel, 2015). The high school social structure is similarly status driven, wherein hegemonic masculinity reigns supreme and cows everyone else through policies, policing (literal and metaphorical), and abuse of power. With few adults in place to act as correctives and guide them right, the boys are left to navigate the world of hegemonic masculinity that is merely amplified in popular culture and on social media.

Given the above, it is incredibly important for high-school-aged boys to feel a sense of belonging as a way to counter the influences of hegemonic masculinity. For the participants, when it came to feeling a sense of belonging with peers, those who were not born and raised in the community still felt like outsiders despite living in the community for years. For these students, the feeling of not belonging carried over into school. A lack of belonging associated with “tenure” in the community was a significant finding and contributor to boys’ ongoing sense of belonging. According to the norms of the community, if you weren’t born in the community and attended the schools since elementary school, you often felt (and were) excluded from the social world of the students and the larger community. While the boys who were new to the community were able to make friends and establish friendship groups that made them feel some sense of connection, they continued to feel like (and be) community outsiders. Like many elite and majority White or predominantly White and wealthy high schools and communities across the United States, the school/community had a social hierarchy that allowed harmful behaviors among its male students through enabling and complacency (Kimmel, 2015; Kimmel, 2018).
For example, the lack of dealing with bullying that many of the participants expressed was normal, “not a big deal,” perpetuated the problems that many of the boys were willing to open up about. Kimmel (2018) argues that “Guys who…watch bullies and do nothing…are the enablers of the worst of Guyland, because being close to the worst-behaving guys often yields the highest status” (pp. 10–11). The boys in the group did not enable bullying to gain a higher status but did so out of the belief that boys should have the ability to handle bullying on their own without the involvement of an authority figure. They did not struggle with bullying; however, their struggle was more with feeling offended at hearing their peers denigrate masculinity by describing it as inherently toxic. If the boys in the group did not feel like they belonged, they felt ostracized not necessarily out of bullying but out of sheer bad luck; being born elsewhere and coming into such an insular community so “late,” it made a lasting impression on how they felt in school. Because the majority of the participants were seniors, they had the ability to reflect over their previous years of school with a clear, mature gaze.

Most importantly, what the boys realized, in hindsight, was that their feelings of not belonging began before high school, and there was little that could mitigate it. Many boys, by their own admission, took on the attitude of detachment to deal with their sense of not belonging.

One of the main draws for the group participants to show up each week was to have a safe space where they could honestly share what was on their minds and in their hearts, a place where they could commiserate by sharing their school experiences.

**Commiserating by Sharing Schooling Experiences**

Generally, school was overwhelming for many of the boys in this study. They shared similar experiences of feeling overwhelmed because of being stereotyped, the heavy workload, belief in school as irrelevant, differences in treatment they received
compared to their female peers, and feeling that the classroom was not a space that allowed healthy debate from conflicting points of view. The weekly meetings were a way for them to check in with one another as a way to try to lighten some of the pressures they felt throughout the week and escape some of the expectations borne out of stereotypes. Because the topics for discussion at the weekly meetings were chosen by the group participants, this freedom of choice made the topics relevant to them in real time. There was a general understanding in the group that not only were they all to be treated equally and with dignity, but they would do that for one another as well. Lastly, they felt a sense of relief at the fact that they could verbalize their thoughts on the topics without feeling silenced. Thus, the discussions that we had on a weekly basis were filling a need that many of the boys had, especially because they were different kinds of boys. Going back to the primary reason behind starting the discussion group, the findings show it was intended to meet the needs of boys who felt like they needed a space to have open and honest discussions about masculinity and masculine identity.

Through their discussions, the group members were proactive in discussing ways that the school could better support male students with their struggles. For example, they agreed that schools needed to provide education about healthy relationships, including healthy masculinity, and the harm caused by the toxic aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Having such a class or program in school would not only benefit male students, they reasoned, but all students. Many expressed the desire for the adults on campus to be more proactive in supporting the students with their identity formation through promoting healthy masculinity and healthy relationships. Thus, the group acted as a way to empower the boys to think of ways that they could improve their environment for themselves and for all students.

