Teaching Young Men in Correctional Education: Issues and Interventions in Male Identity Development

Robert K. Pleasants

Abstract

Because of the disproportionate number of violent males in American society (particularly in the juvenile justice system), teachers and researchers should afford greater scrutiny to the relationship between masculinity and violence. Incarcerated male youth have unique issues not only because of their incarceration, but also because of their gender. Through an examination of masculinity in a social context, this paper considers issues that are common to young men in correctional facilities. In order to better serve male youth, teachers and researchers in correctional facilities should better understand concerns particular to male students. Specifically, these concerns include the intersections of masculinity and violence, the social networks that positively and negatively affect young men, identity construction, emotional expression, and literacy in the lives of male youth. In addition to theoretical analyses of masculinity and its affects on incarcerated youth, this paper offers practical applications for teachers working with young men.

Males constitute a disproportionate percentage of the incarcerated population in the United States, including the population of the juvenile justice system. Yet, despite this correlation between gender and incarceration, the relationship between masculinity and violence remains underexamined with regards to incarcerated youth. This essay will argue that teachers, counselors, and researchers in correctional facilities can better understand—and better serve—
young men if they consider their relationship to dominant forms of masculinity. Ultimately, young men can rehabilitate best through an adoption of non-violent masculinity. This paper will address particular aspects of male identity development through an analysis of masculinity in the lives of young male offenders. Each section will address a specific aspect of male identity construction and offer practical applications for teachers and counselors working with young men in correctional facilities.

The Learning of Masculinity

Gender is a central part of how we create our identity, especially during adolescence. Studies suggest that during early adolescence, children are very rigid in gender norms, enacting these roles as much as they did in kindergarten. While these norms are limiting to both boys and girls, boys experience greater pressure to conform to traditional masculinity in childhood and adolescence. There is limited acceptance for a girl to be a tomboy; however, parents, teachers, and friends will chastise and possibly ostracize a boy for acting like a girl.

Boys are acutely aware of this pressure to conform to traditional masculinity. From an early age, they learn what it means to act like a man. Traditional masculinity teaches boys to be strong, stoic, competitive, aggressive, and authoritative. A real man will be violent if necessary, or at least appear to be capable of violence. Boys are exposed to this definition of compulsory masculinity well before they have the cognitive skills to be aware of their own development and challenge traditional masculinity.

Accordingly, boys typically act in traditionally masculine ways, and they are often rewarded for this behavior. Rather than viewing masculinity as a social effect, many people assume that it is a natural part of having a Y chromosome. When boys play rough, act out against authority, or get into fights, a common reaction is “boys will be boys.” Yet these qualities associated with traditional masculinity are not biologically given. Although some boys may have a natural tendency to be more active or impulsive, all boys learn to be this way. Boys feel compelled to act masculine, but they often express their masculinity in unhealthy ways. Research shows that boys who adhere to traditional masculinity are more likely to “be suspended from school, drink and use drugs, be picked up by the police, and be sexually active” (Richmond & Levant, 2003).

In addition to these increased risk factors, boys may feel lonely and confused as they form their identity. They are more likely to define their masculinity through separation from others, particularly from females. To be masculine is to be not-feminine. While girls often create their identity through intimacy with others, boys
may not have intimate connections and may feel alone. In fact, as they get older, boys tend to have fewer friendships than girls. Indeed, even asking others for help is non-masculine, creating anxiety for boys (Kilmartin, 2000). In addition, many boys do not get extended opportunities to observe their fathers, so they construct masculinity from peers, older boys and men, and the media. It is not uncommon for them to identify with a fantasy as much as a real person.

As many authors have pointed out, the restrictive masculinity offered by our culture can be harmful to boys, limiting their development by offering them a limited emotional vocabulary and inhibiting their relationships with others (Garbarino, 2000; Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Pollack, 1998). In addition, males tend to have an inability to maintain relationships and control their anger. They often fear intimacy and have low self-esteem. Many characteristics associated with traditional masculinity are emotionally limiting, psychologically damaging, and can contribute to unhealthy behavior for males (Richmond & Levant, 2003).

