Of Morals and Masculinity: Scenario-Based Moral Education for Year 9 Boys

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Abstract

This action research investigated how educators can better equip our boys with a social and moral vocabulary to promote a more open, positive notion of masculinity. The research was conducted through scenario-based education in a Year 9 Virtute (form) class. In this forum, boys considered their understanding of morality and how this aligned with our school context at Westlake Boys High School. Specifically, we aligned morality with one of our six character virtutes: citizenship and social responsibility, or, as the boys put it, "being good to other people." Boys then participated in a series of lessons where they were given relevant, social scenarios that would challenge their own sense of masculinity and understanding of social responsibility. This practice was designed to not only have boys start to self-reflect on their own morality and social behaviour, but to equip our boys with the tools and confidence to negotiate difficult social situations going forward, ultimately making them more considerate citizens in the future. The ultimate value of this pedagogy was found in the last stage of the project when the boys came up with their own scenarios to discuss and decipher. In this way, boys contributed social scenarios that they were already struggling with, or worried about encountering in the future, and could seek advice from their peers about the appropriate course of action. In doing so, the boys were shattering masculine stereotypes in two ways by freely articulating their concerns and emotions to their peers and consciously trying to improve themselves as conscientious moral citizens. Through discussion-based solving of scenarios, it wasn't the teacher who was responsible for didactically teaching morality. Rather, boys were given the agency to model the types of positive masculinity they wanted to see in themselves and others.

Glossary

Virtute Class: The Westlake Boys High School version of form class or homeroom. When the project was conducted, these classes had 17 students of the same year level and there were two periods a week of Virtute class: one 15-minute admin period on a Monday morning and one 35-minute period on a Friday morning.

Scenario-Based Teaching: In a series of Virtute lessons, the boys discussed morally and socially complex scenarios/experiences. They then analysed these independently before discussing different responses as a class. Scenarios were a mixture of quite generic experiences as well as specific scenarios the boys were likely to encounter or had already encountered.

Positive Social Responsibility: Refers to the aspect of positive masculinity that was the focus of this research. It refers to students considering the morally or socially correct outcomes of different scenarios presented to them.

Year 9: Refers to the year level of the students involved in the research. They are 13- to 14-year-old boys.

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Research Question: How can analysing morally complex scenarios in Year 9 mentor time influence boys' understanding of positive social responsibility?

We can no longer have our teaching of character be in siloed, eureka moments. Instead, we need to be intentional and explicit about how we are guiding boys through difficult conversations and experiences. This project hoped to increase boys' ability to discuss socially and morally complex situations. It focused on our youngest year level (Year 9) to see how we could encourage the development of particular values within them from a formative age and then track this throughout their secondary school journey.

Action research was most appropriate for this project, as the research topic is something that won't be "solved" through one round of research. This study will need cyclical revision and evaluation – notions that action research explicitly caters to (Mertler, 2020).

Literature Review

Masculinity in the 21st century is still too often defined by notions of machismo "where men have been conditioned, if not outright mandated to be seen as strong, rugged, and as masculine as possible." (Watson, 2021, para. 2). Unfortunately, such negative ideals are influencing our boys in increasingly negative ways (Watson, 2021, para. 4). Subsequently, our boys are growing up in the shadow of toxicity, trying to overcome a deficit bias in our cultural consciousness. As David Brooks (2015) states, however, our boys are not bad, they are simply "morally inarticulate" (p. 15).

To change the tide of toxicity, we need to provide our boys with a moral vocabulary and understanding. As Brooks (2015) further notes, this change need not be a radical pedagogical reform. Rather, it requires getting our boys to shift their mindset from the selfish "Big Me" (p. 6) that our 21st-century culture has unconsciously cultivated, towards young men who are socially responsible and whose outward generosity and compassion can offer a new, empathetic form of masculinity. Ryan (2022) recognises these traits as key features of moral education: "moral education refers to helping children acquire those virtues or moral habits that will help them

individually live good lives and at the same time become productive, contributing members of their communities" (para. 2). Therefore, morality and social responsibility are intrinsically connected. Furthermore, Ryan is suggesting morality is fluid and transient; it can be updated and revised in response to the ongoing adaptations in society.