One of the important ways that hegemonic masculinity can be challenged is through the willingness of those who could or do benefit from its expression to empower
themselves and others by openly critiquing hegemonic masculinity and challenging its supremacy. Kimmel (2018) and Connell (2005) argue that the critique of masculinity should be done in such a way to change the status quo that is harmful to everyone, something that the boys were highly interested in doing. The group acted as a kind of idea incubator, wherein they could discuss the merits of potential programs to better help support male students. An interest in changing the way things operate is the clearest indication of the desire to feel a sense of belongingness and the desire to be actively engaged. If they did not care, they would not be so invested in wanting to change the way things are. Changing systems is exactly what Kimmel (2018) and Connell (2005) advocate for, something the boys were invested in trying to do.

**Conceptual Discussion of the Findings**

A casual look at the literature review reveals that there is a cause for concern when it comes to high-school-age male student disengagement and the lack of belongingness, especially given the disproportionate outcomes between male and female students and within male students as a cohort. The findings of the study suggest that a voluntary lunch discussion group that focuses on the issue of masculinity and the importance of belongingness can foster engagement for high-school-age male students. The participants were willing to struggle with understanding their own masculine identities, trying to make sense of their masculine identities, and critiquing some of the harmful ways that masculinity is performed and encouraged through popular culture, the media, the state, and among their peers. Furthermore, the data show that, when boys are provided the opportunity to co-create a space where they can discuss issues of masculinity, they feel a sense of belonging and engagement (Strayhorn, 2019). Drawing upon their experiences in the group, they used the same skills that they practiced in
the group to become more engaged and active in their class discussions. A willingness to participate in class discussions is an indication of the three types of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Much like how engagement is demonstrated through one’s actions, through the body, Connell’s (2005) definition of masculinity as being embodied, literally of the body, in action and personality, and in rule (socio-cultural and socio-political), leads to a fundamental question: Does the behavior govern the rules, or do rules govern the behavior? Judging from the long history of humankind and how it grew and developed concepts like the body of law, the action comes first, and the rule follows. Indeed, one can act one’s way into new ways of being and therefore change the rule. The intersection between the two forms of embodiment (bodily and lawful/rules-based) is precisely where discussions around masculinity can bear fruit. Primarily, the group participants as well as the interviewees defined their masculinity through action, sports most notably, and through their own outward behavior (i.e., stoic, disciplined, gentlemanly, respectful, self-reliant, etc.). They made sense of their masculine identities through how they observed their own patterns of behavior, that of their peers, and of their role models, both personal role models and cultural ones.

According to the findings, the aspects of masculinity that the participants and interviewees discussed the most and took an interest in were relational and individual. The relational referred to how they defined healthy relationships, the relationship between the individual and his social contexts, and one’s relationship to masculinity. Connell’s (2005) conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity is akin to a kind of masculinity barometer, wherein the further one strays away from what is hegemonic, the less likely one is to conform to hegemonic masculine ideals. While the members of the group conformed to some aspects of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., their emphasis on physicality, sports, self-reliance, and stoicism), they were critical of hegemonic masculine traits like
the expression of violence, anger, and aggression. For example, all the boys said that it
was common and natural for boys to police themselves in the case of bullying, without
going to an authority figure—one key aspect of self-reliance. Defining self-reliance in
this way, however, is not what the term truly means. Emerson used self-reliance as a term
to mean one who thinks for oneself, one who is aware of the dangers of conformity and
is strictly non-conformist. This distinction is important because the definition of self-
reliance, as Emerson intended, allows for the individual to discover himself and to use
that self-awareness as a way to challenge the social expectations that are harmful to the
individual and to society. The social expectations placed upon boys and men can often
result in a dominance/submission paradigm (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2015, 2018).

