



# Locating Significance

## IN THE LIVES OF BOYS

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# Introduction

**For more than a decade**, the education of boys has been subjected to intense scrutiny. We have wanted to know how boys are different, why they are, and what implications these differences have for teaching practice. With due rigor, the learning differences of boys have been studied, dissected, and measured. Looking beyond differences, the cognitive and social difficulties of boys have also borne the weight of examination and debate. Throughout these inquiries, real boys have been examined and compared with a subconscious projection of the “ideal boy,” even while the attributes and parameters of the ideal boy are conspicuously vague. Although the preponderance of inquiry has been well intended, a decade of study has not been without consequences. Scrutinizing the differences of boys has at times diminished their natural strengths, and the scope of boys’ prospective contributions to the world at large.

Recognizing the need for a new type and level of investigation, the International Boys’ Schools Coalition has funded and helped to coordinate a global research project on where and how boys discover significance in their lives. There are many things to be learned from such a study, but most fundamentally, the IBSC’s commitment to a qualitative research methodology signals an interest in probing for depth and significance through the live voices of boys. This report is the culmination of a unique and unprecedented endeavor to interview boys worldwide in the interest of discovering and revealing where they find significance and discover purpose in their lives. The interviews (which I often refer to as dialogues) that formed this research initiative constitute an international inquiry into boys’ interests, spirit, and prospective contributions to society at large.

This research began with a core belief: *boys are capable of doing extraordinary things, and are eager to be asked to do things which are significant to them.* This belief invites a new plateau of discussion, shifting emphasis from what’s wrong with boys to what is well, and full of possibility. Specifically, this study has sought to illuminate those aspects of boys’ lives that are transcendent, and that point them toward the type of self-realization that is the foundation of identity, achievement, and wellbeing.

This endeavor has required a careful parsing of what is significant from what is ubiquitous. The excavation of significance requires more than attention to what is commonplace or universal in boys’ lives. Aspects of boyhood which are universal are not necessarily transcendent. By extension, rare and exceptional experiences might dramatically emerge as the platform on which a life pivots. In seeking to locate significance, we are required to suspend our assumptions about what is both essential and peripheral to boys. And by engaging qualitative analysis we equip ourselves for a journey toward selfhood and a more complete vision of boyhood; one that is propelled by boys’ minds and voices.

*Significance implies meaning and value beyond the immediacy of the moment; experiences that shape boys’ minds through the power of insight, inspiration, and meaningful changes in their subjective perspectives of themselves and the world.* Because these experiences might also be thought of as simply “important,” a clarification is in order. Something important stands on its own (completing

university applications, getting a job, etc.). Something significant symbolizes a whole beyond itself; a synecdoche of life's self-defined purpose (e.g., how a task makes a boy feel useful and proud—willing to extend himself because the task resonates with meaning). *Without understanding what is significant, our beliefs about what is important risk being ungrounded. Our advice and instruction are more powerful when guided by the force of meaning and priority in boys' lives, as described by boys.*

Listening to how and where boys locate significance is essential to understanding how they value themselves and their various endeavors. By mapping these roads to significance, it is hoped that the global community of educators, mentors, coaches, and others invested in boys' development will be ready to orchestrate and optimize boys' discovery of significance.

The momentum for this inquiry flows from two streams of knowledge. First, as the author of two books, *Boys of Few Words: Raising Our Sons to Communicate and Connect*, and, *No Mind Left Behind: Understanding and Fostering Executive Control — The Eight Essential Brain Skills Every Child Needs to Thrive*, I have spent considerable time contemplating the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of boys. The current project seeks insight that is complementary to what has thus far been studied and learned about boys. More explicitly, it asserts the necessity of educating the whole boy, and in that regard has a decidedly holistic orientation to understanding boys' developmental needs. Second, having spent my career as a clinical psychologist working with boys, and having had substantial opportunity to visit and confer with schools, the importance of boys' motivation—its relevance to school and families alike—is plain to see. Wherever boys are educated, those who educate them recognize how pivotal boys' engagement is in helping them to fulfill their promise as students and human beings.

The genesis of this global study was a series of discussions with IBSC's Executive Director, Brad Adams, begun in 2008 while traveling across Australia to present professional development programs for IBSC schools, and evening lectures for those school's parent communities. It was during this trip that I began to sense an emerging and powerful need in the lives of boys everywhere. It seemed to me that boys were hungry for something that wasn't routinely provided within the course of their education or family life. My belief was, and is, that this is a need for *significance*—an opportunity for boys to find transcendence in some type of activity.

In particular, a chance meeting with senior school boys at Brighton Grammar School in Melbourne confirmed how focused and engaged boys can become when questions of *purpose* and *destiny* are posed to them. During the past decade of clinical work, I'd witnessed elements of this phenomenon in my work with boys and families. It had always seemed to me that the deeper, sustainable happiness of boys relied less on receiving supportive concern for their "problems," than a willingness to entertain an alternative approach to how to live life—with unequivocal purpose and belief in life's possibilities. To that end, my recent work with boys has revolved around a singular question—how is the fire of belief ignited?

While we probed these themes, the elements of a qualitative research study began to emerge. It seemed obvious that IBSC schools would be fertile ground for a study that delineated the existential themes that wind through boys' lives. As we continued this discussion over the next year, Brad and I agreed that the study's data should be principally derived from a dialogue with boys between the ages of 12–18, but also make space for conversation with younger boys (9–11). In addition, we agreed that those discussions should be international in scope to capture the nexus between a boy's socio-cultural environment and his education.

By making dialogue with boys the chief form of data collection, this study sets itself apart from most research of the past decade in two distinct ways. For one, the study is primarily concerned with what *boys themselves* say about their lives, and how they describe the pursuit of life purpose. In that regard, the data are essentially bits and pieces of narrative that rise to the surface following hours of focused exchange. Second, this research was not undertaken with any specific agenda for changing boy's lives. Instead, it presumes that boys, and their needs, are evolving. As the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould often noted, evolution does not imply improvement, but rests on the necessity of continuous adaptation. To that end, the current study is far less concerned with how to "improve boys" than it is with how boys construct and discover meaning in their lives. Within the fields of philosophy and psychology, this type of subjective inquiry is most often referred to as phenomenology. It is a form of qualitative inquiry that has deep roots in the exploration of human nature, and one which values the study of another's subjective experience as a meaningful research encounter, in and of itself.

Does this mean that this study's data cannot or should not be used to inform the teaching of boys or foster their development? To the contrary, it is hoped that the findings of this study will work their way into pedagogy, school priorities, and educational philosophy worldwide. Wherever the findings of this report are discussed, it is hoped that those discussions will include a deeper understanding of what boys themselves value about growing up and going to school.

For example, encouraging boys to exert effort equal to their potential is an objective shared by a great many educators and allied professionals. As we begin to appreciate that the effort of boys is contingent upon the extent to which their daily lives incorporate their most significant ideals, it's imperative that we understand what those ideals might be. As we will see, *closing the gap between boys' idealized selves and their student selves is a powerful spark that ignites the spirit of boys*. The proximity of a boy's ideals to the practical realities of his life is directly proportional to his sense of purpose. Until that congruity is realized, the requirements of school and life often feel like an encumbrance to boys, leading to problems with effort and satisfaction.

In keeping with the genesis and theme of this report, *every effort will be made to reframe boys "motivation" as spirit*. This research has sought to understand the spiritual lives of boys in the broadest possible sense. Small semantic differences can have an enormous effect on how we think about people and the forces that compel their behavior. In my view, the discussion of motivation that has dominated writing on boys over the last decade has had the effect of reducing our relationship with boys to one of stimulus and response. Framing boys' behavior to an issue of motivation unnecessarily reduces them to being "subjects," and obstructs a deeper understanding of their spiritual essence. Surely, our interest is far more complex than knowing how to stimulate a particular response. Behaviorally focused studies certainly have their place in the relevant literature on boys, but here, where significance is the operative theme, it seems far more appropriate to be focused on the spirit of boys, than merely their motivation.

Along with semantic differences, this study suggests reconsideration of how we apply science in our work with boys. If study of the brain has shown us how boys learn, should it also tell us what boys should learn? Following nearly two decades of "brain-based education" we might reasonably wonder if we are asking too much of neuroscience, or if by chance we have enabled the ascendance of neuroscience by forgetting to assert the authority of education in conceiving what shape



students' minds should take. Making a theme like significance an investigative priority implies a new relationship between science and education, and indeed between science and civilization.

A fundamental premise of the study is that while brain science may be an enormous aid in helping us to achieve our goals with boys, it is in no way a substitute for thoughtful analysis of what those goals should be. Now more than ever, educators are called to ponder and clarify the deepest needs of boys in the interest of providing a truly transformational education. What social institution better represents the ideals of civilization than school? As we collectively work to make boys' schools dynamic entities that serve the changing needs of boys, let us fully grasp our responsibility to forge clear values based on what boys tell us is transcendent to them. Far from being an academic exercise, this pursuit is at the heart of a civil society.

I believe that transformational educators are more than great teachers, they are the seers who recognize seeds of destiny within boys of all types. Helping boys to hear the call of their own spirit, and encouraging them to act on that voice puts the challenge of 21st century education in its proper perspective. *Activating spirit is less a problem of exciting boys to do what others believe are their priorities, than helping boys listen to what already pulls them forward with intensity and vigor.* Where such intensity is absent, the architecture of a boy's ideals lacks structure.

Of course the solution to such circumstances has more to do with locating and reinforcing significance, than even the most sophisticated system of incentives. And before we assume this approach is only a matter of concern with respect to individuals, we should ask ourselves whether economies comprised of people who bypassed purpose in the quest for gainful employment are actually sustainable? As we educate and graduate a generation of boys, many of whom will face economic tumult, what will the legacy of an IBSC education be? It is my hope that we will have helped boys to understand the importance of *congruity* in their lives.

Congruity harkens back to what Greek Stoics referred to as *pneuma*—the “breath of life” that spurs vitality and animates a passion for living. Helping boys to connect with this vitality is an auspicious sign of a healthy community and a purposeful economy. This is a connection which accurately locates economic success as the product of happiness and vitality, rather than positing psychological wellbeing as contingent upon first “taking care of business.”

Boys are now challenged to be patient with an educational process that goes on for many years beyond the point at which they are eager to assume greater self-definition. An education that sufficiently prepares one to enter the market of desirable jobs requires boys to remain relatively passive for years beyond the point at which they are ready and willing to have a purpose to the world around them. If purpose implies contribution, as I think it does, then a central question to contemporary discussion of boys is what sort of contribution should they make—can they make?

Boys themselves also seem to be wrestling with this question. From the perspective of adulthood, it can be easy to forget that children and adolescents tend to regard their life experiences as a kind of standard canon of childhood. It is not until most people become adults that we can meaningfully reflect on what we have done or haven't done in our lives. Boys need adults to guide them toward a broad understanding of possibilities. Examining all dimensions of possibility ensures that the great variety of boys in IBSC schools will have their destinies recognized and validated. This action on the part of schools is non-negotiable if we are to move boys closer to fulfilling their individual promise.

A major part of that promise lies in navigating the realm of work and vocational identity. Boys sense the significance of work as adolescence approaches. This is an ancient sensibility that springs from an awareness that a cornerstone of manhood is being useful and needed. Work, as distinct from labor, serves as a primary pathway to significance because it bestows a tangible sense of worth, service, and potentially, craft. The distinction between labor and work is as timeless as the notion of freedom. More than one hundred years ago, the African-American educational reformer Booker T. Washington explained the difference succinctly: “Being worked means degradation, while working means civilization.” This study embraces the relationship between meaningful work and a civil society, and seeks to chart a course for how schools might include that perspective in educating and raising boys.

Opportunities to acquire craftsmanship have been an essential element of the male adolescent passage for millennia, but are now conspicuously absent almost everywhere. Even so, the experience of craft remains fundamental to helping boys assimilate beauty in their lives. Not simply the beauty of a well-made object, but the very possibility of living a beautiful, well designed life. In my view, this is endemic to a purposeful life; a life that incorporates creative work springs from identity, ideals, and the search for one’s destiny.

With respect to contemporary boys, creative work must be understood broadly. It need not be overtly aesthetic, but it must express those elements of being upon which boys pin their esteem. Employing creativity in the interest of discovering transcendence is an archetypal passage in boys’ lives. It reflects elements of boys’ literature, including the desire to be magical, powerful, and in control—the essence of mastery. When approached strategically, creative work also invites the cross-pollination of ideas, enabling boys to apply what they have learned in one context to solving problems in another.

By focusing on propensities such as this, then, we signal a change of course in our quest to know boys. This new direction promises to draw us close to the gifts and promises of boys, rather than their liabilities. And with this revised focus at the forefront of our relationship with boys, we can certainly expect the collaborative aspects of those relationships to evolve, including the exploration of life’s purpose.

We can potentially show boys that *happiness* (deep satisfaction with the shape of one’s life) and *fulfillment*—more resonant, boy-centered terms than “success”—are found not by choosing what to do with one’s life from a menu of arbitrary choices, but by listening for one’s calling. It is essential to know the extent to which boys believe in their own destiny, and from what life experiences those precepts are derived. The answers to these questions shed light on the evolution of boyhood, and should contribute to the evolution of education as well.

Finding significance is also at the heart of a boy’s capacity for empathy—his capacity for a life of compassion and civility. Boys do not easily construct such capability in a world that bombards them with a continuous stream of electronic stimulation—and its concomitant images of power and success, divorced from significance. While boys seem to have become experts at having fun, one wonders if their fun ultimately leads them toward happiness, or even compels awareness of the social orbits of others. This study offers insight into how important social perception is in boys’ lives, and underscores that social efficacy is at the heart of boys’ confidence and personal agency.



The dialogues that have been the centerpiece of this study provide a treasure trove of information and point to five major dimensions with respect to where and how boys discover significance in their lives: *Becoming Myself*, *Belonging and Influence*, *Pragmatic Transcendence*, *Real-Time Achievement*, *Origins and Tradition*. Each of these dimensions has been identified following analysis of hours of conversation with boys, and each will be explained thoroughly in the text to follow. As you will find, within these dimensions are sub-themes that tell us much about how boys think, and especially what they are thinking about.

If we are to engage the spirit of boys, we must embrace the powerful developmental needs that may not be addressed within the context of school as it now exists. Moving toward a more holistic understanding of boys ensures that we capture what is effective and positive in their lives, as well as what might need greater elaboration. *Ultimately, it is the minds of boys that are the centerpiece of this study.* As the streams of significance in boys' lives emerge, we as listeners, and they as speakers, are changed by the words that materialize. It is simply impossible to observe boys without in some way changing them. Although this effect is always a concern for social science research, I've come to view this phenomenon as an experiential benefit of the present study. If the data collected contribute to how adults think about and respond to boyhood, then why shouldn't the process of collecting that data have had immediate benefits for the boys who provided it?

From this perspective, the dialogues themselves are equal in significance to the data they have produced. In the end, the dialogues that comprise this study are part of a single continuous discussion stretching across oceans and continents. By extension, the effects of this study on the minds of boys took root the very first time I sat down with them to talk.

A unique aspect of the study has been the opportunity to talk to boys from around the world. It would seem that such experiences invite cross-cultural comparison. Yet a key finding of this research has to do with how much boys have in common. Specifically, the further that boys move from the context of the school day, the more they have in common with each other. Where meaningful differences exist, they are noted and discussed. Yet having spent two years on these dialogues, and having analyzed many hours of conversation, I feel confident in asserting that the commonalities of significance are much more robust than extant differences.

This notion should give us confidence in moving forward with some of the suggestions made at the end of this report, wherever one might live, and with the great variety of boys one might hope to educate. This idea reminds us that boyhood itself is at the center of this study. When boys are encouraged to speak directly from that center we can hear a resonant collective voice. Having listened to hundreds of boys make their thoughts and perspectives known I have come to understand that they are more sure about their passions and hopes than either they, or we, realize.

Although I was charged with leading these dialogues, in the end it was my job to follow the tracks left by boys' words. This report is an attempt to decode the themes of this journey. A study such as this can never truly be "finished" in any real sense. The origins of significance today are surely somewhat different than they might be for generations to come. However, I believe that what follows is a fair representation of what contemporary boys find purposeful and significant in their lives.

I heartily thank the participating schools for their patience with the logistical requirements of this project, and their willingness to host a raucous "Strength and Honor" assembly address. My thanks

also go to teachers for their insights and their willingness to lend me students for hours at a time. Mostly, I thank the boys themselves for their enthusiasm and full participation—for every question posed there was an avalanche of replies.