Many incarcerated males have suffered from negative effects of traditional masculinity. In fact, many young men in correctional facilities are incarcerated because of their enactment of traditional masculinity, particularly their participation in violence. Thus, many young men need forms of intervention that will provide them psychological and emotional support as they rehabilitate. According to James Garbarino (2000), delinquent boys need some or all of the following psychological anchors to help lower the possibility for recidivism:

1. strong attachment
2. intellectual ability
3. self-esteem
4. coping strategies (for stress, depression, anger, etc.)
5. social support outside the family
6. androgyny (more than just the stereotypic male role to fall back on)
7. meaning in their life

Teachers and counselors of incarcerated boys can help provide these psychological anchors through their interactions and through the curriculum used in their classrooms.

**Practical Applications for Teachers and Counselors**

- Open up opportunities to discuss pressures influencing the construction of masculinity. Create opportunities for boys to critically examine their idea of manhood.
• Provide diverse positive male role models (some of whom are not traditionally masculine) to expand boys’ options as they choose their identity. They also need to know an expanded definition of masculinity that includes qualities such as empathy, compassion, nonviolence, and commitment.
• Help develop boys’ self-esteem by praising positive cooperative behavior.
• Provide opportunities for boys to build empathy for others.
• Provide therapy and education that is more than simply individualistic. Males should look at social context that contributes to their identity formation.

Masculinity and Violence
Violence in America has been identified as one of the nation’s most important social problems. We talk about school violence, gang violence, and domestic violence, but we rarely talk specifically about male violence. Yet, the majority of violence in the United States is perpetrated by men. In 2004, men were the perpetrators in 90% of homicides (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). Some researchers argue that males are biologically more violent than females, but reviews of scientific evidence suggest there is no correlation between the presence of testosterone and violent or aggressive behavior (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000). There is a connection, however, between socialized masculinity and violence in our culture. Action movies celebrate aggressive men, while sports such as football and hockey condone and encourage violence. Men are expected to be strong—and violent if necessary. With these representations and expectations always present, it can be difficult for boys to understand why some forms of violence are okay, while other forms are not. For most young men, seeing violence as entertainment is a normal part of our culture. For boys who do not have positive male roles in their life, it can define normal masculinity for them, thus often leading to violent behavior.

Because traditional masculinity does not offer a place for boys to express their emotions, boys may view aggressive and violent emotions as their only possible outlet for expression. For example, if a young man’s masculinity is threatened, violence is the most definitive way for him to assert his masculinity. Studies indicate that many violent boys are depressed, yet they often shut themselves off from their feelings, repressing their sadness and turning it outward into rage and aggression (Garbarino, 2000). Violent males often have very low self-esteem, indicating that adolescent boys who are not confident in their identity may be at a risk for violence.
Some of the qualities associated with traditional masculinity are not available to all boys. Not every boy has the resources to be strong, stoic, and sexually active. In fact, the desire to act in these ways may lead some boys to dangerous behavior such as sexual abuse or violence. If boys believe that masculinity is defined by male power, these behaviors may be a means by which they can gain power and prove their manhood (Messerschmidt, 2000). Like other forms of violence, male violence is situated, meaning the right circumstances must be in place for it to happen. As Messerschmidt points out in his study of male juvenile offenders, “fighting back is a culturally prescribed strategy of action” (2000, p. 81). When males are faced with a threat to their masculinity (especially a physical threat), they are expected to respond. Boys feel that they have no choice but to fight. For many young men, fighting and getting hurt seem like better options than acting weak. In their research, Richmond and Levant (2003) quote a boy as saying, “Walking away would be worse than violating my parole.”

While prevention programs should help boys respond to difficult situations they are likely to encounter, they should also focus on how boys can avoid placing themselves in threatening situations. Anger management alone may not be enough to help boys avoid violence, especially if they are “encouraged and reinforced for aggressive behaviors” in their daily lives (Richmond & Levant, 2003). If boys learn strategies to avoid conflict, they won’t be put into situations where they feel forced to fight back.

When working with violent or troubled boys, teachers and counselors may be tempted to use harsh discipline and controlling behavior to ensure compliance with rules and regulations. According to Kindlon and Thompson (2000), boys are more likely to become “confrontational or defiant” in response to such treatment (pg. 37). They point out that, although rigid discipline is assumed to shape boys into responsible men, it often serves to make boys more defiant. In fact, many violent criminals have a background of “harsh and inconsistent discipline” (pg. 69). Teachers and counselors need to be fair, kind, and consistent when working with violent boys.