The school that the participants attended, like almost all schools, had it so that
boys were constantly navigating the fraught environment of dominance/submission
construction (Connell, 2005) or the conflict between hegemonic and subordinate
masculinity, for example. In this environment, the participants uphold hegemonic
masculinity by actively performing it or by being complicit by allowing its performance.
While the participants did not marginalize other forms of masculine expression, their
tendency to adhere to more hegemonic masculine traits could be marginalizing for
others; the primary form of marginalization in high school is social marginalization.
Social marginalization comes from deliberate acts. But not all deliberate acts are created
equal. Social marginalization in high school comes mainly in the forms of bullying,
stereotyping, and isolation. If hegemonically masculine traits are encouraged, then that
would mean the boys who do not conform (or perform) can risk social marginalization,
their particular expressions of masculinity marginalized along with them.

Marginalization masculinity was not as present as other forms of masculinity,
perhaps because the demographics of the school were largely homogenous. The
most common expression of masculinity that the group participants and interviewees
exhibited was what Anderson (2009) calls inclusive masculinity, as many in the group accepted women and people from the LGBTQ+ community and condemned the use of homophobic, racist, and misogynistic language and behaviors. The other forms of masculine expression, mosaic, hybrid, and sticky masculinity (Berggren, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Coles, 2008), showed up in smaller degrees. For example, Phelps had both ears pierced, something that had drawn negative, homophobic comments in the past, which is an example of hybrid masculinity, when facets of identity associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities or femininities are accepted as hegemonic.

Judging from the findings in the research, the male participants in the group, interviewees included, would greatly benefit from having continuing discussions on masculinity, their own masculine identities, and how to define them as well as discussions about their own evolving self-understanding. The group made the participants feel “engaged,” “interested in school again,” “ready to leave high school” for what follows, “excited to challenge people’s beliefs,” “open to debate,” and “like they belonged.”

Strayhorn (2019) lists seven core elements involved in developing and maintaining a sense of belonging. The ones that were most applicable in relation to this study were numbers four, belonging as related to mattering, five, belonging as influenced by one’s identity, and six, how belonging can lead to positive and successful outcomes (Strayhorn, 2019). The make-up of the group was one in which every person was treated equally. No one had more status than another, no one had the share of the floor more than anyone else, and no one person dictated the discussion topics. The group worked organically, decisions were made at the beginning as to what would be discussed, and the discussion would flow from there. The participants were able to grow comfortable with one another as each week progressed. The room was a space, it was understood, where participants could speak freely about their own experiences and thoughts as they related to the topic. This atmosphere sent the participants the message that their voices mattered,
and so did they. Their sense of belonging was established right away, as evidenced by the fact that each week they would voluntarily return to participate in the discussion.

One of the ways they built a kinship was through their sharing of and commiserating on their schooling experiences. Some of the participants, even after living in the community for years, felt like they did not belong, and they verbalized that the group meeting was a way for them to connect with others with whom they could identify. Furthermore, they felt that their participation in the group positively affected their school identities. The group made them feel more engaged in school because they felt a sense of belonging to other male peers who were like them. When participating, they forced themselves to articulate their own experiences in such a way not only to share what they were going through and what they thought about their experiences, but also to help and guide others. In summary, participation in the group was helpful because it encouraged self-reflection and was a form of self-care. If a discussion group such as this can have such positive results, imagine what could happen if a school made the deliberate choice to incorporate similar programs into the school day for all students.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, I make the following recommendations regarding practices, policies, and recommendations for future research. There should be a multi-pronged approach for such a pressing issue, with thoughtful and timely implementations of the following recommendations.

**Practices**

The existence of the discussion group came about as a result of the participants in the group asking me to fill a need: provide a space wherein they could have discussions
about masculinity and identity formation and to process the struggles they felt to achieve a sense of belonging. Given the participants’ experiences with trying to belong, one core element that showed up consistently was that they felt like they did not fit in. When they showed up every week to have discussions, one of the main drivers for their attendance was the availability of a space for them to process their feelings of not fitting in.