Finally, I am profoundly grateful to the IBSC for giving me the opportunity to study boys' lives in such a unique way, and in such depth. Like many of you, I have spent the better part of my career helping, teaching, and developing boys. The breadth of those experiences tend to instill professional confidence, yet this study has been an opportunity to test the limits of my knowledge and the shape of my compassion. Only in risking to venture toward a new horizon have I been able to gently upset my own assumptions about boys. It has been a privilege to have time and space to engage uncertainty in my life, and even more so because that quest has brought me conversations closer to my own purpose and significance.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Qualitative Research Method

**This project is a qualitative study** based on interviews with boys and teachers at selected IBSC member schools. In qualitative research, insights are drawn from an in-depth analysis of the commentary of research participants, and often include quotations. Qualitative approaches to research have a tendency to focus on “how” questions to a greater extent than “what” questions. For example, quantitative methods might measure and contrast which experiences have had the greatest effect on boys’ lives, but a qualitative inquiry can potentially illuminate the psychological and social dynamics that cause those experiences to be powerful.

This project investigates the emotional and cognitive origins of significance in boys’ lives. Data were collected through interviews/dialogues with boys and select teaching staff over the course of a two-day school visit. The interviews were structured by standardized sets of questions, designed according to the guidelines of qualitative study. Research data were organized and analyzed according to theme and relevant findings. When doing qualitative research, it is customary to collect data until one has reached the point of *data saturation*. This saturation occurs when one is no longer hearing or seeing new information. In contrast with quantitative research, which may not be analyzed until the end of a study, qualitative data can be analyzed throughout the study.

There are at least five distinct approaches to doing qualitative research. The present study integrates elements of three separate approaches: *narrative*, *phenomenological*, and *grounded theory*. Each of these approaches offers a valuable element to the current study, and diffusion of these approaches enables data to be compiled, analyzed, and interpreted from several theoretical perspectives. First, a narrative approach emphasizes story or plot line. With respect to the current study, the story becomes important to understanding how significance develops over time and how that development corresponds to other narratives in boys’ lives. Second, a phenomenological approach lives at the heart of this study, insofar as this research has sought to capture the “world according to boys.” Throughout this research, boys have been encouraged to speak openly and with great subjectivity. It has been especially important that boys feel encouraged to discuss meaning in their lives to the extent that some of the dialogues evolve into discussion of life philosophies. Third, grounded theory offers the potential to employ data to construct a viable theory. The advantage of “grounded theory” is that any theoretical framework which might emerge from this research springs from direct interaction with boys. In addition, grounded theory is particularly useful and valid with respect to generating recommendations.

Qualitative research is more than a unique approach to data collection. It is a research method that also embraces a different type of interaction between researcher and subject, and which acknowledges the role of the research setting. Specific elements of qualitative research worth noting include:

- Natural setting (schools)
- Emphasis on the meaning of participant’s commentary

- Acknowledgment that the researcher himself was a key “instrument” of the study (i.e., how questions were presented and processed affected the course of a conversation)
- An inherently interpretive method, given that data were derived primarily from conversation
- Holistic approach to data interpretation inclusive of many aspects of boys’ experience.

## Schools Visited

The twenty schools participating in this study were chosen by IBSC’s Executive Director, Brad Adams, whose selections are intended to represent the breadth of IBSC member schools. The twenty schools, in the order they were visited, are as follows:

<b>The Fenn School</b> Concord, Massachusetts, USA	November, 2009
<b>Neil McNeil High School</b> Toronto, Ontario, Canada	November, 2009
<b>The Boys’ Latin School of Maryland</b> Baltimore, Maryland, USA	December, 2009
<b>Landon School</b> Bethesda, Maryland, USA	January, 2010
<b>St. George’s School</b> Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada	February 2010
<b>John Hampden Grammar School</b> High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, UK	March, 2010
<b>Poole Grammar School</b> Poole, Dorset, UK	March, 2010
<b>Washington Jesuit Academy</b> Washington, DC, USA	June, 2010
<b>Brighton Grammar School</b> Melbourne, Victoria, Australia	October, 2010
<b>St. Joseph’s College</b> Geelong, Victoria, Australia	October, 2010
<b>Sydney Church of England Grammar School</b> Sydney, New South Wales, Australia	October, 2010
<b>Anglican Church Grammar School</b> Brisbane, Queensland, Australia	October, 2010
<b>Christ’s College</b> Christchurch, New Zealand	October, 2010
<b>Wellington College</b> Wellington, New Zealand	October, 2010
<b>St. Joseph’s Institution</b> Singapore	October, 2010

<b>The Eagle Academy for Young Men</b> Bronx, New York, USA	December, 2010
<b>South African College High School</b> Cape Town, South Africa	March, 2011
<b>Maritzburg College</b> Pietermaritzburg, South Africa	March, 2011
<b>St. John's College</b> Johannesburg, South Africa	March, 2011
<b>The Ridge School</b> Johannesburg, South Africa	March, 2011

## Construction of Interview Questions

The preparation of interview questions began several months before the beginning of school visits. It was recognized that with limited time, questions needed to probe relevant areas of interest in a productive manner. Conceptually, it seemed unlikely that boys would engage abstract or vague questions about what purpose or significance means to them. Consequently, an interview strategy of addressing specific experiential and moral issues in boys' lives was adopted. It was hoped that this approach would yield fruitful discussion and candor, and would invite the greatest possible variety of boys to robustly participate in the dialogues. As the dialogues progressed it became clear that some questions were more productive and engaging than others. In addition, some questions tended to elicit a high degree of consensus. It was decided that it was less useful to repeat those questions during subsequent school visits than to modify the questions in the interest of broadening the data set.

Although small revisions were made to the question list from one school visit to another, three more substantive sets of revisions were made during various phases of the project. This was not believed to be problematic because the intention of the study was not to focus on comparisons between boys and schools, but rather to emphasize the collective insights of boys, and to be as inclusive as possible in summarizing those perspectives.

A study on a theme as philosophical as "significance" has wide parameters. This study recognizes the inevitable role of the researcher in framing study data. However, it is also asserted that diverse avenues of response were encouraged and engaged, especially those that were unanticipated at the onset of the study. It was made clear to boys at the outset of every dialogue that discussions such as these involve no right or wrong answers; the priority required was to speak honestly and in depth about what was relevant to them.

### Sample questions—student dialogues

- Is there a difference between a life of significance and a life of achievement?
- What's your greatest fear of failure?
- Let's say you had to pick one thing others would notice about you, what would it be?
- How realistic is school? Does it prepare you for real life?
- Have you ever had a teacher you wanted to be like? How?

- My relationship with girls has taught me \_\_\_\_\_ about myself?
- If I could change the world in some way, I would \_\_\_\_\_?
- Compared to other boys, do you know more or less about your purpose in life?
- What role does creativity play in your life?
- Which do you value more, your opinions or your emotions?
- Are you more sure of what you are good at or what you are interested in?
- Does it matter to you if your life and work are of benefit to others?
- After economic safety, what is the value of your education?
- Should boys be judged more by their intentions or actions?
- What's the one thing you regret about your childhood?
- I never, always, occasionally worry about the future? Why?
- Is there any such thing as a selfless act?
- What have you learned from your father?
- How has your mother influenced your life?
- Do you believe in God?
- Can God and science coexist?
- Rank these things in order of importance: Power, Status, Winning, Grades, Happiness
- Are you spiritual? How has that shaped your sense of purpose?
- What does it mean to say a boy has become a man?

#### Sample questions—faculty dialogues

- What sorts of achievements matter most to boys?
- Rank these things in order of importance to boys: Power, Status, Winning, Grades, Happiness
- In what direction do you perceive boys' interests evolving?
- What role do aesthetics and craft play in boy's lives?
- What role does spirituality play in helping boys find their life purpose?

### Typical School Visit

Each school visited appointed an on-site coordinator to coordinate logistics, and to select boys for inclusion in the research. In addition to interviews with boys and staff, a two-day visit often included a short presentation at a school assembly where boys were given a brief orientation to the project. As a means of illustrating what was meant by significance, boys were introduced to the story of William Kamkwamba, an African boy from the country of Malawi, who is the subject of the best-selling book, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. (It is the story of the remarkable Kamkwamba who, at age 16 and barred from attending school due to his family's poverty, managed to build an electricity generating windmill for his village—from trash.) As a component of school visits, the project author provided a parent presentation on developing boys' social skills, which included background information on the genesis and findings of the current study.



**Research participants:** Boys were selected for the study based on age and availability. Each school coordinator was asked to select two groups of 12 boys each. Boys within each group were required to be within two years of age of each other to achieve a cohort with similar developmental experiences. Different age groups were randomly identified for study at various schools so that the study would eventually achieve a collection of perspectives from boys between the ages of 9–18. A total of 480 boys were interviewed, with the great majority of boys being between the ages of 12 and 17.

When selecting boys for the groups, site coordinators were asked to select students with different strengths and personalities. For example, it was made clear that the study was equally interested in students focused on academic achievement, athletics, social activities, etc. It was also indicated that quiet students would be as valuable to the dialogues as more extroverted students. During the second year of the study, schools were asked to include a cohort of students who had demonstrated some interest in the arts. It was believed that the experiences of these boys needed to be represented, and that too few of these students had been encountered in the first year. Inclusion in the arts in no way precluded the possibility that such boys were also keenly interested in other aspects of school life. Indeed many musicians, artists, and writers also proved to be excellent students, avid athletes, and social leaders. Teachers and other professional staff were often selected on the basis of availability due to busy teaching schedules, and the fact that interviews took place during the course of the school day. Most faculty dialogues included approximately 10–15 participants from a variety of academic departments.

**Dialogues:** The dialogues were conducted over the course of two days. On day one, each group of 12 boys was interviewed for 90 minutes. On day two, those groups were divided into smaller groups of 6, and interviewed for 30–45 minutes. The regrouping produced a different communication dynamic, enabling all students to have fair opportunity to express themselves. Throughout this study, boys proved to be eager respondents to inquiry. The interviews were guided by a standardized set of questions to allow for comparison between various groups. Where topics outside of questions emerged as important issues to boys, the dialogues were accommodating. To help boys relax, and to facilitate discussion, meetings were typically held in some sort of a conference room or meeting area, often with comfortable furniture and, always, with snacks.

Basic ground rules for the dialogues included: one's participation was entirely voluntary; boys were free to ask as well as answer questions; any boy was free to withdraw from the interviews at any time; the identity of students would be kept confidential; and excerpts of the interviews might be included as part of the final report, but no names or individual identifying characteristics would be included in any written material.

**Management of Personal Disclosure:** An effort was made to avoid asking questions that might be interpreted as personally intrusive. In addition, the atmosphere of the dialogues was kept collegial and conversational. Boys were typically supportive of one another with respect to giving each participant fair time to talk. In several cases, boys made an effort to communicate a personal conflict either by passing a note, or by asking for a few minutes of private conversation. As a professional psychologist, I assessed the seriousness of these situations on an individual basis and, where it seemed helpful, asked boys for permission to inform a school counselor of the situation. There were no instances of situations that mandated violation of confidentiality. Where psychological factors became an issue they typically pertained to parental divorce, death of a family member, or tension with another member of the school community.

**Data Collection:** This study's principal form of data collection was note-taking. In cases where boys were asked multiple choice questions, each boy in the group was asked for his response, and these responses were recorded sequentially. The clarity of written notes was enhanced by recorded audio done with a Smart Pen. This audio device records audio while synchronizing that audio with written notes in a dot-matrix notebook. The advantage of this approach was to be able to re-listen to the dialogues, and to hear the nuances of how boys expressed themselves. Unfortunately, the device proved to be somewhat unreliable, especially during the latter phase of the project. To compensate for these failures, more written notes were taken during conversation.

Occasionally, questions were posed that invited a "forced" response. Basically, boys were asked to answer "yes" or "no", or to select between several defined choices in response to a particular question. When such questions were asked, boys were polled according to a raise of hands, or by briefly inquiring of each member of a given group. In these cases, boys' responses were recorded, and these tallies are the basis of various percentages addressed in this report. However, not every question of this sort was asked at every school. As mentioned earlier, qualitative research tends to evolve and unfold over time. Still, where percentages are reported they are believed to be robust, and a solid indicator of boys' perspective at a sizable cohort of project schools.

**Six-word Memoirs:** During the middle phase of this project boys were asked to do a brief writing assignment at the conclusion of the second day of interviews. This writing project involved asking participants to write their memoir in six words. This aspect of the research was inspired by seeing the results of this same task posted in the library of the Fenn School, during the first school visit of the study. It was later learned that six-word memoirs had gained wide popularity, in part because the concept had been discussed in a *New York Times* article. The appeal of writing six-word memoirs had led to a website where adolescents could post their own memoir. During the research, boys were given a brief orientation to what a memoir is, and were then read some diverse examples of memoirs written by other boys. They were given 5–7 minutes to write their own memoir, and were then asked to read their memoir, talking briefly about the ideas therein. These memoirs were later collected for review and further analysis.

## Data Analysis

Analyzing qualitative data involves a careful reading of interview notes and replaying recordings of the interviews. Data were initially copied onto index cards and grouped according to question clusters. For example, responses related to achievement, ideals, school experiences, family life, social perspectives, etc. formed individual response sets. As these clusters became better defined, elements of narrative and theory began to emerge. These insights suggested further refinement of data groups. Eventually, both macro and micro interview themes were established. The macro themes are described as "Dimensions" and include *Becoming Myself*, *Belonging and Influence*, *Pragmatic Transcendence*, *Real-Time Achievement*, and *Origins and Tradition*. This report includes commentary on each of the Dimensions, as well as analysis of the sub-themes organized under each Dimension.

The recommendations at the end of this report reflect how schools might act on the insights and perspectives of boys, as well as ideas developed from more theoretical interpretation of data.

## CHAPTER 2

# Dimensions of Significance

A significant aspect of our destiny is the effect we have on people after we are long gone.

*Nelson Mandela*

...human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them to give birth to themselves.

*Gabriel Garcia Marquez*

It is a rare person who is naturally inclined to sit still for sixteen years, and then indefinitely at work.

*Matthew Crawford*

**Throughout this study** I have been aware of treading on new ground. This is not so much because boys have never before been asked what is important to them (although I would venture to say that is largely true of the specific subjects of this study), but because of the unique ways in which this study has sought to illuminate elements of significance. Although it is clear that boys have thought about sources of meaning in their lives, it is equally clear that those questions have rarely been put to them in a context designed for their comfort and confidence—and psychic freedom. The last criteria is the most essential. At the core of this study is a belief that enabling boys’ freedom to imagine and sculpt a life of their choosing is a formative rung on the ladder to happiness and fulfillment. The dialogues have “road-tested” the value of self-determination by giving boys wide latitude for expressing their ideas. Along the way, the content of this study has been amplified by attending to boys’ communication styles, and especially their interactions with other boys. With these observations in mind, I would like to begin an overview of findings with *a simple but fundamental conclusion that should have serious ramifications for the education of boys:*

Boys are eager for dialogue that helps them explore and understand their personal experiences.

We cannot expect dialogue with boys to be fruitful and transformational unless we allocate the time and space for these discussion to take place. Schools interested in strengthening boys’ self-awareness, confidence, and capacity for self-expression should address this mandate sooner rather than later. While it may be helpful for boys to talk casually within their classrooms, dining halls, Houses or residence halls, it is the combination of formality (a discussion led by someone who is serious and psychologically-minded) and accessibility (comfortable setting emphasizing freedom of expression and collegiality) which drives dialogue toward meaningful and tangible outcomes. Simply put, we should seize the opportunity to talk with boys about what gives their life and education meaning and relevance. There is massive content to be explored within that realm if the

doors to boys' psyches can be eased open and met with a non-judgmental interest in encountering what is there. This challenge raises a second principle that reverberates throughout this study:

**It is impossible to observe and listen to boys without in some way changing them.**

As a community of educators invested in helping boys know their deeper selves we need not fear the effect of our presence if we will assume responsibility for it. This might take the form of ensuring that boys hear our questions as we intend them, and it might also mean acknowledging discomfort when and where it occurs. Far from being hurdles to effective encounters, these moments of awkwardness are the life force that makes dialogue with boys both "real" and transcendent. These are the moments when the freedom to be one's natural, vulnerable self shines as a beacon of personal congruity. These interactions are where boys and adults realize that there is nothing to defend in a supportive context where the primary objective is to see oneself honestly and constructively.