**Practical Applications for Teachers and Counselors**
- Offer consistent discipline, but do not set up a system based on severe and unreasonable punishments.
- Provide incarcerated boys with diverse positive male role models. Films and literature used in class can provide boys with non-violent male role models and include different types of masculinity.
• Model caring to students so that they feel worthy and can learn to care for others.
• Incorporate discussions of the negative effects of violence in classroom discussions or have students do a research paper on the topic. Read books or watch films that show the effects of violence from the point-of-view of a victim.
• Avoid using books, films, and other forms of entertainment that glorify violence or show degrading, dehumanizing, and desensitizing images.
• If possible, integrate Victim Awareness Programs into the curriculum. These programs help prevent violence and increase empathy by encouraging offenders to think about the impact of their actions on their victims.

Friendships and Social Networks
All of a boy's relationships greatly influence how he forms his identity. Particularly in adolescence, though, intense friendships are important in identity formation. Identity formation is about observation and reflection, so individuals judge themselves in relation to others, and in relation to how they think others perceive them. Teenagers seem obsessed with how they are seen by others. The opinion of friends and peers is very important to adolescents, and boys have little room to vary from the norm. Adolescents' judging of each other can be hurtful, harsh, and possibly psychologically damaging.

Adolescent males' friendships can be beneficial or harmful, and sometimes they can be both. While boys are under a tremendous amount of peer pressure, they often lack strong friendships and emotional support. As boys become older, they tend to have fewer strong friendships. In general, adult males have significantly fewer friendships than adult females. In addition to the quantity of friendships, the quality of male and female friendships seems to differ in nature. William Pollack (1998) describes the nature of boy's friendships as side-by-side, whereas girls are more face-to-face. Girls' friendships are more likely to be unstructured and more intimate, while boys' are likely to be more practical, activity-based, and—importantly—less intimate. Thus, boys may have fewer opportunities for intimate expression.

Part of any boy's identity comes from emulating people that he admires. Peer pressure can contribute to unhealthy behavior. Incidents of minor crime rise in the early teenage years, remain high during middle adolescence, and decline in late adolescence. Given that adolescence is a time in which teens spend intensive time with friends, the correlation suggests that peer pressure is a likely influence in teenage delinquency. A 1998 survey revealed that 47% of middle- and high-school
students admitted stealing something from a store during the past twelve months, suggesting that teens are under a great deal of pressure to conform (Newberger, 1999). Another study (Capaldi et al., 2001) suggested that words can be as influential as actions to young men. This study found that hostile talk about women in male friendships correlated with men’s violence against women. In contrast, the likelihood of violence is lessened if a boy has a meaningful attachment to others who actively speak against violence.

Practical Applications for Teachers and Counselors

- In order to provide expanded resources for boys and to help them develop closer friendships, consider working in ways that fosters collaboration. While boys may first be drawn toward competition in activities, working in collaborative social groups can illustrate ways in which boys can work together and draw on each other as sources of strength.
- Create opportunities for boys to influence each other with positive peer pressure. As a community, boys may be able to keep each other ‘in check.’
- Integrate films and literature that offer examples of positive and negative friendships. Examine these texts to help boys think about the kinds of friendships they want in their lives.
- Help students develop positive relationships with adults. Such relationships can offer guidance and support for youth and help prevent future behavioral problems (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002).

The “Bad Boy” Identity

Some boys have grown up influenced by the punishment imposed upon them, often internalizing the role of the defiant or oppositional outsider. Boys who perceive that their possibilities for success are blocked may resort to traditional masculinity as a source of power. For boys who don’t have traditional or privileged resources to give them status, getting into trouble can be a way for them to assert themselves, gain power, and claim an identity (Ferguson, 2001). Boys who claim this identity may use disobedience or even violence as a form of social status and power. They may also use their power to assert control over their friends, girlfriends, and other women in their lives. In many cases, boys are given status among their peers by their position as a “bad boy.” These boys often perceive that having a bad reputation or a defiant status is better than no having status at all.