As Schuitema et al. (2008) suggest, the lack of success in historical moral education programmes is not the result of devaluing its importance. Rather, a change of emphasis is required. It is the "how" of moral education, rather than the "what" or "why" that needs to be the focus. As educators, we cannot expect to create better men "simply by reading sermons or following abstract rules. Example is the best teacher. Moral improvement occurs most reliably when the heart is warmed." (Brooks, 2015, p. xv). Here, Brooks speaks to the need for example, or scenario-based learning, and the need for this kind of teaching to take place in an environment where boys feel valued and cared for.

In Garcia-Huidobro's (2018) research into the International Baccalaureate curriculum, he concluded that classroom teachers should be the ones assisting in the explicit delivery of morality, rather than leaving it to the co-curricular sphere. He emphasises the teacher as a role model who is trusted and respected by the students. This resonates with Quinlan's (2019) analysis of how Brown University is tackling toxic masculinity. Instead of discussing "what masculinity means … and how to have healthier relationships." (para. 4) in a wider classroom setting, Brown University uses intimate discussion groups led by mentors who are known to the students on a personal level. Brown (2021) reiterates the importance of establishing safe, intimate spaces where students are explicitly taught character competencies and further maintains that in order for this kind of education to be successful, there needs to be a specific time and space in school dedicated to moral education "where so much of their social world exists" (para. 6). Again, this is not a new idea, with earlier research foreshadowing the need for moral education to be built into the curriculum (Webb, 2007).

The time given to social and emotional learning (SEL) or moral education programmes needs to match its importance. Boys will only find value in such learning if schools demonstrate

it first. If we continue to silo such discussion into co-curricular groups, then we continue to fragment our understanding rather than foster school-wide knowledge and appreciation.

For mentor groups to be effective, the literature acknowledges the need for students to bring their own examples or scenarios to the table. Brooks (2011) discusses how "much unconscious learning is done through imitation," where teachers should be "thinking through problems" (p. 98) with students participating alongside. Similarly, Quinlan (2019) reinforces the need for students to bring their own experiences, fears, and "uncomfortable moments" (para. 5) to the discussion and seek advice from trusted peers and mentors as they work through actual problems together. Brown (2021) reiterates this idea, further linking moral issues with a sense of social responsibility by emphasising how education should focus on teaching boys how to navigate their "inner and social lives" (para. 6) and the complexities that arise in their social relationships. Myers (2016) also supports this notion, but takes it a step further, suggesting that in order to overcome the current "masculinity crisis" (para. 6) we shouldn't just be teaching our boys how to navigate their own experiences, we should also teach them to look outward, specifically into the world of feminism to become better social citizens. These research findings reaffirm that the emphasis of moral education should focus on relationships and social connectedness and positive social interaction, rather than purely introspective reactions to societal concerns.

While SEL curriculums and mentor-led discussion groups are now seemingly universal and growing in popularity (Wood, 2022), there aren't many examples of scenario-based moral education programmes within high school settings. Balakrishnan (2016) conducted a qualitative study of how a Malaysian school used scenario-based, real-world dilemmas to improve their moral education programme and found that "students were concerned about moral issues and values not found" (p. 3) in their current curriculum; thus, suggesting that the current curriculum didn't account for their changing 21st-century needs and problems. Examples of similar studies being conducted in a Western education system were not found; subsequently, it will be of interest to see whether the change in cultural perspective alters the

effectiveness of such a programme, given Balakrishnan notes that there was a "tension between traditional values and individual freedom" (p. 14) in a highly spiritual, Muslim society.

One aspect that was absent from Balakrishnan's (2016) study was giving students a process to overcome challenging real-life dilemmas. As Brooks (2011) notes, we all have a pattern in our decision-making processes: "First, we perceive a situation. Second, we use the power of reason to calculate whether taking this or that action is in our long-term interest. Third, we use the power of will to execute our decision." (p. 150). Instilling a decision-making framework such as this could enable our boys to decide on more conscientious solutions to the increasingly challenging social experiences they face on a daily basis.