In listening to boys, it has not been my objective to create a "formula of significance." An algorithm of this type would not reflect the ecology of how significance lives in boys' minds. Instead, I've focused on detecting the shape and story of significance in boys' lives, and being true to the tone of their language. What boys say, and how they say it, can be revealing or simply reassuring; in either case it is genuine and warrants close attention.

Mapping a cognitive-emotive construct as multifaceted as significance is a bit like mapping the Amazon river without the benefit of an airplane; every promising tributary must be explored "on foot" until the water runs shallow. In the end, some of those tributaries have proved to be major organizing dimensions of boys' lives. Other tributaries form the subthemes that comprise those dimensions. I ask you to accompany me as we navigate the tributaries, and for your belief that our search will lead us to a deeper understanding of what a significant education implies.

## I. Becoming Myself

**The most fundamental awareness** boys have of their own significance is the experience of becoming their own person. There is a strong sense that boys feel excited about the journey of boyhood, and are eager to cross the hurdles that mark the leap to manhood. What it feels like to grow up is at the forefront of boys' minds, and it is a topic about which they have much to release. Every group of boys engaged in this study was asked to wrestle with the question of what they want to do with their lives. What emerged from this line of inquiry was a strong desire on the part of boys to find fulfillment of their core aspirations—what I have come to identify as *congruity*.

Congruity is a psychological concept that addresses the degree to which a person's actual life reflects their main interests, identity, and personal priorities (Rogers, Maslow). Congruity plays a pivotal role in whether boys feel like themselves in their respective activities, and whether they feel as though their energy is dedicated to activities which are aligned with their natural inclinations. If an ordinary achievement is satisfying for boys, a congruent achievement is a life affirming experience that not only garners recognition, but focuses one's purpose. Living a congruent life signifies a life shaped by design and intention. Yet because most boys can't describe such a life explicitly, we may mistakenly assume they have no such aspirations or needs. Along these lines I have found it helpful to remember that children do not think about their perspectives being a function of childhood. What most boys take to be true has either been inherited, or is the product of their unique life experiences. In some ways, this study encouraged boys to engage alternative realities—lives based on a variety of ideals and goals, some of which were hypothesized to be latent among boys.

Very little research on congruity in children's lives has been done. Primarily, this is because children have historically been understood as individuals to be acted upon, rather than in partnership with. Yet the cost of this approach is arguably staggering with respect to global happiness, creativity, and productivity. The present study engages the hypothesis that congruity fuels effort, maturity, purpose, and personal responsibility. Where congruity is exceptionally high, we can reasonably hope to find happiness and fulfillment—the deep satisfaction that one is leading a life true to one's values, needs, and destiny.

### Core Values

In part, congruity has become a primary theme of this study because of how boys described and ranked their core values. It was understood from the early days of this project that boys have more than one objective in life. In an effort to understand their top priorities, boys were asked to compare and rank a variety of objectives. For example, are boys more interested in status than achievement? Is it fair to understand that grades are more important than winning to boys? As a means of testing this hypothesis boys were asked to rate their top priority of the following list: *power, status, grades, winning, or happiness*.

**Boys overwhelmingly (80–85%) endorse happiness.** (The other priorities, in descending order of importance, were as follows: status, grades, power and winning.) This may partially reflect boys' perception that the other options are elements of happiness. Still, it's interesting to note that most teachers rate *status* as boys' top priority, and *power* as second most important.

What seemed important to take away from this element of inquiry was that happiness is the most powerful attractor in boys' lives, even more than traditional notions of "success." From the perspective of adults, the value of success may be relatively clear, but from the experiential, subjective perspective of boys it is a less convincing agent of action and purpose.

Nothing beats happiness...whatever else you want, you have to be happy. I'd rather be happy poor than like miserable rich...if I change later on it'll probably be because I lost my goals, what I believe in...and whose fault is that...society can tell you to do something different than what you believe in.

Put it this way, I'm not a fool. Only a fool spends his life chasing money dreams when he could have had happiness all the time. How many years of education do you need before you know that?

Money gives you a certain kind of happy, but not the most important kind. Hopefully I can have both.

For me, happiness is number one, then being famous, then money. Plus, I intend to be the next Ryan Seacrest.

More will be said about the deepest sources of happiness in boys' lives during discussion of the Pragmatic Transcendence dimension of this study. There, we will see that the most significant existential concerns in boys' lives have to do with vocation, and whether their vocation will make them happy. When boys overtly discuss their pursuit of happiness it most often has to do with searching for congruent work. Conversely, existential anxiety is most often related to an uncomfortable awareness of incongruity—a detour from core values.

It's simple, your best classes are the ones you're most interested in.

Every time I think, okay, I'm past that stuff [academic requirements] I get pulled back down. I'll do what I'm told to do, but at some point I am going to ask, 'why'. Look at Bill Gates, he didn't let Harvard tell him what is important. I'm not saying I'm Bill Gates but I do admire his determination...look where it got him.

If someone told me I was definitely going to have a job, the right job for me, I would be much more relaxed. I'm pretty sure I'll get a good job because I reckon my grades are decent, but what does that do? What is a good job...money and status? I'll certainly be glad to have money and status but I think I may need something more to really be happy. Maybe it's immature, but I'd like to work with people I know and like.

I'm not going to say that money means nothing...that's shortsighted...but money can make you happy. I think it's ridiculous to have to choose between money and a good life...they go together.

In the course of reviewing this study's findings, it would be easy to overlook aspects of the dialogues



that were a persistent presence, but which might be taken for granted. For example, it is worth noting that the great majority of boys interviewed conveyed a disposition of optimism about their lives. Rarely did I encounter boys who felt defeated or demoralized. Most boys voiced a high level of hope for their lives, and a belief that they had some power to control their destiny. One important way boys feel this power is through **choice**. Repeatedly, they discussed their perspective of life as a series of choices, and the responsibility of individuals to make good choices for themselves. There was a strong sense that this moral code evolves from shared origins, such as families or schools.

I don't want this school to ever forget me. This is my family, and you don't forget family.

My mother has taught me what I need to know to live well. Even though I've probably read more books than she has, she's my rock.

Our headmaster is always going on about character and choice, and I was always okay fine but...now I'm starting to see the choices...I know more about what he means...when I look at the names [of old boys] on these walls I want to be part of that, and it starts by making the right choices.

Choosing gives me a headache. I'd prefer someone chose for me, but they better make good choices.

## Searching for Congruity

The most basic expression or awareness of congruity's absence was found in boys' discussion of their day-to-day purpose. For example, boys often commented that they find themselves wondering why they are dedicating time and effort to particular activities that in the present do not feel congruent with their deeper selves or longer-term goals. Sometimes these questions appear to be the by-product of boys not fully appreciating the value of having to learn something that feels unrelated to their interests or identity. But there are also times when boys' questioning is more reflective.

We come here every day and we do what we are told to do but sometimes I wonder who made these rules. It's not that I think it's wrong, but you do wonder why it has to be a certain way... we can do the work, but that doesn't say we should do the work. Personally, I was meant to be free, like a free spirit—that's where my spirit comes from. I definitely believe it's why girls love me.

When we're sitting around and talking at night, everyone has ideas about what they would do different. The rules are fair but I don't think the school takes into account how much more mature boys are than they used to be.

Particularly among older boys, where a sense of ownership and personal responsibility has developed, there is the sense that one has the right to direct time and effort. It is at developmental junctures such as these that boys' questioning of school purpose becomes a significant impediment to belief, and by extension, effort.

...last week I had to write a play with two of my mates and I was asking myself why I'm doing this. I've got nothing against plays, but right now I have piles of work to do and writing a play didn't seem to be a priority. Year 11 is just so intense...you want to be able to know that what

you're doing is going to take you somewhere..if it isn't then that doesn't make sense...it feels like everyone has forgotten what it's like to be in Year 11.

Hardly any boys voiced an expectation that they should be allowed to autonomously determine how their time and energy is allocated. However, there is a feeling on the part of a great majority of boys that they would like to be informed of why they are doing a particular thing and how that activity is related to their school's vision for education. Where such discussions take place, boys tend to feel more fully acknowledged by schools, and as though they have a voice in the trajectory of their education.

Another formative dimension of boys' development affected by the search for congruity has to do with the basic question of "**why should I grow up?**" This type of reflection was not one anticipated by the dialogues, but which emerged as the subtext of various discussions. In this regard, the dialogues were a reminder that the inevitability of physical maturation is not necessarily matched by psychological maturation. Although boys readily knowledge that each subsequent year in school results in an accumulation of knowledge and skill, they are more ambiguous about the timeline for becoming an adult. A majority of boys acknowledge that many aspects of boyhood are enjoyable and fun. They have a sense that responsibility looms ahead and do not necessarily feel inclined to rush toward that responsibility. **More specifically, there was a sense among boys that increased responsibility should have substantial benefits.** To an extent, those benefits might be pragmatic such as having more money, more freedom to engage in exciting experiences, and especially greater social opportunities.

Yet there is also an existential dimension to boys' expectations around increased responsibility. In this regard, many boys anticipate living a life that is more congruent with their core values and interests.

We know what it takes to be a man but we also know what men get to do...it's like a trade-off, you have to work harder, but then again you're getting to focus on what you really enjoy. My father always tells me I have to work hard now if I want to have a good life later...I'm willing to do that, but there are like no guarantees. No one actually tells you that life is going to be good...I guess it's just your faith...you know it's not just about success, it's about doing what you like. I could program for twelve hours and still not be bored, but like thirty minutes of reading something I don't like kills me...I mean how old do you have to be before you can control that...maybe never...I mean how can you talk about destiny if you have no choice ...right?

It should be noted that virtually all boys in the study identified aspects of their school experience which are congruent with their core values and interests. There are times and places within the course of the school day in which boys feel focused, activated, and eager. Yet there is a sense among boys that those experiences are more or less found by chance rather than by design.

I really had no idea what design technology was all about, but I've really enjoyed it...it shook up my choices and the future.

Cadets may not look that appealing from a distance, but it is actually fun and I feel like I've gotten something out of the discipline.

As much as boys identified with aspects of their school experience, they were also inclined to feel out of place at some point in their education. These perceptions were not unexpected given the changes associated with transition from one academic year to the next. Overall, boys indicated that having to contend with such feelings was a matter of personal resolve, and to an extent, helped to fortify them. Younger boys discussed how feeling out of place caused them to be somewhat introspective, primarily thinking about how they are different from peers, or how their current school differs from a previous school. By age 15, boys appeared to accept changes in social groupings as inevitable and were more focused on practical approaches to adapting than dwelling on matters of personal difference.

Momentum toward congruity is also established in boys' lives when, and if, a vocational direction emerges. Having a sense of vocational direction is a great relief to most boys, and tends to have the effect of leading boys to believe that their chances for long-term happiness are greater.

At least if you know which way you're headed you feel stronger. You don't need to worry about what a lot of other guys here are worried about.

I have dreams of these things I want to do...I mean like actual dreams at night...sometimes I'll just think about that stuff and I don't know whether to be like 'great' or 'oh my God.'

Boys expressed interest in having a vocational focus by age 13 or 14; by age 16, its absence often signals a "mini crisis." For example, boys believe strongly that vocational happiness is the single greatest factor—over which they have control—contributing to life happiness. They want to feel confident that they are working toward a career that will be fulfilling, and believe that the first step of that process is knowing what type of career they want. This conflict appears to be a critical developmental milestone in most boys' lives. On the one hand, they are realistic enough to know that one can only go so far in firming up a vocational identity during adolescence, and that any choice they make may change in the years to come. On the other hand, belief about the contribution of vocation to a life of happiness and contentment is so great that boys spend significant amounts of time worrying about the issue.

Oh, I definitely think we should be talking about it here [at school] because we talk about it constantly at home. My dad always says you're going to spend almost every waking hour at work so you better love what you work at. I agree, but where am I supposed to begin?... he just knew what he wanted from when he was younger than I am now.

I believe most men are unhappy with their work. I don't want that to be me. That's one way I want to be different from my father.

I totally never pictured myself as an engineer, but now I can see what you can do...like I could actually build a bridge...that's amazing to me. I began thinking like hey I could make money and be happy. I may change my mind about what I want to do, but it has to be the same balance if you know what I mean.

## Ideals and Role Models

Another way in which boys grapple with congruity is through their **projections and idealizations**. In order to explore this content boys were asked to project about an “ideal” self. Although their formulations tended to be vague when asked to identify personality attributes, they proved to be more adept at naming people whom they regard as “significant.” By the time this question emerged in the dialogues the groups already had a working understanding of the distinction between achievement and significance. Boys generally agreed that to be significant one had to do more than accomplish big things.

You could do a lot of stuff but that doesn’t make you significant...you have to be important to other people, like someone who has made a sacrifice... or someone who did something just because it was the right thing to do.

Achievements can make you famous, but technically anyone can be significant if they do certain things.

Significance means a lot to me, you might say everything. The most significant person in my life is my mother. I want to be like her, or like a coach I had two years ago.

Specifically, a “significant” person had to have a high degree of social relevance, typically because they had served the greater social good in a visible way. Examples of whom boys think of as significant comprise a diverse group including such people as Martin Luther King Jr., Bill Gates, Julia Gillard, Lance Armstrong, Peter Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, the Queen of England, Miles Davis, Abraham Lincoln, Terry Fox, my brother, mother, father, the Chaplain, Yo-Yo Ma, and soldiers, among many others. Boys as young as 9 and 10 were able to readily identify significant people whom they admire.

When boys think about how they want to be significant as an adult, their projections typically have as much to do with being effective and important in personal roles as they do with serving the public interest. For example, many boys asserted their hope to be strong and effective fathers and providers. Approximately one-third of the boys interviewed said that altruism was a key objective in their life. In every country and locality, boys were encountered who defined their personal success in terms of service to others. It was interesting that these boys were often noted to be the quieter member of various dialogues. Notably, the inclination to serve others and “give back” was often heard from boys coming from a background of socioeconomic disadvantage. For example, boys who were able to attend their respective schools principally because they received a scholarship, or some type of external funding, often felt the greatest responsibility to return this aid to others.

This school has made me what I am and I plan to repay that debt. Whatever else I do in life is like a bonus. I’ll feel good about it but my first responsibility is to give something back to my family and anyone else I can help...I mean I don’t know if anyone wants my help, but I’ll do whatever I can. I’ve always had to go to church whether I wanted to or not, and that’s what I get from it.

Among the projections that comprise boys’ ideals, there is a fine distinction between what they construe as idealistic and heroic. In most dialogues, initial thoughts about heroism focused on

merely doing something good. In this regard, heroes were described as people who had accomplished great things, typically having achieved a degree of fame. When challenged on this point, however, boys seemed to correct their definitions to address the need for sacrifice and bravery. In virtually every group, the definition of heroism was a substantial point of interest and debate. Boys older than 14 were eager to grapple with the moral dimensions of heroism, and enjoyed having their perceptions tested by inquiry about specific people. One of the most engaging questions pertained to the recently rescued Chilean miners, and whether they or the people who rescued them were more heroic. Although boys were eager to engage in discussion of heroism, they were notably more measured in estimating their own willingness to be heroic. Particularly with respect to the type of heroism found in warfare, boys had mixed feelings about whether they could commit themselves to such sacrifice.

I actually read all the names [on the war plaque] and I thought don't want to die like that. Maybe I'd feel differently in some situation, maybe I'm selfish, but right now it's impossible to think that way. We have these ceremonies to honour the dead, but when you think about it, that doesn't really help them.

I would fight if I had to but not because I want to be a hero...because we can't just let somebody attack us and not fight back.

The only downside to being a hero is you have to be dead to be one.

## A Language of Authenticity

When the topic of personal significance is raised with boys, their discussion hovers around the desire to find their authentic self. This observation, alone, is quite remarkable. There was an eagerness among boys everywhere to understand how one separates artifice from what is real with respect to identity, self-perceptions, opinions, and ideals. As boys mature, they appear to have a deeper appreciation of being authentic: feeling authentic in one's words and actions helps boys to think of themselves as more mature and sophisticated. For example, upper school boys view authenticity (speaking your mind, being oneself in social contexts, living according to one's values) as a cornerstone of their personal integrity.

Who everybody else sees...that's not me, I know it's not. I don't think I know exactly who I am but I don't feel like the person other people think I am, except for like two friends. But I definitely want to know more about who I am before I leave this place. You can't really feel like you're ready for what's next until you know what you're about. ...one of the things I respect about them [Year 12's] is that they know more of what they're about.

A man knows what he stands for, a boy doesn't.

I don't agree, boys can know what they stand for—it's just that they might not have the courage to show it, or might not have the freedom.