In her book, Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity, Ann Arnett Ferguson illustrates how defiant attitudes are often racialized. That
is, adults are more likely to view African-American boys as threatening or oppositional. Accordingly, these boys may also be more likely to internalize these perspectives and assume an identity that is, in fact, defiant to those who want to control them. The combination of these two factors may place African-American boys at greater risk for getting into trouble both at school and with the legal system.

Adolescent males who internalize a "bad boy" identity may do so because they cannot see practical ways for them to become successful men according to society's definition of success. Before young males can create a healthier identity for themselves, they need to believe that they have a positive future ahead of them. Boys who have realistic goals for the future are more likely to create a healthy identity for themselves.

Practical Applications for Teachers and Counselors

- Encourage healthy identity development by praising positive behavior.
- Choose activities that help students boost their self-esteem. Community service projects can be integrated into programs to give them a sense of accomplishment, pride, and community connection. Further, community projects that work toward social justice can promote a higher stage of self-development. Outdoor programs such as ropes courses and other team-building activities have also been shown to have a positive impact on self-esteem.
- Allow students to take part in the decision-making process in the classroom so that all activities are not dictated by the teacher only. Sharing power in this manner may help diffuse defiant attitudes by setting up an environment of mutual respect and giving boys power to choose their activities. Models of strict hierarchy and/or competition within the rehabilitation system can contribute to and perpetuate student's problems. Cooperation is a much more beneficial model.
- Help students set practical and concrete goals for themselves in the classroom. Troubled young males need meaningful work to give their life meaning and help them link their identity to work.
- Help students set goals for their future after incarceration. Allow them to focus their studies on topics that will help them reach their goals.

Emotion and Expression

As they become men, boys learn to suppress their emotions. Parents, teachers, and peers often reward boys for assuming a stoic demeanor. Christopher
Kilmartin (2000) explains that boys are "generally rewarded for controlling their emotions, but they are sometimes discouraged from controlling their behavior" (pg. 88). Adolescent boys tend to withdraw emotionally while becoming more likely to express their feelings through their actions rather than verbally. If boys also become socially withdrawn from their parents and peers, it can be a sign of danger. Boys who feel unable to express themselves verbally often express their anger or frustration through violence.

Because boys and young men may be afraid to express vulnerability or sadness, they sometimes express themselves in ways that they think are more acceptable for males. Young men may act anxious, angry, hostile, or defiant toward others when they are actually depressed. If they do not deal with their anger, then they are more likely to take it out on themselves or others, sometimes through violence. Boys are much more likely than girls to be violent, accounting for roughly 80% of teen suicides (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000).

In part because of their focus on personal identity formation, adolescents tend to be very egocentric. If male adolescents assume a form of conventional masculinity that values concepts of stoicism and individuality, their youthful egocentrism may stagnate, thus limiting their ability to empathize and create healthy relationships with others (Forbes 2003).

Because traditional masculinity teaches males to be self-sufficient and stoic, young men may feel ashamed or humiliated when they recognize their need for emotional expression, support, and nurturance. Young men need strategies to help them recognize and understand their emotions so that they don’t become displaced as violent emotions such as anger or rage. Adolescent males can build their emotional literacy by learning how to identify others’ emotions as well as their own. In order to deal with their emotions, they must first be able to recognize them. They also need to understand the situations or reactions that produce their emotional states, especially if those feelings may eventually lead to violence. Becoming aware of their own emotions and developing empathy for others may help prevent male offenders from committing other crimes. Young men will share their emotions with themselves and others within the right environment. They must first feel that it is safe to do so. Boys need role models who share their emotions in order to see that it’s okay for men to be sensitive and emotionally honest with others.

Because young offenders form their moral reasoning over many years of experience, interventions are necessarily a long process. Staff should be aware that youth may have low self-esteem. In addition, they may experience difficulty identifying and understanding their emotions (Davis, 2000; Garbarino, 2000).
Therefore, intervention programs should begin by helping male teens identify and express their emotions in healthy ways. Understanding their own emotions is a necessary first step in understanding the emotions of others.

**Practical Applications for Teachers and Counselors**

- Provide a safe environment for students to share their feelings. Having male role models present who openly express their emotions can help students open up.
- Use writing exercises and small-group discussions to give students opportunities to identify their emotions and express themselves.
- Encourage reflection and meditation, both of which can be very beneficial in promoting self-awareness and recognition of emotions (Garbarino, 2000; Forbes, 2003).