Overall, it is clear that action research could provide the method of real-life scenarios as a means to teach moral education. This is due to the constructivist philosophy that underpins action research and the need for learners to become active participants in learning, rather than receive knowledge passively. Ultimately, students brought their own experiences and scenarios to the table and worked through these actively and collaboratively. By doing so, learners not only defined the parameters of a particular lesson, they actively redefined their understanding of morality specific to their own setting and their own concerns. Similarly, action research not only allowed, but necessitated, a reflective approach from me, the teacher; an imperative skill for an educator delivering such a complex and mutable programme.

Research Context

Westlake Boys High School is an all-boys state school located on Auckland's North Shore. At Westlake, we cater to a diverse cultural and economic community with boys attending from all across Auckland. New Zealand European and Asian students account for our largest demographic, while we also have strong Pasifika and Māori representation. Overall, we have 119 different ethnicities represented at Westlake. We are a perennially high-performing school both inside and outside of the classroom, but focus on ensuring success for all learners. Boys start at Year 9 (13-years old) and finish at Year 13 (18-years old).

The participants for this project were the sixteen Year 9 boys in my Virtute class. They were chosen due to their age and because I already had a relationship with them as their teacher–we had already spent 31 weeks together. The boys and their families were notified of the research and its details a month before it began via a letter home. Boys were informed in class and through a letter home that they had the opportunity to withdraw at any stage throughout the process. No student chose to opt out of the research and all families and students gave their consent to participate. Initials were used to replace boys' names in collected data and direct consent was given to include any visual representations of students in photos or videos.

The Action

Currently, our Virtute time includes a programme that involves some academic mentoring and unstructured time to follow up on the well-being of students. My research zeroed in on a specific element of the programme and the change that I introduced to my practice was the explicit teaching of morality and social responsibility through planned scenarios. Boys participated in a series of lessons where they were given relevant, social scenarios that would challenge their own sense of masculinity and understanding of social responsibility. Boys unpacked these scenarios independently, in pairs, and through class discussion. They were also given a framework to help them accurately assess the various complexities of the problem at hand before deciding on the best course of action. Finally, the last phase of the action had boys create their own scenarios, based on their own experiences or situations that they were worried about facing in the future. These were then anonymously submitted and shared with the class to unpack. Therefore, the action became a form of peer mentoring where boys helped each other solve difficult social scenarios they were either facing or could face in the future.

Data Collection

A mixed method approach was taken to data collection during this project. The data were primarily qualitative, based on teacher observation and student feedback. Moreover, there were never objectively "correct" answers for each scenario; therefore, boys did not receive grades for their work but instead received peer moderation and feedback which, as the data showed, contained far more significance than a grade ever could. However, some key quantitative data were gathered, primarily in the form of student surveys.

Data were collected in two broad categories: student voice/experience and teacher observation. Specifically, boys' voices were captured with pre-, during, and post-action surveys, student interviews, student reflection, written responses to scenarios, and student-created scenarios. Teacher observations were primarily recorded in my reflection journal each lesson and included quotes from the boys, comments on boys' reactions and behaviour, and interesting insights garnered. Student surveys were primarily conducted through Microsoft Forms, while the scenarios and boys' responses to scenarios were distributed via Microsoft OneNote. Interviews were conducted one-on-one in my office.

Once all data were collected, they were subsequently organised through a coding system and grouped by theme.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

My analysis revealed themes focused on: how the thoughtful discussion of moral scenarios can outweigh the supposed accuracy of the response; that one of the primary benefits of this pedagogy was how boys could understand and acknowledge a range of perspectives that developed their own empathy; and how the key barrier for boys' choosing the morally correct course of action in challenging scenarios is undoubtedly peer pressure and the maintenance of their social reputation.

Thoughtful Discussion Outweighs "Accuracy" of Response

Despite my not providing definitive answers to any scenario, 13 of the 16 boys indicated that the scenario-based approach made them more aware of their moral decision-making and social responsibility, while one student was unsure. No student recorded a negative response. Similarly, 11 of the 16 students indicated that not only did this learning make them more aware of their own responsibility to act morally, but they also stated that it would help them in their future decision-making when faced with a complex scenario.