In contrast to older boys, **younger boys either conflate authenticity with originality, or at least see originality as a prerequisite for higher levels of significance.** Through age 12, boys express a strong need to stand out from one's peers. One group of boys robustly confirmed the notion that "if everyone is doing it, it's not significant." Conversation with younger boys suggests that one's

identity is linked primarily to what one likes to do. In contrast, older boys pin identity to core values, and whether they have passed various “tests” that they have individually established for themselves in life.

Given that boys as a group are concerned with identity, social acceptance, and how they are perceived by others, it’s not surprising that they would be preoccupied with the tension between being themselves and finding social acceptance. **The intensity of discussion in this area, including the questions boys asked of one another, suggests that a forum and language for discussing this aspect of congruity would be widely appreciated.**

Listening to boys discuss the process of finding their authentic self, it becomes apparent that most boys lack a sufficient vocabulary for describing the nuances of that process. The absence of the vocabulary is a notable source of stress in boys’ lives and may be why they identify social skills and aspects of emotional intelligence as the topic they would like schools to most teach them more about.

The only thing I want to learn more about, other than technology, is how to handle social situations. You can’t afford to be a social idiot at 16.

This was an interesting discussion...I’m amazed I had so much to say about this...I guess I didn’t realize it was on my mind, but I think we needed this...so what do we do now?

Why can’t we meet like this all the time?

The prospect of becoming authentic, which boys confirm as a critical plateau in their development, is interpreted by a majority of boys as needing to learn what they are good at. Specifically, **boys view discussion around authenticity as an opportunity to consolidate knowledge about their strengths.** This is an area in which boys were surprisingly unsure of themselves. Even where boys express some intuition about personal strengths, they were eager for feedback, and opportunity to weigh the clarity of their reflections against those offered by other boys.

Well, if I have to say what’s real and not real, I’m going to tell you about what I’m good at. Why else would I be good at something unless I’m meant to do it...I believe that’s what we’re all trying to figure out.

For me, finding music was the best thing...then I had a talent, and having a talent gave me a place to stand out for who I am. Talent is one of the things that makes you unique.

I’m basically drifting. I have no idea what I am good at or want to do. My mom is practically having a breakdown, my dad is like ‘you’ll find it, but it takes time.’

Does collecting Incredible Hulk action figures count as ‘talent,’ because if it does, whoa, I’m awesome.

While upper school boys place great emphasis on critical feedback as a means of discerning their authentic selves, they also sense the dilemma in being too dependent on the insights or affirmation of others. To that end, older boys tended to reinforce that “space” and “separation” are essential to becoming your own person—and that one particular time of day is quite valuable.



It's hard to be your own person when you're being watched all the time. The best time for me to think about this is when I'm alone, just before I fall asleep...that's when I do most of my best thinking.

I agree, we're too busy during the day to think about these issues, unless there's going to be time for it, like this. It's easier to figure things out just before I fall asleep.

The vigor of boys' discussions of authenticity was proportional to the seriousness with which those conversations were undertaken during the course of the dialogues. Introducing an element of drama into the conversation, such as the prospective consequences of being inauthentic, tended to elicit more impassioned responses. One implication of this finding is that where we want to engage boys in meaningful discussions about the process of becoming themselves, the transition to manhood, and other dynamic developmental experiences, our efforts will produce a greater yield if we can illustrate for boys how their beliefs have real consequences. For example, "Is making a good impression on a new teacher more important than making a good impression on other students? What do you sacrifice in choosing one over the other?"

I'm at this school to get into a great university...of course I'm going to make a the best impression I can on a teacher...that's my job!

I hate that idea. Who matters most, friends or teachers? Definitely friends. It's not like I don't care about my impression [in class], but it is what it is.

Why do these things have to be mutually exclusive?

I seem to offend people without even trying...it's like a freakish talent.

## Multiple Narratives

As the dialogues progressed into their second year, a theme regarding the **meaning of boyhood** developed primary importance. Specifically, questions emerged as to "who owns the meaning of masculinity and what does it mean to be a 'good' boy or man?" This topic proved to be fruitful, engaging boys in the idea that they are partially defined by individual stories, and that a single boy may have several important identities. For example, many boys interviewed had an identity related to being raised in a farming family, in a rural area. This was a decidedly different identity than they developed attending a private school, in a large, cosmopolitan city. In the interest of developing this topic through illustration, a question was posed to boys involving personal choice: "If you had a choice between writing a complex and difficult book review, and pushing a rock up a hill that required 110% of your individual strength, whatever your level of strength is, which would you choose to do?" Approximately 70% of boys worldwide chose to "push the rock."

Despite a majority choosing the more physical activity, there was no clear relation between a boy's choice and his academic standing, writing potential, or intellectual curiosity. Instead, this question seemed to tap the idea that even studious boys can find meaning and pleasure in a variety of activities. Clearly, many boys who chose to "push the rock" could also describe the value in writing the book report, and *vice versa*. At the same time, opinions tended to be strong and amply expressed.

Oh, I'm definitely a rock guy, but I also love to write...if I get to choose the book I might change my mind.

It's an obvious choice. Writing a book report is meaningless...it doesn't accomplish anything.

I am shocked by everyone who said 'rock.' That is not who I am.

Will someone be watching me push the rock?

Can we do both?

This is confidential, right?

The writing vs. rock responses seem to tell us that there is no single layer of experience that can define what is meaningful and relevant in boyhood. Instead, boys are engaging multiple narratives, often within the course of a single day. There is a sense that boys would benefit from having these different ideals validated, although that is not an awareness that boys were able or ready to fully articulate. What does seem important to take from this area of inquiry is the idea that the performance/physical aspect of boys' experience seeks activation. This need is partially met through athletics, although there is a substantial difference between the meaning boys derive from sports and what they find when imagining themselves pushing a rock up a hill. For example, many boys imagine that others were watching them push the rock. Boys also identified that pushing a rock up a hill is a task with a clear end point—one knows when the task is over and they can feel free to do something else. The fact that this task required 110% of a person's strength was also a key factor—that level of effort is by definition Sisyphean. Furthermore, many boys said that pushing a rock would be more than preferable, it would be fun. Boys who chose the book review were often dumbfounded that so many of their peers were interested in pushing a rock, and assertively defended writing a book review as the only meaningful option of the two choices.

The deeper value of this question is that it enabled boys to see one another with a fresh perspective. They went on to discuss that at this point in their lives few of them are willing or able to commit to a single identity, or sense of purpose.

What's the big deal. So what if you choose whatever. The point is that everyone is different. There is no right choice...isn't that the point?

Honestly, I can't stand either option, because I don't think I'm very good at either.

If you told me there was a rock to push outside right now, I'd say great, let's go. Last year I might have said something else.

Writing is either like this amazing experience that totally absorbs me, or like painfully boring. I can't answer your question without knowing the book.

## Perspectives on Creativity

At the outset of this study it was believed that creativity would emerge as an important pathway to significance in boys' lives. Although boys objectively discussed the value of creativity, far fewer identified strong creative pursuits in their own lives. Many boys expressed a belief that boys,

in general, should be creative, even as they note they find little time for “creative” activities. Among boys under the age of 15 there was greater involvement in the arts and crafts, and more conviction that the arts were fundamental to identity. For example, 9–11 year-old boys attending a school where a woodworking workshop was literally and metaphorically a center of school activity affirmed that woodworking was a valued subject, and an important aspect of school identity. Older boys often expressed disappointment that they had lost contact with their creative side, but were pragmatic in asserting that they now felt they had more pressing academic priorities. The majority of boys seemed perplexed when challenged with the notion that the arts could be an academic priority.

Look sir, you have to understand what’s important here. It’s not that we don’t like it [arts], but you’ve got to make choices...you can’t do everything.

There’s a difference between what you enjoy and what you need to do. I sort of can’t believe I’m saying that, but it’s true.

Two years from now I’m hoping to be set in a good university. How is focusing on my creative side going to help with that? I think you have to be realistic.

**The 11th and 12th years of education appear to represent a key fork in the road for boys’ creativity. A majority of boys allude to taking flight from creativity during these years, feeling as though they need to focus on “higher priority,” outcome-oriented activities such as university preparation coursework and university applications.**

Boys at several schools noted that creative activities are generally marginalized within the school context as peripheral to success. Several art teachers agreed with this perspective, some noting that the distant proximity of their classroom to the rest of the school was an implicit expression of how their respective schools devalue the teaching of creativity. One art teacher commented, *“The location of art and design rooms is significant in establishing the priority of handmade things within school culture.”* In schools where art and craft rooms were more centrally located, there were tangible differences in the quality of student work displayed in hallways, and the degree to which students discussed the making of things as central to their school’s identity.

In addition to visual/design arts, a large number of boys said they had been in school theatre productions, and even those that had not, expressed value in being in a theatre class. Boys playfully described their enjoyment of role-play, and their appreciation of the freedom implicit in various forms of improvisation. A sizable cohort of boys also describe a serious involvement in music, which they often see as a path to self-discipline, and a form of connection to a broader school community.

Notably, the most passionate creatives were those boys involved in some type of personal writing. These students viewed themselves as future journalists, novelists, screenwriters, and poets. Although this group only comprised a small percentage of students in the study, these boys were highly committed to their creative ideal.

I don’t know if you can understand, or if anyone can understand what writing means to me. I will not stop. I know I will not stop because it is who I am. If I stop writing I cease to exist.

I feel the same way. Writing is not optional, it is like breathing.

My father's a journalist, and I'm hoping to be a journalist. He lives the most amazing life... he's been everywhere...I want that.

My parents forbid me to stop writing. They said that before I wrote I was always close to having a breakdown.

We had to write this essay on whether it was possible to do something selfless, and I decided to actually take it seriously. I don't know why because I hardly ever take anything too seriously, but I did, and then it was like, hey, I actually have a strong opinion on this, and my teacher, you know, she really liked it, so I said, hey, why don't I do more of this, or maybe, like I could be good at this if I actually tried, which is what I am doing, and maybe that's why I got selected to be in this group. I don't know.

**In discussing creativity, most boys locate creativity in everyday tasks rather than a designated form of self-expression.** Boys value creative processes that have a clear beginning and end—and are especially intent on their creative endeavors leading to a finished product. Despite this perspective, very few boys had any recollection of creating something they would describe as “beautiful.” Where they did provide examples, the projects involved were building a piece of furniture, composing music, or helping to create a service program.

The absence of craft in the vast majority of boys' lives was striking. Only about one-third of boys felt confident in their ability to use basic hand tools and less than 25% had ever done a significant craft project with a parent. About 80% of boys expressed a desire to build something with their fathers. When asked why they had not engaged a project with their father, nearly 90% said it was because “he is too busy.”

Boys appear to feel as though aesthetic “beauty” is more related to nostalgia, or a romantic worldview, than something they might practically pursue. When pushed to explore the relevance of beauty in their lives, many boys affect a wistful disposition, verbally acknowledging the importance of beauty, as they search their memories for any recollection of having attached themselves to the making of something beautiful.

It's important to do these things...we know that...and we probably will when the time is right.

I made a box for my mother and lined it with felt..she cried when she saw it...I know she really likes it, even though it's only a box, and her jewelry is too nice for it.

My parents still have my pictures from when I was 5 years old. My mom says I'll appreciate having them some day, which is probably true, but then again they're not very good.

When my father is away on a trip and I think of him, it's when we were building a boat shed together. That was the best time we ever had together, although he might say differently.

## Rebellion

Throughout the interviews there was a small cohort of boys, primarily between the ages of 14–16, who adopted a disposition of being disaffected or rebellious within the context of the interviews. These boys appear to take pride in illustrating how they set boundaries with adults, and enjoy telling stories about how they overcame those who have tried to make them do something they did not want to do. Mastery is clearly important to these boys, although their idealized form of mastery has mostly to do with subverting adult authority.

A small cohort of middle and upper school boys (5–8%) identify rebellion as essential to individuation. These boys see rebellion as something to be savored, and which is **activating** in the sense of fueling their spirit and energy to do difficult things.

She can do anything she wants to me, but it won't change anything. If I don't want to do it, I'm not going to do it, or at least not put anything in it.

The first time you decide 'no,' I only do what I think is worth doing, you have a feeling of power, but also calm. I'm never going back to being a robot. Robots don't achieve anything.

I tell my teachers what I think all the time. They've probably had enough of me but why should we have to be the only ones that listen? We do know something about what's good for us and we deserve to have a voice.

Do you want to change the world with your study, sir? ...because I want to change the world too...what's the point if you don't go for it, I guess.

Notably, it is through this subversion that many boys appear to win the approval of peers, and further discover a clarity of life purpose. Balancing rebellion with conformity is a special talent for several boys interviewed. More specifically, they are able to negotiate conformity with the basic protocols of school (getting to school on time, turning in work, keeping behavior under control), while working steadily to keep their minds resistant to what they perceive as the oppression of adult guidance.

Well you are allowed to rebel as long as you do it a certain way. My maths teacher encourages us to challenge his methods, and everybody gets hyped about that...it's not just a different way to solve the equation...it's a different way to think about numbers, or even if you need numbers for certain things. I don't know if we'll ever win, but we definitely like trying.

Every type of war has its rules.

You can knock me down but I'm going to keep getting up. My mom taught me that, even though it freaks me out to think how she learned it.

In formative ways, congruity addresses experiential gaps in boys' lives. Primarily, these are gaps that define the difference between boys' ideals and their day-to-day reality. As adults, we may understand these gaps as reflecting the nature of life itself, and might even see the acceptance of such gaps as a hallmark of maturity. But doing so relegates congruity to the realm of childish longing rather than an essential ingredient for happiness and fulfillment. What other outcome could be more important? Congruity does not require that we lessen our expectations of boys so

much that it requires us to redraw the essential steps of boyhood, especially those that comprise adolescence. Reframing the adolescent passage to foster deep authenticity may be the single most important collective step we take toward helping boys to be the “masters of their fate.”

As 21st century educational practices evolve it is increasingly clear that schools are playing a greater role in raising boys. With that responsibility comes the mandate to engage the subjective experiences of boys, providing programs and opportunities that lead to greater congruity. Boys already appear to be carrying this expectation, even while they dutifully comply with what is asked of them. Validating the idea of congruity through open dialogue may be where such a journey begins, but the journey’s destination is the fulfillment and sense of purpose found in years to come.



## II. Belonging and Influence

**At every school visited,** boys have spoken openly about the bonds between themselves and their peers, school, and family. These bonds are often described as the emotional foundation that give boys the freedom and courage to test themselves. However, the bonds are more significant than simply being a foundation. They also signify belonging, and in that regard address a key anxiety that runs through the lives of boys: Where do I fit in? Each time that boys gathered for the dialogues this question hovered in the background of conversation. Typically, there was a strong sense of connection among boys interviewed. In most cases, the groups quickly coalesced as boys began to understand the focus and purpose of the project. Although the dialogues lasted only two days, the bond of these groups was obvious, and at many schools, boys were vocal about their disappointment that the discussions came to an end.

**Belonging is a major subtext for various aspects of these dialogues.** The ability to find and create belonging is significant because it establishes boys' place within groups or a hierarchy. This social standing becomes the platform many boys need to feel socially and emotionally safe. With belonging established, boys confidence increases, and they generally feel more courageous about testing aspects of individual difference. In this sense, the significance of the first dimension (*Becoming Myself*), and the second can be understood as continuous, and an expression of how significance is an integrated concept within the lives of boys.

Overall, boys had a positive perspective of belonging that emphasized the desire to "fit in." Boys seemed to acknowledge that they might intentionally alter their social identity if they were they to attend a different school, although they view such changes as a natural component of learning to fit in. **Along these lines, boy perceive their ability to fit with different groups as an element of mastery and achievement, rather than as a threat to authenticity.**

### Identification with School

Among boys interviewed **there was widespread endorsement of the value of attending a boy's school.** Younger boys were especially apt to recommend single-sex education, and those boys who had previously been at a coeducational school were quick to illustrate the qualitative differences in their interactions with teachers and classmates at a boys' school. While younger boys (9–12) note that boys' schools generally have more rules to remember, they value the explicitness of these rules, and feel as though they have a better chance of staying out of trouble (in contrast to coeducational schools).

Oh, this is way better. At my last school teachers always favored the girls. It was just impossible for boys to be like the girls. I'll admit we were a lot noisier but it was like they took it personally. I can't really see how putting boys and girls together makes sense, but then again I'm only 11.

When I first came here I thought it would be a lot different and it is, but it's good different. There are tons more rules but everybody knows them...you have less to worry about.