**Literacy and Masculinity**

Because it is often linked more to toughness and physicality than intelligence, traditional masculinity is not usually associated with reading. For this reason, boys generally read less than girls. They also read different texts than girls, choosing more non-fiction, periodicals, and books about sports or hobbies. When choosing fiction texts, boys tend to read more escapist, fantasy, and science fiction books, as well as comics and graphic novels (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002). Yet boys should also have access to a wide range of materials so that they do not simply choose books that may glorify violence or portray stereotypic masculinity.

According to Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm (2002), the first step for teachers in motivating their students to learn and read is showing interest in them as individuals. In Smith and Wilhelm’s interviews with boys, the participants expressed that inspirational teachers should:

1. try to get to know students personally.
2. care about students as an individuals.
3. attend to students’ interests.
4. help students learn and work to check up on students.
5. be passionate committed, work hard, and know his or her stuff.

One way to show interest in students is to have students create personality profiles. These profiles can be in any form, including posters, portfolios, and short stories. The main purpose of personality profiles is to answer the question...
“Who am I?” Students can share their likes and dislikes, their personalities, and other things that are important to them. They can also be a good jumping off point for getting students to think why they like the things they like. Once students know more about each other and have established a sense of trust with their teacher, they will be more motivated to do schoolwork.

Group work can also be effective in motivating boys and fostering a sense of community in the classroom. Discussion groups based on certain texts, for example, can make reading a more social activity. Group work can also help students work together to explore and answer difficult questions about a text, giving all students a sense of accomplishment. To help maximize understanding of a text, teachers can also help students by frontloading. In other words, they can give background and discuss important aspects of a text before students read it, thus preparing them for what is to come. Frontloading can also give students more confidence when approaching a text and can help them recognize their competence before pushing themselves to learn more. Another way to help comprehension of a text is to integrate the work within a larger unit on a similar topic. Units should be structured around critical questions so that students’ reading and writing can be in service of genuine inquiry, stimulating their interest and curiosity. These units should be relevant to students’ lives, thus making the reading more important to them. Within these units, it is also possible to allow students choice of what they read. The units themselves can be based on student choice, in addition to the texts within the units.

In considering texts that might be attractive to boys, shorter texts may be more engaging. Because they are quicker and easier to read, short texts can help boost young men’s confidence by giving them a sense of accomplishment. Boys also like texts that are exportable, meaning they can relate the texts to other parts of their life, integrating them into conversation with the friends. More than anything else, texts should be relevant to their lives. When offering choices to young men in correctional facilities, teachers should offer texts that help them understand the negative effects of violence. Thus, teachers might reconsider popular action-adventure texts that glorify aggression or reinstate norms of traditional masculinity.

**Practical Applications for Teachers and Counselors**

- Make reading social by incorporating discussion groups and other forms of group work based on common readings.
- Create units based on topics of inquiry. Consider inquiry topics that can help the rehabilitation process.
Create units and select texts that are relevant to boys’ lives.

Allow boys to have some degree of choice in what they read. The more they are able to have a say in what they read, the more likely they are to read more.

Offer a wide variety of texts, and allow boys to choose books that suit their interest.

Assign texts of varying lengths, including shorter works to help students feel the accomplishment of finishing a text.

Incorporate personality profiles in lesson plans to help boys get to know each other and to show your interest in them.

Frontload to prepare students for the texts that they will read. Give them background, outlines or questions in advance so that they know what to look for.

Conclusion

In order to better serve male youth in correctional facilities, teachers, counselors, and researchers must understand young men’s relationship to dominant forms of masculinity. With this understanding, teachers and counselors must also help young men critically examine their own engagement with masculinity. Specifically, professionals and youth within correctional facilities must engage with the intersections of masculinity and violence, the social networks that positively and negatively affect young men, identity construction, emotional expression, and literacy in the lives of male youth. Through an analysis of incarcerated males as males, professionals in the field can foster a deeper understanding of the roots of violent and delinquent behavior in young men. If young men in the juvenile justice system examine their identity as men and adopt non-violent forms of masculinity, they will be less likely to engage in recidivist behavior.

References


**Biographical Sketch**

**ROBERT PLEASANTS** is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also works as Teen Services Coordinator for the Family Violence Prevention Center of Orange County, NC.