In a post-action survey, of the 16 boys, 15 responses acknowledged that the greatest part of the programme was equipping them with the skills to navigate challenging experiences. One student stated that the best aspect was, "You learn life-like scenarios which will help you make better decisions in the future," while another commented that the action helped him, "learn how to deal with the situation in the right way." Thus, teaching boys *how to think* about the various factors of a complex moral decision was enough to make them feel more confident about making positive moral decisions in the future, without having to stipulate the "correct" course of action.

Invariably, not just focusing on the outcome, but the thought process as well, meant allowing boys time to think about morality and appropriate courses of action. It was through this "slowing down" of the decision-making that the most value was gained. This conclusion was supported in my reflections, where I noted that, "Most boys found that a model like 'Define, Determine, Decide' wasn't necessary, but did emphasise that it helped them slow down and think through the problem." The value, therefore, of introducing this model was not in the tool itself, but having a strategy that slowed down boys' decision-making."

Acknowledging Perspectives

If I didn't tell them the "correct" way to act morally, who would? The answer came from the boys themselves. Perceptively, one student acknowledged that the best aspect of the action was the insight into other people's perspectives: "Different people having different opinions on the same problem they face, indicating we will get to learn diverse solutions to act on a

problem." Another student echoed this sentiment, suggesting that the best aspect was "hearing other people's advice and what they would do." Through discussion-based problem-solving in the scenarios, the boys taught each other how to act responsibly, how to acknowledge other people's perspectives and emotions, and how to act in the best interests of each other. Again, it was noted how the boys were not articulating the need for teacher-directed answers. Rather, these insights show that the process of working through the problems together is more powerful than a solution offered by a teacher. This finding is not to suggest that the teacher's role was redundant in this action. Pre-teaching was needed to help define key concepts and establish procedures. This was evident in a pre- and post-survey of the first lesson. Before the lesson, only three boys knew what morality and social responsibility were; whereas, after the lesson, 11 out of the 12 boys surveyed suggested they had a clear understanding, with one boy unsure. This suggests that teacher direction and mediation are crucial when introducing potentially sensitive scenarios. Moreover, teachers are invariably role models, and modelling the type of thinking needed is important and requires teachers to work through their own cognitive processes with the rest of the class.

It is clear that real value and learning came from a discussion with peers due to the development of empathy and understanding. Explicit consideration of morality and the potential consequences of their actions helped the boys understand social responsibility and think more empathetically. One student summarised this nicely by stating how scenario-based learning helped him become more of an "upstander"–it wasn't about him learning how to sort out his own problems, but how, through discussion, he "learnt how to solve problems that might go against your morals." Of note, this boy is from a conservative cultural background and was initially uncomfortable when faced with some of the more challenging scenarios, such as one involving a homosexual student who was struggling with his identity. Regardless, he did exactly what he has articulated above and even though the "problem" went against his cultural values, his response was mature, empathetic, and one that had an amicable resolution as its goal.

The Influence of Reputation and Peer Pressure

After the first scenario was presented to the class, I noted in my journal that, "When I brought up the first scenario, all the boys found that the 'right' thing to do in this situation was easy–all were unanimous in their answers." This observation was supported in the post-lesson survey where 10 out of the 12 boys present noted that they have a strong sense of morality and always tried to do the right thing, while the same ratio believed that they have a strong sense of social responsibility and contributed positively to the school community. I witnessed this in their discussions and responses to the scenarios, further noting, "The really promising aspect of the introduction of Scenario 2 was that even though some boys were visibly uncomfortable, they not only were mature in their responses, but they certainly understood what the right courses of action were, namely, privacy, empathy, and understanding. All responses were of a supportive nature, regardless of personal feeling."

What then, prohibits boys from always acting in a positive way when faced with challenging social scenarios? The data were unequivocal: peer pressure and the maintenance of reputation. In the same survey as above, 11 out of 12 students admitted that, while they always want to do the right thing, they struggle to do so. Six of these students attributed the cause to either peer pressure or reputation (defined as what other people would think of them). Five other students stated that being afraid of consequences would stop them from acting morally, and, when asked to elaborate, their responses all acknowledged that they were afraid of social consequences (being isolated from friend groups and being called a snitch) and not punishments from teachers or parents. This notion was perceptively summarised during post-action interviews. When asked if the difficulty in moral decision-making was exclusive to boys, all responses indicated that it was due to the increased level of peer pressure boys experience. One student stated, "It's definitely harder for boys due to peer pressure." Another student was less definitive ascribing peer pressure solely to boys, but confidently stated: "Yes, because of peer pressure. Peer pressure can happen to both girls and boys, but it is more severe to boys."