At first you think you're going to hate it because it's not what you have known... but then you realize that there is a brotherhood here... everyone really knows their place... there is a hierarchy but not in a bad way. I would never want to go back to a coed school... I see girls all the time and hey that's nice, but when I'm in school I can concentrate and that's got to be a good thing.

Older boys were somewhat more ambivalent about single-sex education, feeling as though they would like more interaction with girls. However, upper school boys were also able to bring perspective to their education, often expressing appreciation for being educated in a boys' school since the beginning of their school years.

I definitely miss girls... if you ask me right now which situation I prefer I would want to go to school with girls, but if you ask me which situation is better for me, I'm not sure, I think I'd probably stay where I am.

Girls make life fun but complicated. I'm with girls a lot... plus, we have dances and other social events. Right now I'm living the way I need to, to get ahead... but it's not always going to be this way. I plan to have lots of ladies in my life.

I've been in a boys' school since I was five years old. You could say it's all that I've ever known but that's not actually true. I've never really felt like my life lacked girls. I just always assumed that girls are not part of what I'm doing at school. If I would have gone to school with girls, it might have been, but then it would have been a lot different...good different or bad different I don't know.

Numerous boys identify school as a kind of brotherhood that provides valued safety. They feel comfortable experimenting with different types of social behavior, and feel less self-conscious of how they are being seen by others. **Most boys say they feel less afraid of failing at a boys' school than they would in a coeducational school.**

We could be competitive about everything but it's no big deal... it's mostly for fun and it ends pretty quickly. I think you expect that at a boys' school...something would be wrong if it wasn't competitive.

It's not like I want to be outdone by my mates, but I don't exactly feel threatened by them. There's a certain way that boys can compete with each other and also encourage them... there's an intensity here... it's absolutely huge in rugby, but it's a lot of other places too. My dad went through this and I think he wanted to send me here so that I could go through it too. I just realized lately that I actually feel closer to my dad since coming here.

Identification with school also tilts on the strength of boys' attachments to their teachers. For example, boys describe forming strong attachments with teachers who engage in constructive levels of self-disclosure within the classroom. A great many boys also find teachers to be a critical source of benevolence in their lives. Essentially, they count on teachers to have a consistently positive attitude, and to be willing to "sacrifice" themselves for their students. Although this reference felt ambiguous when it was expressed, **boys seemed to be saying that they essentially want from teachers what they want from their parents, *loving resistance*; adults who are willing to steady themselves so that boys can push-off against that resistance in the interest of self-definition.**

**Doing this without judgment and, ideally, with benevolence makes a teacher invaluable, and an irreplaceable historian of a boy's development.**

It depends if you have a great teacher. We have two teachers who are fun because they are interesting... I want to learn but I want someone who sees me...I will do almost anything for a teacher who shows me he respects me.

My language teacher pushes us because she has taught many other boys, and she knows what we can probably do. She wants us to succeed because she knows we can do it. I'd rather have that approach than a teacher who looks down at you, and I've had that too...we all have.

In my old school they wanted you to fail...that's why I asked my dad to get me out of there. I was lucky we came here because now my teachers are somewhat more caring. I can't be as open with them as with my parents, but I do feel they want me to do well. You can't really exaggerate that...you just know when someone wants you to succeed.

Why would you teach if you can't stand people our age. This is our generation...we have to be ourselves, and it's really up to them to catch up.

I think Mr...knows more about me than either of my parents. Being in boarding makes it harder for my family to know things, but at least you have some teachers and coaches who know what you're going through.

My attitude is I may not learn the same way as everyone else. Deal with it.

Boys emphasize the value of discussion and debate, conveying a **strong interest in having their beliefs and values challenged**, especially after age 14. Many participants enthusiastically endorsed the notion of searching for such debate, placing special value on the perspectives of peers, and those teachers whom they believe know them well. **Most boys interviewed expressed appreciation of teachers with strong opinions or personal perspectives.**

Through encounter with such teachers, boys feel as though they can test the robustness of their own beliefs and approach a critical milestone of **self-knowledge**. Given the choice, boys would rather endure such tests around adults with whom they feel safe. Although boys rarely discussed emotional safety explicitly, its value to them was undeniably strong, and implicit in their discussion of virtually every aspect of school.

You always want to talk if people are open to what you have to say...I enjoy giving my opinion, and I enjoy hearing others, but I don't want to be shot down if someone disagrees. Actually, how can an opinion be wrong...it's illogical...I don't like to be told I'm wrong if I'm only giving my opinion.

Being at the top [Year 12] makes things much easier. You don't feel like you have to defend yourself as much. Everyone respects what you have accomplished...your perspective is respected. I appreciate that...it makes me feel as though I have gotten somewhere.

The way she says your name tells you what's coming...it's either like "so Robert" [high pitch] or "now Robert [low pitch]...the [high] voice means "please give us your opinion," the [low] voice means "what are you thinking". I'm definitely more relaxed with you know the [high] voice.

The dilemma of accommodating boys' need for affirmative, safe debate, and their concomitant need for objective feedback about strengths and weaknesses was noted by teachers at several schools, and succinctly captured by one teacher who commented: "*We're so busy reinforcing every boy in every way, that there's no time left to give them more objective feedback about what they actually do well, or not so well*".

This situation is a significant dilemma for students and teachers alike. Overall, it appears that up until mid-adolescence, boys rely heavily upon affirmative feedback to remain motivated and comfortable in school. At schools where academic and athletic achievement are held in high esteem (virtually every school in this study) boys are particularly dependent upon affirmation from key mentors.

**Among 11th and 12th year boys, a decidedly different mindset was present. Boys of this age expressed a strong desire for more objectivity, and in some cases, feel such urgency for objective appraisal that its absence is a source of anxiety.** Specifically, as boys begin contemplating further study and the realm of careers, their wellbeing rests on believing they have found a direction for their lives—and by direction they primarily mean a career. Most young men interviewed welcome objective/critical feedback about their strengths and individual differences.

It's not just that I want honesty, I want to know what someone thinks of me...I've done some decent things, so it's not like I'm going to be destroyed. Tell me what you think...how else do I know who I am...actually that's not completely true, but I do think the opinion of people who have known you, well it does count for something.

There's a barrier around us and we're chipping away at it like caterpillars in a cocoon. Knowing what someone else sees makes it easier to find your path.

I can't be successful unless I know what I'm good at.

Sir, I'd like to know how we compare to boys in other schools.

I agree with that. You have to realize, we've had an earthquake here...it changes your perspective...if there is something important to know, I want to know as soon as I can.

Interestingly, there was a solid cohort of 9–11 year-olds who seem able to do the same. These lower school boys conveyed optimism and confidence in themselves, traits which are largely buoyed by the presence of unconditional love and support in their lives. The degree to which this confidence was expressed appeared to be proportional with their sense of belonging in their respective schools. In contrast, 12 and 13 year-old boys conveyed skepticism about whether they were on the right track in their lives, or even whether teacher feedback was valuable in helping them find that track.

I really have no idea because I just do what I have to...there's not enough choice to know much about yourself.

Most of this doesn't feel natural to me.

I'd be totally lost without music. Music is pretty much the one thing that tells me I'm going in a good direction.

We do get a lot of feedback, but how do you know if it's true?

I do trust my teachers and all, but people do make mistakes.

## Family Dynamics

Throughout the dialogues boys talked about their **identification with families**. In most cases, this identification has been heightened by their awareness of their parents' sacrifices—including being sent to a good school. Boys see their mothers and fathers as about equally influential in their lives.

However, there was a notable qualitative distinction between boys' relationships with their mothers and fathers. Specifically, boy felt more "counseled" by their mothers, and more "taught" by their fathers. With respect to mothers, most boys felt as though it was easier to talk with their mother about a difficult emotional issue. For example, they described their mothers as coaching them on social skills and helping them cope with conflict.

I'd say my mother is a better listener. She knows when something is bothering me...she always asks me to talk if she sees something bothering me. You always feel like she has enough time.

The thing about my mother is she doesn't get angry. She always just listens, and then tells me what she would do.

My mom is my world, no question.

It's funny because that's not how I thought it would be...maybe from films or whatever...I always thought my father would be giving me advice about sex...but I'm sitting there and my mother is talking about all this stuff...and I'm thinking how can this be my mother?

In contrast, boys typically thought of their fathers as teachers, and much of what their fathers have taught them has to do with moral conduct, being successful, and applying a good effort at difficult things. These insights are appreciated by boys, even as they expressed longing to connect with their fathers on a more personal level.

Basically he's taught me how to be a good man.

My father has taught me what good character is, and especially how to persevere. He knows me better than anyone else, so he's going to know when I could do better.

I'm exactly like my father, which actually scares me. I listen and I think that could be me saying these things one day. I don't want to be like that with my son, if I have one. I'm going to be a much better listener.

He has taught me how to treat girls...how to have honour in difficult situations.

Notably, few boys could recall doing memorable things with their fathers beyond going to sporting events, although they clearly value those experiences, often citing them as the seed of the father-son bond. Only about half of the boys interviewed indicated that their fathers had ever taught them to use tools, and in some cases, boys said that they had taught their fathers how to use tools. Very few boys had ever built something with their father, although most said they would greatly enjoy such opportunities.

Boys spoke pragmatically about their father's career obligations, often noting that their fathers had very little free time. Despite boys' pragmatism on this topic, their nonverbal communication

seemed to unequivocally convey **a strong longing for deeper connections with fathers**. Boys were less focused on peak experiences than time together. They were especially interested in some type of collaborative activity that could potentially signify the strength of the father-son bond.

Many boys' approach to school appears to be built on how they perceive that their fathers (and in some cases, mothers) approach work; **boys take pride in their ability to focus on a particular objective in the midst of chaos and distraction**.

My father has this amazing ability to work no matter how he feels. He could be exhausted but if he has work due the next day he'll still be in his office when I go to sleep...it can be frustrating but I respect his ability to get results.

My mother knows more about tools than my father. If it wasn't for my father I swear nothing would work in our house...we never discuss this...my mother fixes everything...it's how it's always been.

When I work for my father [at his restaurant] I try to take in everything. He knows how to run a business. I need to learn that because I want my own restaurant. My father emphasizes attitude, and I'm finally getting through on that.

My mother is a lawyer. Believe me you do not want to challenge her...at anything. I don't even like playing checkers with her. She thinks you only lose if you don't have the right logic.

## Worthy Son

When asked about their greatest fear, boys of all ages discuss their fear of not living up to their **potential**. In this sense, boys are clear about having a sense of personal responsibility to be the best student possible. Boys conveyed a perception of the world that suggests life is filled with fleeting opportunities, and one can't afford to let such opportunities pass them by.

However, an even greater priority for boys is to be a **worthy son**. Among virtually all boys, a highly reliable emotional incentive was the desire to live up to parental expectations. The strength of this need in boys' lives was well beyond what was anticipated. **Boys' awareness of their parents' expectations and idealizations is so strong that it is as if parents are ever-present members of their various classrooms. At moments of weakness or ambivalence, they defer to this presence as a source of strength and guidance.**

It is particularly important to note that the presence of this parent is a source of comfort rather than stress. Repeatedly, boys expressed profound appreciation for the gift of a good education, and their intention to be worthy of that gift. Approximately 90% of boys said that earning a parent's respect was more important to them than grades, although they understand how these two objectives are entwined. **The vast majority of boys were agreed that disappointing a parent was far worse than facing even a serious behavioral consequence.**

Oh my god, seeing the disappointment in their eyes is the worst. I'll do anything to avoid that. You feel so small..like you've betrayed them.

I don't even like to think about disappointing my mom. That's a serious failure...she'll forgive me, but I may not forgive myself...at least not for a while.

When you let them down, they make you feel like 'how could you do that.' At that moment you want to disappear, but you can't...you have to just accept that you haven't done your best. Sometimes you can correct it, but not always.

It's weird because I'm not sure I ever try my absolute best, but most times my parents think I do. Sometimes I use their comments to measure whether I made a good effort.

Boys readily acknowledged that they rarely, if ever, verbalize their appreciation or positive regard for parents, although they are firm in their belief that their parents are already aware of these feelings.

For me, my parents are a more powerful influence than anything that happens at school.

It may sound pathetic, but when I was younger I made my mother different gifts, or sent her notes. I've always just assumed she knows I still feel the same way. I know I shouldn't assume...

## Religious Values

Boys were queried about their perspectives on religion, religious practice, and their identification with religious principles set forth by schools. They were further asked how religion might have informed their understanding of life purpose. The degree to which religion affected daily thinking was one of the few factors in the study that differed markedly by country. Among project schools, boys in South Africa were most likely to indicate that religion was a dominant and helpful aspect of life, informing moral values and personal identity. Boys in Singapore and Australia echoed these sentiments but to a lesser degree. In North America, New Zealand, and the UK, religion was rarely endorsed as a source of significance in boys' lives, although boys at parochial schools do acknowledge that they frequently pray. There were also boys who stood in opposition to this attitude, asserting that religion was an important dimension of family life, and on two occasions, boys stated they would seek religious vocation.

Overall, boys expressed an ambivalent attitude toward religious practice, indicating that they sensed the benefit of religion's structure, but struggle with its dogmatic aspects. Where boys identified faith as an important source of personal guidance, it is most useful to them during "difficult times." This point inspired some debate about whether turning to religion only in times of crisis is how one should practice his faith.

It helps me when I'm down...it goes way back...my family, they always taught us to seek God. When I think of God it's hard to separate that from thinking about my family...when my brother was sick we all prayed...I don't know if it helped him as much as it helped us.

I believe God is always watching over me, and it helps me to feel like calm.

I hate the slowness of chapel. It takes forever, and half the time you have other things which really need to be done.

I disagree, to me chapel is one of the most important times of the day. I'm going to remember chapel when I leave here.

That's the point, you go even when there's not a crisis...that what faith is.



Students at a public parochial school conveyed an expectation of religious discipline, and accept that requirement because it is part of the school culture. Even so, a great many of the boys in Catholic school said they do not believe in religion, observing religious practice primarily because their family and school require it. Despite this assertion, reference to the infusion of religious doctrine in school culture was often cited as a source of strength and clarity. **There was a diffuse sense that school-religious values have permeated boys' lives, although boys had difficulty explaining how.**

I suppose religion helps you to become a good steward...it tells you, you have to take care of your friends if they have problems.

We did not choose to be religious so it makes it hard to accept. It doesn't mean that religion is bad...I can see how it could be useful...I don't know, maybe it's just that it gets forced down your throat so you tend to say, 'do I want this?'

We are really all religious whether we want to admit it or not. If you pray then you're religious. I can't see how it hurts.

No one is saying that it hurts, but I'm not Christian and it gets a little annoying having every point made with a Christian focus.

My parents always say just be open to it. You don't have to decide if Christianity is the right thing for you now...so I'm just going with the flow for now in my life. It's not that big of an issue for me.

I'm Jewish and there's not that many other boys in school that are Jewish. I don't really bring up religion, but it is a main part of family life.

There were also instances of anger and insistence that religion was a negative influence on boys' lives.

They can take their religion and do with it what they want. I think it's gross. I want no part of it.

I've been listening to these things...I guess you could call them ideas... for so many years... I just shut it out...what a huge waste of time.

It's an absurd responsibility in a modern society.

Interestingly, although boys were ambivalent about religious values, they were decidedly more interested in the philosophy and history of religion, and how history might frame daily experiences. Teachers commented that they see boys as having a variety of existential concerns which emerge in classroom discussions and in boys' written work. Teachers in secular schools expressed some frustration that they are limited in their latitude to address these concerns, but noted, *"we try to inculcate spiritual concepts within our honor code and school philosophy."* Boys' interest in having schools address existential questions was conveyed by comments such as the following:

I've had to deal with two deaths this year, and I'm still dealing with it. I feel like I need someone to teach me about death...we all have to deal with it, so why don't we talk about it?

What me and my family believe is different from what a lot of people at school believe... which is fine...when I need answers to spiritual questions I usually don't even mention it in school...it's better to wait until a good time with my family.

Finally, boys were asked to discuss the relationship between God and science, and how they co-exist. Generally, boys who believe in God took this question in stride, asserting that the two entities are complementary.

Science starts where God leaves off, or the other way around...it doesn't matter...it's not really a problem unless you actually believe in evolution...I don't.

My faith explains things to me that science can't. I would never look in a science book to figure out what to believe...and I'm not going to look in a bible for the cure to a disease...that's ridiculous. I don't see why people have to choose one over the other. My mom has always said we need God even when we think we don't.

But isn't science kind of a religion too?