One aspect of not fitting in was their shared experiences with being negatively stereotyped by many of their female teachers. Therefore, I would first recommend that the discussion around male students among staff be reframed from a deficit perspective that focuses on what the boys are not doing to center how the school can better support male students. The main focus should be how to make male students feel like they fit in, like they belong. School leaders should encourage faculty to listen to and facilitate male voices in and out of the classroom and encourage forthright discussions about masculinity and masculine identity within the classroom.

Policy

Judging from the success of a program like MDP in the Oakland Unified School District (Givens et al., 2016), I would also recommend that schools create and implement a similar program that focuses specifically on healthy masculinity and healthy relationships. This program would ensure that boys would get the support and guidance they need.

The Manhood Development Project (Givens et al., 2016) was designed as a response to White, hegemonic masculinity. The participants in the group were provided a counternarrative wherein they were taught about key African American male figures from American history, individuals that they were not exposed to in their history or ELA classes. MDP was a place where they could see themselves in the roles that their forebears played in the formation and success of the country. Furthermore, the boys in
the program had Black men from the community come in to talk about their own journey through the perilous woods of masculine identity. I envision a similar program, one that is more formalized like MDP, with a clear, set curriculum, the space for guest speakers from the community, and as a means to provide a space for all the male participants to challenge the status quo of masculine expression and performance.

MDP is an example of how local control over curriculum design can properly and adequately serve the student participants (Givens et al., 2016). Therefore, if a curriculum is to be designed for a program on healthy masculinity and healthy relationships, the curriculum design should be localized. Curriculum should not be standardized or done through a national publication company like the curriculum design currently is for standard school subjects like the sciences, language arts, math, and foreign language. Currently, the politicization of history is causing many textbook companies to literally rewrite history to sanitize the bloodiest aspects of American history under the guise of “progress” and “anti-propaganda.” Given this recent backslide, it is incredibly important to empower the student participants in the program to work with trusted adults on campus in order to design the best possible curriculum that will serve the unique needs of the populations being served.

One key element that did not really show up in the discussions during the course of this study, one that could be incredibly fruitful in its potential, is to have space where White male students can examine their masculinity, paying particular attention to how their race and masculinity can intersect to the detriment of male students of color (i.e., marginalization masculinity [Connell, 2005]). Whiteness is a crucial part of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, it is important for White male students to examine White masculinity and learn about other boys’ experiences who are non-White to see the differences in how the intersection of race and masculinity plays out across different experiences. Having White male students examine White masculinity can empower
marginalized masculinity and challenge the idea that hegemonic masculinity is uni-racial. The benefit of having White male students examine White masculinity can alert them to the ways that they unfairly benefit from such a system, can encourage empathy, and can encourage them to become more active in changing the way things are in such a way to promote equality.

Another recommendation is to create and mandate a course that teaches about healthy masculinity and healthy relationships. When it comes to state policy, it took many years, decades even, for California to mandate an Ethnic Studies course. But, it happened. It is now enshrined into law. Similarly, students, teachers, and parents could lobby the state legislature to mandate a class related to healthy relationships and healthy masculinity as a graduation requirement. Having a course about healthy masculinity and healthy relationships that every high school student takes can act as a counterweight to the negative, toxic messages about masculinity and relationships that are promoted in popular culture and through social media. Furthermore, such a course can ensure that young people are having conversations that are more nuanced and acknowledge the complexity of masculinity and masculine expression and that define and promote healthy relationships.

**Research**

Given the smaller scope of the research study, I would recommend that more research be done that addresses the limitations outlined earlier in this paper/study. Future research should include more participants and more stories from a wider variety of male students. The wider variety can include students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, different races and ethnicities, different cultures, different religions, different gender identities, and different sexual orientations. Given that most of the participants in the study were 18, it would be insightful to see how younger male students
experience masculinity, what their struggles are with masculine identity formation, and
how they feel about their sense of belonging in school. When considering race, or even
age group, some possible questions that could be explored are How does masculinity
differ, or in what ways is it shaped by racial/cultural expectations? Or how does grade
level or age change the boys’ responses to the interview questions and shape their
experiences with masculinity and with school? Also, it can seek to find what aspects of
school make them feel disengaged.