Of course, this is not necessarily true, but it is significant that boys perceive it to be so, especially when they were not primed to consider peer pressure at all.

The findings above were corroborated by my own reflections after the first scenario was introduced. I noted, "While two boys were very confident that they would do the right thing, there were some boys who were honest that although they knew what the right course of action was, it would be hard to actually implement due to the social pressures."

Interestingly, the fear of social pressure or ostracism was reflected in the process of scenario-based education itself. Even though the majority of students believed that this type of education would help them in their future decision-making and that other students would benefit from such learning, only five out of the 16 surveyed said that they felt comfortable sharing their ideas with the class, with three students strongly disagreeing with this statement. Therefore, peer pressure was not just affecting their moral decision-making outside the classroom, but negatively influencing their ability to fully collaborate with peers inside the classroom.

Conclusions

Overall, it is clear that scenario-based moral education can increase boys' understanding of social responsibility. This research demonstrated that, generally, boys know what the moral course of action is in challenging scenarios. Furthermore, they want to do the right thing. The difficulty for our boys is when the right course of action conflicts with their preconceived notions of masculinity. Moral judgement faltered when boys fell into hypermasculine stereotypes; when they felt their reputation was at stake, when they felt like emotional reticence and physical strength were more valuable than empathy and patience. By discussing scenarios where these notions of masculinity were challenged, we, as a collective, were able to reaffirm a positive masculinity that prioritised social responsibility over personal pride. I initially expected boys to reject this idea or dismiss it as "teacher speak": something we were forcing upon them. Instead, for the most part, they embraced it. My belief is that many of the boys actually felt relieved that we were debunking antiquated notions of masculinity that

celebrated bravado and machismo. This was certainly evident in the final stage of the project where boys shared their own scenarios, as most of these focused on how boys could act in an empathetic manner without seeming effeminate.

Importantly, it was clear that if we approach masculinity from a deficit perspective, then immediately boys will get defensive. This is where the framing of my action was so important. Since we defined masculinity stereotypes as something as both good and bad; as something that can help and hinder, the boys weren't feeling attacked or felt like this project was acting as a remedial, didactic lesson. In many scenarios we embraced masculine stereotypes that are often seen as negative but reframed them as tools that could help mediate a difficult issue, depending on the scenario. For example, some scenarios called for approaches where displaying resilience in the face of adversity was a more appropriate action than immediately seeking help, or when confronting an issue boldly was more appropriate than waiting for further support. Boys didn't want to be told that their perceptions of masculinity were wrong, they wanted to be encouraged to improve, not correct. By discussing morally complex scenarios, we could have these kinds of conversations and critique what skills and values our boys would need to utilise for a range of different situations, rather than upholding one paragon of masculinity.

This project showed me that we can't approach masculinity with a binary mindset, that our boys have either the option of a laconic, stoic version of masculinity that is often much maligned, or a sensitive version of masculinity that celebrates the sharing of insecurities and emotions. Masculinity is complicated and fluid. It has different connotations and definitions to different people. Therefore, by discussing complicated and fluid scenarios, this project has encouraged boys to bring different masculine strengths to different problems. The common denominator that underpins this fluidity, however, is the concept of social responsibility. This is what the boys constantly came back to; that whatever decision they made, it had to be for the benefit of others. If empathy and social responsibility underpin their moral decision making, then regardless of which types of masculinity they value, our boys will learn to be more considerate men.

In this regard, I don't think the boys underwent a revolutionary change. They didn't all of a sudden become moral exemplars and always do the right thing in every circumstance. What this project has provided, is a change in how they approach such circumstances and the kinds of considerations they will make before acting, rather than rashly deciding on a course of action that is counter to who they are as a person and what they value. This is exactly what I had observed working with the students throughout this process. By discussing these scenarios I have seen the boys become more critical in their decision making when I've given them more difficult scenarios. They really, genuinely start to consider all aspects of a scenario, rather than rushing to a conclusion. They acknowledge the potential consequences of their actions and specifically how this can harm other people. Furthermore, by the end of the action research, my role was very minor. It was the boys who were mediating each other, reminding each other of possible consequences that could have been overlooked or intervening when a questionable decision was suggested. I became more of an observer than an instructor by this point, which again speaks to the fact that these boys know how to make good, moral decisions, they simply need dedicated time and space to discuss morality together.