## Social Competence

The enormous value of having friends is a major component of belonging for boys. In some cases, friends are thought of as a kind of social currency that confers status, and supports esteem. Friends are also of immeasurable importance to the psychological development of boys in the sense that they typically think of their identity as being defined by their circle of friends. Having more friends can increase the feeling of belonging, along with helping boys to better differentiate themselves from peers. **Going to a boys' school seems to make this experience a bit less cloudy for boys, and may well be an important reason why they speak so positively about single-sex education.**

Boys often said it is very important for others to “like me for who I am,” even though they are convinced that others like them for “who they think I am.” Participants reported spending significant amounts of time thinking about how they are seen by others, and typically assume that others also spend ample time thinking about them.

Everything I do is going to be judged...I know it is...you want to be sure of yourself...it's hard to change your reputation.

I spend a lot of time thinking about what I want to say...probably more than anyone else.

I don't feel like I do judge other people...I don't really care how someone acts or what friends they have...but I know of, or have at least heard of boys who have said certain things about me. I really don't mind it, but I want to be who I want to be...sometimes I have to like figure that out...it doesn't always just pop up.

I wore purple socks on one day last year and people still mention it...that tells me it matters. I have to live with that.

Friends are a primary way that boys get involved in doing and trying new things. **Almost by definition, doing something significant suggests to boys that it will be done with one's friends—at least until age 16 or 17.** Most boys agreed they would be more willing to experiment with a new activity if they could work collaboratively with friends—although the youngest boys were most willing to voice this preference without a sense of vulnerability. In contrast, the prospect of doing something significant, by oneself, feels uncomfortably lonely to boys until later adolescence.

It depends, if it's for all of us... we're all going to be doing it then I'm in...but I wouldn't want to give up a weekend if it's only me...I don't care what the project is.

Sir, something like that should be an important memory in your life...I reckon memories like that are going to come from doing something with your mates. No disrespect, but the teacher is going to matter less than mates.

Well, I actually wouldn't mind the challenge of being alone...it would be different. I don't know how much I could accomplish but it would be interesting to see.

Alone or with friends...whatever is fine...it's just another thing I have to do...I guess it's another obstacle to overcome. I've been doing this since I started school, so whatever...bring it on.

The self-appraisal of younger boys is marked by ambivalence about their social competence. While boys of this age expressed a desire to search for elements of their core selves, they are not infrequently anxious about what they find there. For example, 10–13 year-old boys commented on an awareness of being sensitive to the comments and actions of others. They were genuinely grateful to reveal this sensitivity in the dialogues, and expressed further appreciation for teachers who help them to feel more comfortable through self-disclosure or personal storytelling.

Mr....told this story about his English teacher that cracked everybody up....well, I think his point was you're going to have difficult times, but so does everybody else. Mr.... has a way of making it part of a story.

Afterwards he [teacher]said to me he'd look out for me, don't be afraid to speak up in class... but I probably wouldn't have the trust except I've seen Mr....do it for other students. If you laugh at the wrong time in his class...like if you laugh at somebody at the wrong time, he'll let you know. I'd have him every year if I could.

You can't expect me to say what I think if you won't do the same.

Boys of color tended to refer to their race and ethnicity as a significant aspect of personal identity, and something they hoped would be acknowledged by peers in a friendly and open manner. These boys appear to spend more time thinking about how they are perceived by others than boys who are caucasian. Within the context of the dialogues, discussion of this topic was a notable point of vulnerability for boys of color, and although other boys appeared to appreciate the importance of this issue as it was being discussed, their appreciation was often expressed through silence and stillness rather than verbal feedback or disclosure of their own feelings.

Among upper school boys interviewed, several subtly identified themselves as being gay, and conveyed a belief that this aspect of their identity was already known to most of the peers in the interview group. Where sexual identity was alluded to, there were no discernible indications of discomfort among the boys interviewed. In several dialogues, older boys sought to explore situations of personal vulnerability through hypothetical situations involving a friend or classmate who was gay. Boys appeared invested in demonstrating an attitude of acceptance toward gay males, although many participants chose to remain more reserved on this topic.

An essential form of competence to lower and middle school boys is the development of **social awareness**. Although boys are aware that adults measure their success primarily along academic lines, boys themselves give greater weight to the task of managing social relationships. Younger boys are surprised at how many personality differences can be found among their classmates, although they generally believe those differences are a matter of free will. By extension, these boys viewed the task of staking out their own social identity as a serious undertaking, and a task to which one has to be highly committed.

There are many decisions you have to make all the time...you never know which one you'll be remembered for.

I'm in the lead part in the school play, and everyone knows it so they're like 'congratulations.' It used be I was known for basketball, but no one mentions that. Being in the play is really big here...it's how you'll always be thought of. It's good and bad.

Everyone is different and kind of the same...it's confusing because you like different things, which may not be what your friends like.

It would be better if I were more like American TV...Americans always seem content with what they're up to...actually they're always ridiculously excited...is that how it really is? How real is *Glee*?

The social dynamics of power are clearly a significant part of the school experience for boys. It is expressed through incessant academic competition, and the frequent jockeying for position that goes on inside and outside of classrooms. Teachers are also well aware of this dynamic, and noted that managing the tension of power and status is essential to effectively leading a classroom. One teacher commented, *"the most powerful force in the classroom is how boys regard one another, with respect or with fear."*

Social status is a complex phenomenon among boys, and a topic they enjoyed discussing. Boys talked openly about their desire for social status, although what they imply by "status" is somewhat divergent. For some boys it simply means being highly popular and positively regarded by peers.

Popularity makes you significant, and significance equals status.

For other boys, status seems to mean winning the respect of peers by defying the norm, and in some cases, authority. An example of this phenomenon was noted by a teacher who referred to low grades as *"giving boys clout among the disaffected."*

By middle school, boys are quick to comment that their social lives are "far more complicated than our parents realize." Boys wish that their parents understood how important it is to make the "right moves" socially. They expressed frustration that their parents assume that the social challenges of a generation ago are the same as those that boys encounter today.

My mum tells me she understands, but it's just talk. I know she doesn't...if she did...I don't know...maybe she'd be more understanding...she'd realize it can be hell.

They know some things, but they never had *Facebook*...oh man, that changes things...it's constant...oh man, you have to use it to know...really, my parents don't know anything about *Facebook*.

Some boys feel that school is “unrealistic” because it does not teach you social skills. This is a particularly strong concern for boys age 14 and older. Boys perceive that social skills instruction is fundamental to their personal success. **Teachers concurred that boys do not get enough guidance and training in social awareness.** Boys were asked to identify and rank topics which they would like their respective schools to teach them more about; social skills was the consensus priority, with “technology” being 2nd, and life skills (home economics) being 3rd.

An important personal measure of significance in boys’ lives was their relative ability to be persuasive, and especially to change someone’s mind. Specifically, **the capacity to use one’s words to change the behavior of others signals to boys that they have acquired an important form of social power.** In the case of persuasion, boys were more likely to believe that is their intelligence and insight that are most central to persuasion. However, knowledge of facts and techniques is also highly valued.

If other people are paying attention to what I say I know they like me, at least they like what I have to say...that’s kind of like being popular but maybe even more important.

There is nothing better than guys thinking you are smart...I know this sounds rude, but it’s the truth. Tell me you don’t like that...it’s awesome, it’s the best acceptance you can get.

If I can argue my point well I feel good. I don’t have to win every debate, but you just want to see that little sign in someone’s eye that you changed them. That’s happened to me twice.

One of the things that makes this year [Year 10] so much better than like two years ago is that your teachers actually listen to you...you could actually change their opinion...you feel more like an adult because your ideas actually matter.

I hate to tell you this, but they’ve got you fooled. Our ideas don’t matter all that much. You think your ideas matter...try suggesting less homework. Think about it.

The significance of being influential is elemental to boy’s sense of status. Interestingly, **boys expressed much more interest in being influential through spoken language than in written language.** Repeatedly, they discussed the importance of being “listened” to. This aspect of the dialogues seemed to echo boys’ fascination with performance, and particularly their strong interest in combining performance and wit.

The energy invested in this topic stood in stark contrast to boys’ discussion of text-based social communication. The reported ubiquitous use of *Facebook* is a good example. **The vast majority of boys interviewed reported that *Facebook* consumes three or more hours of their day.** Although they are merely monitoring *Facebook* for most of this time, rather than interacting with it as a sole activity, there is a sense of dread as they describe their obligation to continually check new posts on *Facebook*. More than 300 boys were asked if they would rather give up music or *Facebook*—not a single boy said he would give up music. A cohort of boys in England seemed to capture the majority perspective of boys worldwide:

*Facebook* is an essential waste of time.

**The strong consensus among boys using social networking (about 95% of all boys age 14 and older) is that it is a non-productive obligation which they would prefer did not exist.** The vast majority of boys stated they would like to give up *Facebook* and would gladly do so—as long as everyone else is going to give it up as well.

Having reviewed the dialogues in depth there is no question that belonging and influence is an important dimension of significance in boys' lives. More specifically, belonging and influence seem to represent a critical continuum; belonging represents a foundation of safety, while influence represents a broadening of safety into personal agency. Clearly, one must precede the other but the great majority of boys need to feel influential, at least in some circumstances, in order to feel strong and capable. With respect to *verbal influence*, it is particularly important to note how strongly boys value spoken communication relative to written communication. There are certainly exceptions to this rule, including a small cohort of boys who have described themselves as budding writers. Overall, however, the intense interest in being an effective communicator via speech appears to echo boys' expressed interest in gaining better social skills, having more sophisticated emotional intelligence, and in understanding the nuances of social power. Yet even understanding this desire on the part of boys does not yet tell us how they might want to leverage influence. To what end will boys use their prospective powers of speech, and how does a foundation of safe belonging and strategic influence support the possibility of transcendence? The shape of that process is understood by appreciating the decidedly pragmatic perspective most boys adopt in thinking about purpose and significance. Exploring boys' thoughts on these issues begins with understanding what activities boys find transcendent, and what factors make them so. This is where we turn our attention next.

### III. Pragmatic Transcendence

**Perhaps the most fundamental reason** for exploring significance in boys' lives is to uncover which experiences they find to be transcendent, and why. By transcendent, I am referring to those activities and experiences that have meaning for boys beyond the fulfillment of obligations. The difficulty of studying this topic involves being clear enough that boys understand the focus of inquiry, yet open enough to accommodate a broad range of thoughts and commentary. Language played a key role in this area of inquiry because once the word "significance" or "transcendence" was introduced, boys began filtering dialogue questions through their subjective understanding of those words. During the first year of the study it became increasingly clear that while boys experienced transcendence in their lives, such experiences were rarely the result of doing something that had been intentionally framed as "transcendent." Specifically, those experiences that did rise to the level of transcendence often did so by surprise, or because of a unique and complex interaction of social, emotional, and cognitive factors.

For example, engaging in a difficult task is far more meaningful to a great majority of boys if it is done in cooperation with friends. Simply having accomplished an important task in cooperation with a friend makes that accomplishment significant. Even basic challenges such as preparing for an exam become more meaningful if done with peers. Yet knowing how social circumstances inspire feelings of transcendence only leads to greater curiosity about the prospective purpose of cooperative activities. What is that boys really want to do that changes their perception of themselves and the world? How common are these experiences in boys' lives? From what elements of the experience is meaning derived?

If there is a common denominator to these questions it would be that boys are likely to be *agents of action* in experiences that they find transcendent. To illustrate: boys occasionally discussed films that they found moving and transformational in their own thinking, but few boys would say that watching a great film is as transformational as doing something that left their mark on the world. The transcendence boys seek often has practical origins. In most cases, the transcendence has a visible or audible outcome. Its significance comes, in part, from scale—its largeness is proof of its value. In most cases it is an activity that results in being admired. The transcendence that attracts boys is pragmatic less by choice than its evidentiary reality; it is something one can see and, ideally, touch.

The boys in the study conveyed a clear understanding that school is a testing ground for challenges to come. They consistently expressed an earnest desire to meet the challenges put before them. Their anticipation of these challenges is essentially distilled as: do well in school, stay out of trouble, go to university, get a good job, and live a responsible life. However, an understanding of these expectations does not preclude an awareness that life gets more exciting when choices and actions have bigger consequences. The transcendence that shapes boys' hopes and dreams foreshadows those sorts of choices and situations. The emotional effect of these prospective experiences is powerful, reinforcing self-efficacy and personal relevance. More than anything else, these are hopes about the desire to be taken seriously.



## The Power of Positive Regard

If there is an emotive force drawing boys towards transcendent activities, it is the possibility, and indeed hope, of being perceived with high regard by family and school. The focus of the regard has a tendency to vary, although the sentiment that seems to connect disparate groups of boys is a desire to be taken seriously. Often, it feels as though boys cannot let go of a degree of personal restlessness until they have achieved a serious and sincere appreciation for their actions.

I just wanted him to see that I could do it. I knew that I could but I need him to know that I could...why is it so hard, why does it take so long to get there? I probably could've done that two years ago but he's just seeing it now... it's actually a huge relief.

I'm not going to lie, I want people to be like dazzled.

We're always writing these short, little essays about our opinions. It could be something you like, or about a current event, which is all fine. But there's a feeling these assignments are just exercises, just exercises. I almost feel like if our perspectives really mattered we would do something about them rather than writing them down.

Although the need to be taken seriously works its way into discussion with older boys more frequently than it does with younger boys, there were boys in groups of every age who connected with this idea and discussed its relevance for their esteem and sense of personal capability. Teachers added to this awareness in stating *"Our boys are eager for opportunity to prove themselves. Every year the cycle starts again. They are constantly being tested but it's not the same as being able to demonstrate your maturity in terms of acquired skill, insight, and follow-through."*

In probing this issue with boys it seemed as though they sometimes lead "double" lives as part of an agreement to subordinate themselves to the hierarchies of life and school culture. For example, within the scope of fifteen minutes boys might be providing a detailed argument for the value of "saying what you think," without regard for what others think, as well as an eloquent explanation for why they sometimes suppress personal ideas and perspective where such expressions are inappropriate. The subtext of these ideas seems to be an awareness of social conventions, and a willingness to be compliant even where emotional instinct might suggest otherwise.

Although the dialogues led to a conclusion that boys were eager to be taken seriously, they never made that point explicitly. Rather, the great majority of boys seemed far more eager to do things that would lead them to be recognized as worthy of serious regard.

I wouldn't do that.... it's boastful... if you really can then you shouldn't have to boast... I've always been taught that if you do it well eventually you will be given credit. Waiting is a part of life... how do you get around that?

I also believe waiting is part of life, but then again you can wait too long. A great victory isn't something you wait for.

If you volunteer and don't get picked you wonder why you didn't. It makes you think about volunteering again.

You could be thinking 'pick me' even though you know everyone wants to be picked first... it's an honor...it's all good.

Throughout the dialogues there was an implicit suggestion in boys' responses that life gets better as one gets older. In part, this improvement is believed to stem from being more respected as one gets older. In most boys' minds, freedom and respect are two key pillars of the aging process. Boys described coveting those moments when they see they are being respected and acknowledged for important accomplishments. There is no single example that fully embodies this type of interaction as described by study participants. However, the word "capable" was used frequently by boys, and could generally be interpreted as an acknowledgement of competence. In most cases, the affirmation boys sought was a kind of emotional sustenance—its presence in the lives of boys appears to be more critical than the action or attribute it might be associated with.

## Meaningful Fear

As a means of introducing productive tension into the dialogues, boys were asked about their greatest fear of failure. **A significant existential fear of boys across socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups is the possibility that they will not fulfill their individual promise.** As discussed earlier in this report, boys often feel as though they have been given a special opportunity to attend a quality school and want to be worthy of that opportunity. Living up to one's potential also had to do with boys having the self-discipline to exert sufficient effort. Interestingly, the opposite scenario was also described as having value. For example, boys noted that failure has a purpose in life, including that it "wakes you up."

What's that saying, 'if it doesn't kill you, you'll be better next time?'

You learn the most from what you fail at.

I think that sometimes I subconsciously want to fail...I need to for some reason.

My father says learn from your mistakes...I guess he's learned from his mistakes...you're just never allowed to mention them around him.

The fear of failing one's potential was particularly strong among boys who sense that they are in a position of upward mobility. Boys as young as 11 or 12 were articulate in explaining the opportunities that a good education affords, and worried that such opportunity may slip away if they become too complacent. Along with the fear of missed possibilities, is a concern that the flame of enthusiasm might be suddenly extinguished; that boys will lose the passion they perceive is necessary to "push through pain" and succeed in life.

Right now I have an edge in most sport and I don't ever want to lose it but I could you know... if I don't practice being the best, if I don't believe I'm the best it could just well...