Future studies could also focus more on the importance of belonging and school
engagement, particularly what factors go into make male students feel like they do/do
not belong, or what makes male students feel disengaged. Focusing more attention
on belonging and engagement can further elucidate the struggles that male students are
going through that are not just specific to masculinity and masculine identity formation.
One such example of future research is described in the Limitations section below.
Figuring out the efficacy of hosting such a male student support group can be highlighted
through surveys of the research participants and through a schoolwide survey to compare
the feelings of engagement and belonging between the two data sets.

Another suggestion for future research would be to do an action research project
with high-school-aged boys wherein they would visit the middle school to host healthy
relationship workshops. This action research project was initially one of the planned
objectives of the male student group in the study, but it did not bear fruit due to the fact
that the adults at the middle school campus did not believe that the high school students
were capable of running an effective workshop and that the middle schoolers would
take them seriously. The boys in the group, along with the members of the school club
that they were going to partner with to create and run the workshops, were completely
discouraged and felt insulted. Perhaps it is incumbent upon the adults to listen to their
students and realize that they are a lot more in tuned with their needs and the needs of their peers than the adults give them credit for.

Finally, measuring the effects of the group participation on belonging and school engagement could be assessed beyond discussion. For example, a survey could be given to the group participants and then to the rest of the school. A comparison between the control group, the school, and the treatment group, the male student discussion group participants, could more accurately assess whether participation in the group could affect belonging and engagement in school.

**Study’s Limitations**

The findings reveal the struggles with masculine identity formation, the critique of harmful masculine performance, and the desire by the group to express healthy masculinity and have healthy relationships. They explored masculinity from their own personal experiences by comparing their own experiences to those of their peers. They also explored masculinity through their observations of masculine expression both socio-politically and culturally.

While masculinity was explored more generally, one limitation of the study is that masculinity was not discussed through an intersectional lens. For example, an exploration of masculinity and race, socioeconomics, or disability could have both revealed how intersectionality further complicates masculine identity formation and masculine expression as well as reveal how masculinity can be used to oppress peoples from minoritized communities (e.g., racialized communities, socioeconomically stigmatized communities, and those who are disabled).

One possible reason for the lack of intersectional discussion of masculinity is the sample size. The group was small and somewhat representative of the school’s
demographics, which is not as diverse as other school districts in California. Another possible reason for not discussing masculinity from an intersectional lens could have been due to the fact that the boys in the group were not made aware of intersectionality and intersecting oppressions. They could not bring up something of which they were not aware. I could have brought intersectionality up, defined it, discussed examples of it as it related to masculinity, and encouraged them to have a discussion about it, but this did not occur for two reasons. The way that the group was organized gave control of the topics for discussion over to the boys themselves. I was a fellow participant and not a discussion leader. The group was leaderless and fully democratic. The second reason was that, like the boys, I was more concerned with exploring masculinity as it related to their own unique experiences. It was important to give the members the opportunity to share their own experiences, to uplift their voices and ensure that they were accurately represented when it came to presenting their own experiences, ideas, and feelings on the topics for discussion, something that they were not getting anywhere else on campus.

Another limitation was that the exploration of belongingness and engagement in school was not as extensively covered as hoped. While the participants talked about their struggles with feeling a sense of belonging and made connections between participation in the group and engagement in school, a deeper exploration of belongingness and school engagement should occur in a possible future study. There was some correlation between participation in the group and an increased feeling of engagement by the study participants.