Subsequently, this research will have a significant impact on my own future practice. In my portfolio as an Assistant Principal with responsibility for pastoral care and well-being, I am always searching for ways we can better support our boys in their journey to become good men. As aforementioned, a school-wide programme such as this would ensure all boys have access to explicit moral education, rather than this being dependent on which teacher(s) they have.

The plan for 2023 is to roll this out to all Year 9 students in our Term 4 Virtute programme. The programme would be an eight-week course for all 552 Year 9s to complete. Before it is implemented, though, there are a few adjustments to make. The first would be in refining the 3Ds (Define, Determine, Decide) model that helps boys work through the complexity of the scenario they are given. Some kind of framework or strategy is necessary, as mentioned previously, yet the 3Ds strategy seemed to limit engagement at times as some boys found it too laborious. The solution would be a simpler, refined framework.

Secondly, while this is primarily student-driven pedagogy, the role of the teacher shouldn't be forgotten or marginalised. However, it is important that teachers acknowledge their own ethical or cultural biases to ensure they aren't didactically projecting their own agendas onto the students. Where this approach could go wrong is when the teacher becomes the arbiter of morality and instructs, rather than guides. When students have concerning notions that counter our understanding of positive masculinity, it is important to question positively and help them see differing perspectives, rather than dismiss or denounce boys' opinions. This can be challenging for staff, but it is a challenge we need to embrace if we want to help facilitate positive change. Staff training would need to occur before asking teachers to lead this.

While the success of such a programme is hard to quantify, the next step in action research would be investigating the impact this education has on Year 9 as a cohort and their behaviours in the school community. After refining the programme and extending it to the whole year level, it would be pertinent to first collate data in much the same way as I have done here, but on a wider scale to see if my experience is reflective of the wider cohort. Furthermore, it would then be interesting to see how this impacts the wider school community in terms of the number of bullying incidents recorded, the number of boys who commit to charity-based projects and if staff observe any discernible change in boys' behaviour when interacting with their peers. The next action research cycle would attempt to assess behaviour, rather than understanding. After extending the scope of this action research, could boys act in a more socially responsible manner and be more empathetic to their peers?

Reflection Statement

Ultimately, this action research affirms Brooks' (2015) sentiment that boys aren't bad, they're simply, at times, morally inarticulate. Upon reflection, I'd take this notion one step further and posit that it is not just the articulation of morality that boys need to become better men. Rather, boys need to *practise* morality; they need to train for it as they would a sport or a subject. Ideally, a sense of strong morality becomes ingrained and positive social action becomes automatic. This won't, however, be accomplished through sporadic, informal teaching of character.

As educators of boys, we need to consistently and intentionally teach morality as we would Mathematics, English, or Science. In these subjects, it is not just concepts and theory that are taught. Concepts and theory are introduced and then buttressed by actual problems, questions, and analyses. This is where scenario-based moral education has shown to be valuable. Rather than instructing and theorising about what makes a good, socially responsible man, boys have the opportunity to problem-solve, analyse a situation, question their own sense of right and wrong and, perhaps most importantly, to hypothetically place themselves in other people's shoes to find a positive solution to a challenging scenario.

Perhaps the most pleasing aspect of this research is that I was surprised at how morally intelligent my students already were. Scenarios that I thought would challenge were deflated with ease. One particularly awkward scenario involving the disclosing of homosexuality was dismissed with, "How is this even a problem, sir?" Moments like these inflate me with pride for my students, while simultaneously filling me with guilt that I am surprised by their maturity. This action research has affirmed my belief that negative masculinity is often not an individual trait; it is born from a negative collective. We don't need to teach a boy to become a good man, we need to teach a group of boys to become better men, together.

Finally, I extend my greatest thanks to those who made this action possible. Firstly, thank you to The International Boys School Coalition for continuing to run this programme.

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