If you're not the best it can be you have failed, maybe not completely failed, but you have failed on some level.

Well, you want to have a good life and a good life means working hard. I can accept working hard now for the rewards later on. Everyone might not agree, but for me I want to live well and I will do what it takes.

If you ask me the difference between this school and the school I used to go to, the difference is the boys here know what they want out of life...or at least many of us do. That's why I fit

in better here. I may decide to run my parents' farm but I want to know that I have choices and whatever I do I want to be good enough at it that I get paid well.

I try to think to myself, you know, whenever someone says about how hard I have to work, you have to show me the money. I don't mean to be like that but it helps me. It will help me to get where I need to go. If you just want money it's greed, but if you want money for a better life, for status, it's different. I know a dude that has no money, but he has status... that's not me though, and that's all right.

Another compelling force related to boys' fear of failure had to do with being the best at something. This need seemed to be less related to self-esteem than a strong need to distinguish oneself from other boys in a meaningful way. This interest seemed to be an antecedent of a more mature drive for expertise, credentials and specialization that boys associate with professionally-oriented men.

Most educators are in strong agreement with this observation noting that, "*Boys feel immense pressure to be great at something.*" When queried directly about this possibility, boys were hesitant to identify "greatness" as a personal ambition. The great majority of boys described their ideal accomplishments in more modest terms, and tended to be more focused on achieving personal happiness than extraordinary merit in the minds of others.

I don't need to be great but I do need to be good. I don't think you can decide to be great, you can only determine to be good, and then greatness is out of your control. It's either luck or what other people think.

I'll admit that I have fantasized about doing something spectacular, but I don't really see that happening. It could happen... it might happen if that's what I decided I want to do... it's not something you have control of at this point in your life.

Why isn't every person great already? I think they are. I don't know how I am great...I believe, I guess, that I am because I am human. I don't think you should have to justify your existence for three meals a day and a roof over your head.

I think if your family looks up to you, if they believe in you, they trust you to do what's right for them, you're a great person. My father may not be a great man when other people look at him but I know what he's done for our family and he is a great man...nothing is going to change my mind on that.

My grandfather was kind of famous but he never seemed as happy as my grandmother.

## Purposeful Work

This report has addressed various sources of anxiety in boys' lives, including worry about meeting parental expectations, and concern about not living up to personal potential. However, there was another dominant anxiety in boys' lives related to their longer-term happiness and fulfillment. It is a concern echoed by boys in all countries, and lies at the core of boys' understanding of why education and school performance are important. Specifically, **boys robustly indicate that their greatest long-term fear is not having a career that is fulfilling.** Boys astutely differentiated between work that pays well and work that is authentic, interesting and satisfying. If there was a single

platform on which they believe their long-term happiness rests, it is the hope of finding congruent work. In many cases, belief about the importance of work had been learned at home.

My parents really enjoy what they do...it makes the long days worthwhile, at least for them.

If I believed I was going to be like my father, then I don't know...I won't do that...nothing is worth that.

My mother has shown me the path for my life. In the village where I grew up my mother is the one you go to, to talk...she cares for everybody. What she does is more than work.

I truly can't see why surfing should not be my work...it doesn't seem obvious how to do it, but it never does until you do it.

This study hypothesized that boys are eager to activate latent physical and cognitive capabilities in the service of completing some type of *purposeful work*. Boys were queried intensively on what types of work they had done in their lives outside of school. Most boys said they were actively engaged in helping out around their home. For example, they mow lawns, shovel snow, and help with interior work such as washing dishes, vacuuming floors, and cooking. None of the boys indicated that they were offended by being asked to perform these types of labor, and most said that it was a routine part of family life. Boys who came from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds tended to be more vocal about the necessity of helping out at home, although all boys seemed to take some pride in making a contribution at home.

Although boys acknowledged the necessity of chores, none found them to be particularly meaningful. Few boys describe ever having done work of a practical nature that has increased their sense of autonomy or mastery. In most dialogues, boys conflated the notion of work with labor.

I do whatever they tell me to...it's not a huge deal...I really don't care what it is...it's just work...it's just another thing I have to do before I can do whatever.

If you're asking whether I enjoy my chores, I'd say no...does anyone enjoy chores?

Pressed to describe what type of work they might enjoy, boys named a great variety of professions and careers more relevant to their futures than their lives at the present. In an effort to probe more deeply, boys were given several examples of activities that would be viable for their peer group. In addition, they were asked to consider the responsibilities and "work" of boys their age a century ago. Most boys found it difficult to reconcile how much more practically skilled and autonomous boys were a century ago. Often, they intellectualized about this issue, seemingly to make sense of their own lives.

Things were different then...it's not a fair comparison because society has changed...life is more complex now...you can be sued if you make mistakes.

It's well and good to captain a ship, but I don't necessarily believe that's more difficult than a field like computer science. I think it's better to be successful with your brain than whatever you need to captain a ship.

Actually, you do need intelligence to go to sea, but it's a different kind of intelligence, and that type of person might not be a good student.

What difference does it make what people our age used to do? We're living now, and we have to do what's right now.

Allowing various rationalizations to surface about the lack of practical skill or craft in boys' lives enabled participants to engage in projection about doing non-academic work. Although there was no consensus about the type of work boys might like to do, there was substantial agreement about the **ideal attributes** of such work. In order for those attributes to fully emerge, participants were asked about hypothetical work activities such as building a monument to their school's athletes in a visible city location, working on a multidisciplinary team to address climate change, building a boat, designing a primary school, etc. Emerging from these discussions was the following list of attributes:

### **Novelty**

I don't want to do something that's been done. What's the use of that?

Energy comes from something new.

Different is better.

### **Difficulty**

They have good ideas at school, but it's really too simple...I want to be challenged...you're not going to get credit for doing something simple.

### **Scale**

The reason I'd do that is because it would get attention. That would make it fun.

Massive effort is going to have a massive effect.

I don't want to spend my time building a birdhouse, I'd rather build a real house. My brother did that and he went to a regular school.

### **Collaboration**

If I'm with friends I'll stick with it, otherwise no guarantee.

I wouldn't know how to begin alone.

### **Recognition**

Everyone could see what we have done...

I'd prefer to have my name carved in stone...I can see my mother's face when she sees that...whoa!

### **Skill**

I begged my grandfather to teach me how to use bigger tools...I always wanted to use them...smaller things aren't that impressive...you need to show technique.

### Mastery

I wouldn't want to spend that much time unless there was a chance I could be one of the best that has ever tried it. I know myself and I get bored if I don't get really good at something quickly.

### Legacy

Because we would always be remembered...we would be a part of the school's history.

Right now I'd do it more for fun, but someday I would look back and probably be happy with what I had accomplished.

I'd rather be remembered for the kind of person and friend I am than for any thing I did, but I guess they could go together...is that what you're saying?

### Self-definition

We need practical ways to find out what we like, and what we should do.

One of the most striking observations during this part of the dialogues was the distance between what boys think of themselves as being capable of, and what they could actually do. Boys themselves appeared to be struck by this chasm, although the dialogues helped to bridge that awareness gap. For example, when hypothetical scenarios were first introduced, most boys sat relatively motionless—there was a palpable sense of resistance and confusion about the relevance of the questions. As discussion progressed, however, boys relaxed and began to consider alternative roles and values. **This observation suggests special attention be paid to the difference between boys' ability to name vs. recognize potential sources of significance in their lives.**

This fundamental bias toward recognition over naming is consistent with the prevailing cognitive style of boys. However, that aspect of boys' nature has apparent liabilities with respect to estimating one's interests, strengths, and capabilities. For example, most boys' understanding of what they are good at was based on a few chance experiences. Within the scope of boys' lives these experiences take on signifying importance—often out of proportion to the quality of the experience itself. One boy commented that he knew he wanted to be an architect because, given the choice, he always drew buildings. Another boy thought he might be a restaurateur on the strength of his ability to make custom calzones.

Overall, boys' difficulty naming what is important, significant, or purposeful seems to stem from a lack of experience testing themselves in this regard. Although boys recognize that school is a place where aspects of their skill and character will be tested, their primary orientation to these "tests" is that of *recognizing* expectations put forth by others. Being asked to *name* personally transformational challenges was a more complex and disorienting experience for boys. Listening to boys grapple with this question, however, suggested that they find the topic relevant and would engage it more deeply given a forum for doing so.

## Approaching Manhood

The dialogues reinforced the notion that boys don't always need exceptional opportunities to discover transcendence. Simply crossing the hurdles of growing up was a powerful and affirmative experience for most participants. The experience of maturing becomes most transcendent as boys grapple with the emergence of manhood; feelings of responsibility, a sense of self-reliance, and the acceleration of sexual attraction. Generally, these are welcome changes, inspiring boys to think more reflectively and strategically about their future. **Overall, it was boys' beliefs about a man's level of autonomy that they found most appealing about becoming men.**

I'm looking forward to it...adults seem less stressed than we are.

A man can change things alone.

I will probably have different worries, and they may be more serious at times, but overall I believe life can and will get better.

You can get tired of asking permission all the time...a man can do what he wants as long as he's not breaking the law.

**Boys discussed that they become men by doing something important, by accepting responsibility, having goals, and by caring for others.** Among boys older than 12, there was consensus that becoming a man means not only knowing the right thing to do, but also acting on those convictions. The majority of boys believe that manhood is attained gradually. Much of this autonomy, according to boys of all ages, is linked to earning money and being able to pay one's own way. For younger boys, the ability to pay one's own way is not only a matter of earning money but grasping the mechanics of how money is spent.

Becoming a man means knowing how to use a credit card.

Coming to terms with masculinity proved to be a highly engaging topic for older boys. Although participants had many different perspectives of masculinity, their most poignant intuitions had to do with masculinity and interdependence. For example, "a man can give and receive a compliment or apology." This awareness seemed to reflect the courage required to be vulnerable with another male. In virtually every school, older boys believed that empathy for others requires strength and maturity.

You become a man when you're of more use to others than they are to you...I don't mean that negatively, I mean that a man is someone who can be counted upon.

I'd say being a man means having the ability for kindness...when you think about it what do I want from my father and what do I want to be for others...kindness.

You have to know your mind. You have to make decisions, even if they're unpopular.

Being a man is a state of mind, sir. You're ready when you're ready. I can't say when that will be.

**When boys are asked at what age they expect to become men, they answer anywhere from the age of 13 to 30.** Interestingly, boys' answer to this question was reasonably well predicted by their



current age. For example, 10–11 year-old boys often saw the onset of manhood as 13, and typically no later than age 18. In contrast 17–18 year-old boys preferred to defer manhood for as long as possible, often dating its commencement to age 25 or older. In essence, the closer boys were to actually being an adult, the less eager they were to acquire that designation and its incumbent responsibilities.

Some boys perceive attendance at a university as an essential passage to manhood (the contemporary “vision quest”), while others view it as being in a holding pattern. A small cohort of middle school boys saw manhood as being related to religious rituals such as a bar mitzvah. Generally, it is the depth of preparation and seriousness involved in such rituals that framed those rituals as a step toward manhood for boys.

Boys would generally like a more structured passage to manhood, although they are apprehensive about having any person or group challenge them to “work harder.” Most boys conveyed anxiety that if schools, families, or communities were to become more actively engaged in helping them to become men, it could result in being put under even greater pressure. More specifically, **boys express concern that their lives are already saturated with evaluation of their “effort.”**

I wouldn't mind being challenged and everything, but then you have to take something away.

We're already doing a lot. I can't think of any free time for myself...I think others would say the same.

People complain about boys being competitive, some people...if you want us to be less competitive, then stop judging us...you always have to be like [switched] on.

The happiest day of my life will be finishing my last test...tests literally make me sick to my stomach, and I've probably taken hundreds of them...it's a miracle I'm still alive.

A major component of maturation for boys at IBSC schools is **deciding how to lead**. This was a universal theme, and appeared to reflect a frequently reinforced principle of boys' education. Perspectives on leadership varied according to the age of participants. For example, middle school boys desire the recognition of leadership but are wary of the responsibility. This disposition may be best reflected in the comment “I want to lead without directing.”

The youngest participants in the study primarily saw the potential for leadership through demonstrating exemplary behavior, and this was often validated by feedback from a legitimate source of authority.

She [teacher] made me the leader because I'm always finished on time.

You only get to be the leader if you're consistent. I don't mind that because it's the rule, and you know the rules.

Among older boys, leadership was often associated with a willingness to deviate from a group when necessary. It seemed cathartic for boys to discuss this process within the context of a group gathered for the purpose of listening carefully to each other. However, there was some difference in boys' willingness to express their opinions on this point. Generally, only those boys age 17 and older were confident in asserting the value of discrepant actions and opinions. However, among this

group, there was great enthusiasm for doing so. This observation seems to reflect a burst of courage and individuality that emerges as boys are preparing to complete preparatory schooling. The best illustration of this tendency occurred in Christchurch, New Zealand during an eventful meeting with upper school boys. (It has been my intention throughout this report to guard the identity of participants. This particular interaction is striking for its situation, as well as the intensity of boys' engagement in the dialogues. It is reported here in near *verbatim* form, without revealing specific individuals or sensitive, personal content.)

(Boy 1) That's absurd, I can't believe you'd say that.

(Boy 2) Well you can believe what you'd like, but that is what I believe.

(Boy 3) He's right. Leave him alone...relax and listen.

(Boy 1) I'm not attacking him, I'm simply questioning the idea that heroism has anything to do with leadership.

(Boy 2) That's not what I said exactly. You're shaping things for your own purpose...you've been doing that for years. [group laughs]

(Boy 4) No he's not, he's just arguing a point, and he's doing it well.

[Protracted and very strong earthquake aftershock suddenly rumbles the room, dramatically halting conversation.]

(Boy 5) Ah, another one.

(Boy 2) We should be used to that by now.

(Boy 1) Anyway, don't lose the point...you don't become a leader through a single heroic act.

(Boy 3) You could.

(Boy 1) Well maybe you could, but it's not likely.

(Boy 3) How do you know? I reckon that leaders are made not born. Otherwise, what's the point?

(Boy 1) That's a strong opinion...I'm not sure I agree. Really, I can't believe we've attended the same school.

(Boy 6) We've been at the same school, but we might listen to different music if you get the point.

Transcendence is a visible aspect of boys' lives once we know where and how to look for it. Typically, it is found in the pragmatic activities and interests that dominate their time. There are some boys who overtly expressed interest in learning the meaning of life, but for the greater majority, meaning is found in successfully meeting the requirements of growing up. Still, boys demonstrated a strong ability to visualize themselves engaging in transcendent work. Discussion of this topic accelerated the tempo of dialogue, increased energy, and appeared to infect boys with a sense of possibility beyond what most participants had previously considered. That transcendence should be found in

pragmatic forms in boys' lives speaks to how integral their life experiences are; meaning is not something that is found within the context of a dedicated "meaning" activity, but rather, is found in understanding the relevance of one's immediate actions to one's broader purpose or goals. In some ways, this attitude may reflect recent generational shifts. For example, the increasing interest of youth in blurring the boundaries between work and play. Perhaps boys are telling us that at this moment in history compartmentalization is antiquated—a purposeful life is one in which all varieties of human activity need to be understood and harvested for their relevance.

## IV. “Real-Time” Achievement

**From the earliest days of this study’s dialogues** the role of achievement in boys’ lives commanded serious consideration. By the second year of the study, examples of boys’ achievement had been well-established and recorded. Boys had little difficulty explaining which achievements they prize. Whatever anxiety they might have had in disclosing the details of other areas of their lives did not seem to touch their discussion of achievement. There seemed to be a reflex among boys to discuss achievement whenever the dialogues began to probe concepts related to meaning. In this regard, it seemed that achievement was the most automatic way in which boys identify robust sources of meaning in their lives. To encounter the stories and examples of achievement provided by boys, is to be impressed by ambition and the scope of personal interests.

The duration of the study provided time to reflect on boys’ achievement, what it means to them, and how to inquire about it in what would hopefully be a more revealing way. Almost always, boys were observed to be working hard to “sell” the merits of their individual achievements. This might have been a response to their perception of study questions, including the possibility that boys felt judged. As a listener, it felt more like boys were invested in convincing themselves of the merits of what they have accomplished. With this hypothesis in mind, an effort was made to shift the dialogues away from the recording of past achievements, toward the imagination of future ones. In doing so, three core qualities of achievement emerged as essential to boys—if they are to engage achievements which have larger life significance; **urgency, necessity, and recognition**. These achievement attributes appear to fuel the adrenal response of boys’ “**real time**” achievement.