Despite the above limitations, overall, the findings were generally positive. The study participants were willing to try to come up with ideas to make school a better experience for all, especially for the middle school boys who would soon attend the high school. Their discussions revealed a desire to reverse some of the aspects of masculinity that they felt were harmful and counterproductive. While the discussion group was at the
very beginning of trying to understand masculinity and its complexity, it provided a solid footing, a template even, for beginning to critique how masculinity is performed, with a focus on challenging the ways in which masculinity can be abused.

**Conclusion**

Defining masculinity, especially healthy masculinity, can be very difficult to do. Once healthy masculinity is defined, performing it is a whole other challenge. Human beings are social creatures and are subject to group whims to prevent themselves from becoming an outcast. The strictures inherent in a social hierarchy, wherein the group decides and defines expectations of comportment, especially as it relates to masculinity, can become constricting and dissuade anyone within the group from really challenging that which they may individually deem as unhealthy. In short, it is an incredibly complex endeavor filled with nuance, and one that assumes complicity when there may be none.

Establishing a shared space wherein a group of participants can show up for a discussion on the issue of masculinity can promote connection between everyone in the group, a space where we try to arrive at some conclusions to the discussion topics and to the questions that come up during the discussion. Participants can connect through engaging with one another’s ideas in a critical discussion, and they can connect their own prior knowledge and knowledge gained in classrooms to the discussion. They can discuss identity and reveal something about their own identities through their social commentary and how they engage with complex ideas. In the attempt to arrive at self-understanding as a result of having their ideas validated or challenged, they can grow, learn, and reconnect to school and the skills the education system wishes to impart.

The success of the group meetings demonstrates how making connections in school, to one another, and to what they know and are learning could lead to them feeling
more connected to school. When given a space to be autonomous, and when provided
the opportunity to voluntarily show up rather than through mandate, the boys in the
group can discuss masculine expression and performance in an attempt to better define
it. They can define it in such a way that pushes back against the narrow confines of how
masculinity is defined that is more like a caricature than an undisputed fact; there shows a
pattern of both criticality and complicity.

The idea behind masculinities theory (Connell, 2005) and using it as a critical lens
is to provide the language needed to articulate the complexity of masculine performance
and expression and to provide a complex, realistic definition in order to properly and
accurately critique it. The boys will come into the group already mindful of how their
peers and the culture generally portray masculinity, how each promotes a narrow form of
masculine expression and performance. The four categories of masculine expression and
performance (i.e., hegemonic, complicity, subordination, and marginalization masculinity
[Connell, 2005]) are designed to highlight the main types of masculine expression that
are present in the socio-political environment and permeate a school’s culture.

Whether or not masculinity plays a role in high-school-age male disengagement
from school is not really considered in a lot of the research around male performance
in school, a pretty obvious blind spot. What the study reveals is that boys may be more
than willing to engage in in-depth discussions, critical in nature, that use the very skills
that the education system is tasked with encouraging them to develop: critical thinking,
making a claim, backing the claim with evidence, challenging another’s claims, debating
ideas, and pursuing truths. Disengagement in school can result from disinterest, a lack
of connection to the content, not feeling a sense of belonging, not feeling seen by the
adults on campus, disproportionate discipline, exclusionary punishment, the effects of
stereotypes, and pathologizing academic struggles. Therefore, having a discussion group
with high-school-aged boys can be helpful for boys with marginalized identities.
Discussion groups like the one highlighted above can encourage boys to explore masculinity and their masculine identities. Furthermore, this exploration of masculinity and masculine identity can empower them to find and use their voices in a way that promotes positive, lasting change. The importance of student voice and its use to promote positive lasting change are stated goals in countless schools’ and school districts’ mission statements. The uses of student voice and critical thinking to promote social change are both central to the school and district wherein this research took place. Perhaps it is time for the adults to become more involved in high-school-aged boys’ lives by encouraging them to find their voices and use them.
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APPENDIX A.

OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION PROTOCOLS

1. Recorded conversations using HT Professional Recorder software application.

2. Topics for discussion for our weekly discussions are chosen by the research participants.

3. Transcriptions of the recorded conversations through Rev.com.

4. Memoing, a combination of inductive for the group discussions, and deductive coding for the interviews, done using Dedoose after the transcriptions are completed using Rev.com.

5. Recorded interviews will be completed using HT Professional Recorder software application.
APPENDIX B.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

Introductory Protocol

Before consent to be recorded is attained:

My name is Matthew Klein, a doctoral candidate in the California State University East Bay Educational Leadership program, and I am conducting research on high-school-age male student engagement in school, sense of belonging, and their thoughts and opinions about masculinity. At this time, I wish to ask if you give your permission to be audio recorded. Do I have your consent to be recorded? For your information, only I, the researcher on this project, will have access to this interview recording and transcript. Before we begin, I wish to let you know that (1) all information will be held confidential, your identity will be protected using a pseudonym in the transcript; (2) your participation is strictly voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable; and, (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you wish to go forward with the interview?

Thank you for agreeing to participate.

After consent to be recorded is attained:

You have been asked to be interviewed by me, Matthew Klein, the researcher and doctoral candidate in the California State University East Bay Educational Leadership program, because I feel that your unique knowledge and insight is valuable in my research on high-school-age male student engagement in school, sense of belonging,
and their thoughts and opinions about masculinity. I am trying to learn more about the experiences of high-school-age males in school as it relates to their engagement in school, their sense of belonging in school, and what they think about the state of masculinity for young men in the United States. The goal is to contribute your voice to the growing body of research on male engagement in school and on the topic of masculinity.

**Interviewee Demographics and Background Information**

1. What is your name?

2. How old are you?

3. In terms of race or ethnicity, how would you describe yourself?

4. What grade level are you currently in?

5. What is your favorite subject in school?

6. How long have you lived in the community?

7. How many different schools have you attended? Which ones?

8. What clubs and activities in school are you involved in?

9. What kind of grades do you get?

10. Do you qualify for special education services, or do you have a 504 plan?

11. Would you mind sharing about your experiences receiving academic support through special education services or a 504 plan?

12. Are you designated as a GATE student? What are some supports you get as a GATE student?
13. Do you qualify for free or reduced-price lunch?

**Educational Experiences**

1. How do you feel about school?

2. What makes you happy in school?

3. Generally, do you feel safe in school?

4. Do you feel like you belong in school? What makes you feel like you belong (or not belong) in school?

5. What are some of the positive aspects of school? Why are they positive?

6. What are some of the positive aspects of school? Why are they negative?

7. Do you feel engaged in school? If so, what makes you feel a sense of engagement in school? If not, what makes you feel disengaged?

**Being a Male Student and the School Environment**

1. Do you feel that the school environment is a safe place for male students to be however they want to be?

2. Do you feel that there are expectations of behavior for male students in class and among their peers? What are some of these expectations?

3. What is one thing you wish the adults on campus understand about what it means to be a male in high school?

4. Is there a problem with bullying among the male students? If so, how is it dealt with by the staff, or by fellow students?
5. What makes male students modify their behavior when around their peers? What are some ways that they do this?

Male Role Models and Masculinity

1. Who was a male role model or mentor for you growing up? What did they teach you about masculinity?

2. If you were to mentor younger boys on how to successfully navigate high school, what advice would you give them?

3. Do you feel there are enough good, positive male role models on campus? What would positive masculinity look like?

4. How would you define healthy masculinity? What would it look like?

5. How would you define unhealthy masculinity? What would it look like?

6. If you were to have a son, what would you teach him?

Participation in Our Weekly Group, Its Impact, and School Programs

1. Do you think participation in a group like ours has impacted, or can impact your schooling in any way?

2. What makes you want to come to our weekly meetings? What are you getting from it?

3. What makes you want to participate in our discussions?

4. Should schools have programs geared only towards male students? What would that look like, and provide them?
Before we wrap up, is there anything that we did not talk about or that you want to say that you were unable to say during this interview?

Thank you for your time. I may reach out to do a brief follow-up interview if needed.