### Urgency

Boys often talked about being **engaged by risk**, and their perception that risk is related to adventure. **Most boys would like more time for risk in their lives.** Risk was associated with notable benefits, including a high level of fun, and the sense that, at least in some cases, one is doing something very important. It could be an important social accomplishment such as intervening in a circumstance where another’s personal safety is at stake, or it could be physically dangerous such as attempting to break a skiing record, or venture deep into wilderness without much safety support.

Boys also relate risk to moments of vulnerability. The overwhelmingly popular example of such a moment is having to perform and speak in front of other boys. Younger boys were particularly self-conscious about their high voices, prompting one participant to rationalize about the situation:

Boys are actually born with low voices, but our high voice comes out when we sing, and it’s supposed to come out then because singing is how you prevent your voice from getting stuck at a high pitch. You have to have the courage to sing to get your low voice back for when you grow up.

Upper school boys are fearful of making a public mistake, and especially, looking foolish. In talking about stress, however, older boys noted that stress—including a sense of urgency—is often a positive factor in their lives.

It [stress] guides my life.

You need stress, everyone does, you can't function without it.

It depends on the kind of stress. If you're sick, that's stress, but it's bad stress. If you have limited time left in some sort of competition, it could actually help. Personally, I eat stress up.

I don't like deadlines but I couldn't survive without them...my dad's the same.

Boys indicate that urgency stimulates their problem-solving capabilities, and that motion stimulates creativity. For example, a number of boys say they do their best critical thinking while skiing, snowboarding, or running.

Generally, educators agree with boys about the advantages of risk: *"We need to let kids take more risks. How are they supposed to learn about themselves without risk? When I think back about the most important experiences of my own adolescence, they all involved more risk than 90% of the boys I teach ever experience."*

Boys do not explicitly relate stress to urgency, but the great majority of situations they think of involving risk incorporate an element of time—something of skill and difficulty has to be completed within a limited time frame. The contributions of stress and risk to catharsis are also well understood by older boys as underscored by the insight:

You put everything at stake—it can build up or collapse—it's like a crucial moment when you're risking your reputation.

Although **competition** was widely discussed by boys as a source of meaning and enjoyment in their lives, it was not universally important to boys. The dialogues suggested that school context has much to do with how boys perceive competition. Older boys discuss wanting to compete more against themselves than other people, but are unclear how they can work on this other than to get good grades. These boys seemed eager for more natural and immediate opportunities to test themselves against various measures of competence and autonomy, and especially for challenges that involved a degree of urgency. The validity of this hypothesis was best assessed by presenting upper school boys with a hypothetical scenario in which they might feel called to action. For example, *"Let's suppose that your Headmaster suddenly came into this meeting, stating that he had just received a call from a local official requesting the assistance of at least six boys from this school to help with an emerging situation in the city center. You will be expected to work late into the evening, be on time for school tomorrow, and give up a good part of your weekend. You should be prepared to get dirty, avoid danger, work closely with others, and be able to tolerate foul language. How many of you might volunteer?"*

**More than 90% of boys interviewed expressed an eagerness to participate in the described activity.** Simply presenting the scenario triggered a strong adrenal response among boys that suggests they are eager to make such urgent possibilities a reality.

I'm in.

Can we go now?

Strength and Honor sir.

Beyond competition, how schools identify the attributes and significant contributions of students has a formative effect on what boys value, and how they assign importance to various achievements. Among boys with a less athletic orientation there was often a hope for more validation of their individual strengths and interests. There was never a sense of resentment toward the focus placed on sport, so much as there was a desire to be a recognized and valued member of the school community.

I made this short film that was shown at an assembly, actually you might have seen it, that was really great to have happen. I'd rather have something that I created be seen by other people than anything else.

Every boy wants to be in the play...everybody knows who's in it, and the teachers know and they say things...it just makes you feel good.

If you talk about wanting to design and make pants you might as well be on another planet.

**Notably, boys also see urgency in the requirement to stay focused. More specifically, many boys understand focus as an issue of stamina and personal character.** There was some indication that these precepts are inculcated by parents, yet there was also some indication that these beliefs flow from the “brotherhood” of being at a boys’ school.

My attention is my responsibility.

Staying focused is everything in everything I do. But it's ridiculous because sometimes I'm daydreaming about being super focused.

You see other guys focusing and you want to do the same. That was the first thing that surprised on my first day of school here. Like why is everybody so focused? Now I'm like that.

Some teachers have a pragmatic way of understanding boys’ concern about focus, and its relationship to the flow of school, noting that: *“The school day is all peaks and no valleys. Nature abhors a vacuum.”*

One unique approach to managing boys’ attention was widely discussed at one school, among boys between 9 and 11. Essentially, boys described an intervention called “flop,” during which they would flop on the ground for several minutes as they were transitioning between various activities, especially between outdoor and indoor activities. Boys noted that “flopping” helped them to regain their focus, settle down, and more successfully ready themselves for the next school activity. Because of “flop,” the school day had to be extended to accommodate flop time—yet I did not interview a single boy who would trade in “flop” for a shorter school day. In addition, the ritual and tradition of flop seemed to have become an important source of school identity to boys—it was repeatedly described as “cool.” The success of flops also seems to be a remarkable testament to boys’ own perception about how critical it is to sustain executive thinking skills—flopping has converted the metacognitive aspect of self-regulation into a fun tradition whose logic is crystal clear to its participants.

Boys reported divergent views on how their personality affects their ability to focus. For example, not all boys feel as though school makes it harder to focus.

At school I am more kind and less crazy.

I have more self control and I don't tease as much.

As soon as school starts I feel different—sometimes I think I should sleep at school, it would be easier to get up in the morning.

Boys of all ages discussed their private battles with complacency. There is widespread recognition among boys about the value of “top down” attention (being goal-directed, using planning, forethought, etc.) even though “bottom-up” attention (responding to more local stimuli, distractions, amusements, etc.) is what boys recognize they come by more naturally. To shift from bottom-up attention to top-down attention, many boys rely on the activation of adrenaline infused thoughts.

I've got to do this if I want the grade.

Just do it, it's not going to kill you.

I don't like the work, but I totally like the results.

Mr...always says 'push through the pain.' That's really helped me.

As a means of briefly testing boys' preferred emotional state, they were asked whether they would rather be *highly relaxed* or *very excited*. Boys were equally divided in identifying their preferred state of being, and there was no discernible pattern between a boy's preferred emotional state and his spiritedness in various contexts. There was far more consensus in boys' perspective about whether school causes them to be more physically or mentally tired—**approximately 90% of participants agreed that school makes their brain more tired than their body**. To compensate, boys often discussed wanting to do something physical after school in order to achieve more balance. There were three exceptions to this need. Boys interviewed in Singapore, New York City, and Washington D.C. described themselves as spending the majority of after school time doing school work. Among these boys there was no apparent sense of being burdened in this regard. Rather, it appeared to be an established component of school culture.

## Necessity

When asked to reflect on significant achievements, boys typically focused on academic, social, and athletic accomplishment and, occasionally, community service. It was clear during these discussions that achievement was valued primarily as a means of gaining admiration. This linkage was in no way viewed negatively by boys. Their judgment of whether an initiative or accomplishment was “successful” was often pinned to whether it garnered sufficient admiration. Among adolescent boys, the need for admiration seemed to reflect the lingering egocentrism of childhood. Even where that may have been the case, however, boys did not convey the idea that they were resisting maturity. Rather, **there was an implied sense of wanting to accomplish things for which one could justifiably desire admiration**.

Participants were queried about their interest in **making a difference** in the world. Boys' response to this question was highly variable. There was a small cohort of boys who believed in the idea of solving a major global problem such as water pollution, climate change, poverty, or cancer. Yet even as such issues were discussed there was a palpable sense that these problems were abstract, and beyond the ability of boys to make a meaningful difference.



When more immediate and more local issues were presented for discussion, boys were more enthusiastic. Participants were particularly eager to help in situations where they could make a meaningful, visible contribution. Yet **boys wanted to be needed not only for their labor, but for some type of specialized knowledge or skill.**

If there's something unique I know, then fine, sure, I would help. The thing is you never get asked to do something like that. Like collecting food for a food drive is very important, but it's not exactly a skill thing.

If it involves technology I may be of help...I wouldn't mind helping.

I think people need to see you doing something that they couldn't do to appreciate what you've done.

My problem is I know I need to start at the bottom, and that's boring because I've been at the bottom my whole life.

**Overall, boys expressed interest in opportunities to achieve that are less programmatic, and more likely to reflect “real” emerging situations (as described earlier), and the application of individual talents.**

In some cases, the value of “real-time” achievement outweighed even the significance of school culture or a supportive leaning community. In speaking for a cohort of 13–14 year-olds, one boy noted:

Good teachers and friends can be found everywhere, but opportunities [for achievement and recognition] are irreplaceable.

In most cases, however, boys strongly endorsed an awareness that achievements accomplished with friends, and under the auspices of school, would be highly welcome. Such activities are associated with both fun and importance, and boys found it particularly exciting to think about such activities occurring within the context of a typical school day.

In addition, there seemed to be an interaction between the accessibility and viability of tasks, and the capacity of boys to feel energized by more altruistic achievements. More specifically, when asked to think of initiatives to which boys might want to commit themselves, most boys were unable to think of plausible or sufficiently elaborated ideas. Conversely, when asked to rapidly respond “yes” or “no” to helping out with a series of challenging but tangible community needs (i.e., constructing a daycare center playground, helping a municipality to modify the behavior of aggressive dogs, organizing a street festival to celebrate international music, monitoring polling booths on election day), boys were far more decisive, and affirmative about 70% of the time, although virtually every boy, 9–12, expressed a desire for inclusion in these types of activities. This observation is consistent with the high level of energy and industriousness observed among this age group.

Where boys are explicitly told that they are needed as individuals to do important work of some kind, they reliably rally their energy, conviction and empathy. When they are asked to commit time, effort, and thought to an abstract intention they are far more hesitant. In addition, **the magnitude of necessity seems to make all the difference.** As was discussed earlier, scale is a critical factor in reinforcing an activity's potential for transcendence. With regard to necessity, **boys**

seemed to interpret scale as a matter of how urgently and seriously they were needed. In this sense, scale has an equivalence with degree of importance. Throughout the dialogues boys seemed to be intrigued by the idea of being needed in important ways, but at the same time conveyed some skepticism that this “need” would be authentic. Specifically, boys appeared to be wary of being drawn into a character building exercise in which “being needed” would be somewhat contrived.

The adrenal effect of being genuinely urgently needed seemed to reflect an absence of such experiences in most boys’ lives. This has been a difficult point to corroborate with data given that boys themselves have no viable point of comparison. When this topic was discussed, few boys could offer relevant insights, and although many boys might affirm a desire to be valued in this way, almost none had enough experience of this kind to be confident it would be beneficial, or even enjoyable. However, if boys’ degree of engagement is a reliable measure of what interests them—and if interest is a necessary foundation for achievement—then it is fair to conclude that necessity is a potentially powerful catalyst for transcendence.

## Recognition

The third component of “real time” achievement is recognition, and includes being recognized by peers as well as adults. The recognition boys receive from their peers most often has to do with being impressive in some way, while the recognition they receive from important adults and schools is more of an *appreciative recognition*. For example, opportunities to be recognized for good citizenship, community contribution, and other forms of non-academic achievement were repeatedly listed as key forms of achievement.

You really like to imagine yourself going on stage to accept an award from Mr....It makes your day. Everyone knows you did something well and they look up to you for it.

We always tell the story of this boy who saved another boy’s life. He’s a legend here... he’ll never be forgotten. In a way, it’s what we all want.

There is such a huge difference between hearing your name called and actually standing up in front of others. I never really thought about it that way before now...I guess I’ve always been aware of it somehow.

If you ask me there are too many awards...you kind of can’t keep track of the awards. I say give less awards but make them larger and more valuable.

A consistent theme of the dialogues has been the **connection between pleasure and recognition**. The type of pleasure boys get from being recognized seems to transcend satisfaction and contentment. In describing his feelings about having received a “good citizen” award, one boy commented:

I knew that I was going to be feeling good for months, or at least weeks. It was just a really great feeling to be recognized by everyone at school. My social studies teacher was like ‘way to go,’ and you have to earn his respect.

The very possibility of public recognition is compelling for a great many boys. Although such personal investment in being recognized could be construed as self-absorption, such a conclusion does not square well with the tenor of boys’ voices on this topic. There was a strong tone in the

dialogues of recognition being proof of having lived up to one's potential. In this regard, recognition seems to allay a significant fear among boys that they might not reach that benchmark. Boys' appetite for recognition was as varied as any other personality trait, but most boys conveyed an expectation and need for frequent recognition. Indeed, **most boys think of recognition as a basic need—as essential as music or exercise.**

A small group of older boys objected to other boys in their group describing the value of recognition.

Look, it's fine to be helpful and do your best, but the way I believe—the way I think most of us have been taught—is to ask ourselves what it's going to do for us, and if it matters to anyone. I could be the nicest, most generous bloke around, but what of it? I mean does anyone care?

Actions are always louder than words sir.

This type of sentiment seems to reflect the belief of some boys that what is most significant about school is “what you get out of it.” Overall, this mindset seemed to be more pragmatic than cynical. It also seemed to be an attitude many boys had assimilated from their families about the purpose of education.

The materialism with which some boys approach school performance was also echoed in the observations of teachers who noted that *“Our boys have a totally bottom-line perception of school work—they're constantly asking, what's the point?”* Yet other teachers voiced their belief that boys are merely reflecting the world in which they live. For example, teachers noted how important, but distorted, perceptions of money are among boys. *“They truly believe they are going to be rich, just because they want to.”* Teachers also agreed with the notion that recognition is valued among boys, but happens so frequently that it has lost some of its power. Teachers at several schools intimated that new recognition rituals are needed if schools are to command boys' interest and spirit.

Recognition for **athletic achievements** was a frequently mentioned priority for boys. When asked to elaborate on the importance of athletics, boys discussed the value of learning to “push yourself” as an important rite of passage for young athletes, and in life in general. Boys also expressed that participation in athletics affords them an opportunity to exercise their need for emotional, competitive intensity. Teachers pointed out that *“sport is the ecstatic expression of boys,”* seeming to hint at the expressive potential of sport. **Indeed, many boys say they feel most creative when they are in the midst of athletic competition.**

Oh, I'm completely focused when I'm playing lacrosse...there is no other time I can think of when I feel as tuned in.

Have you ever been snowboarding? If you had you would know, I think, what I'm talking about. Just the speed makes you think and solve problems more quickly.

The reason I gave up cricket for football is because I need motion to compete...more motion is definitely better.

Although most participants quickly affirmed the value of recognition for individual competitiveness, they were even more enthusiastic about recognition for group accomplishments. There was not a sense that group accomplishments were somehow more valuable to others, so much as there was

a belief that it was more fun and energizing to do things with peers—and that being part of group recognition reinforced the depth of friendship.

We were really hyped...it had been four months of working together, and now it was time to enjoy our success...you know you're probably only going to have one experience like that... you want to savor it.

When we finish here we finish together. I'll be like clapping my heart out. We all know what it takes.

We are fortunate to be close. It wouldn't be possible otherwise.

Real-time achievement looms large as an element of significance to boys, although there is tremendous work to be done in helping boys to put their achievements in a broader context. Specifically, where schools can point boys toward achievements that help them become a more complete person, those achievements will potentially be transcendent. While boys are quite familiar with the achievements of hard work, and are reasonably well familiar with achievements of empathy as embodied by community service programs, they appear to be in serious need of achievements that ground them in a sense of their own purpose. The potential for such purpose is alive and well among boys, and they have hinted at experiences that have helped them discover their purpose at school and elsewhere. Yet the dialogues have found that the development of most boys is currently shaped more by incentives than calling—and in that critical distinction lies the explanation to many of the concerns people express about 21st century youth. **It would appear that a seminal collective challenge of contemporary educators is to shift boys' perspective of achievement from something that is done to appease others, or merely because it is fun, to the notion of real-time achievement that promotes purpose and self-efficacy.**

## V. Origins and Tradition

**Personality, thought, and emotion** are qualities taken to comprise the “nature” of boys. This final dimension of significance examines the tension between this nature, and school and cultural traditions in their lives. The data of this dimension are the least overt insofar as boys rarely felt compelled to explicitly discuss these themes. In most cases, I believe they are generally unaware of any such tension, even as this issue emerges as a clear subtext of their opinions and discussion. This last section of findings and observations seeks to weave traditions and boys’ nature together in a way that examines their reciprocity. Simply noting the great amount of time boys spent discussing tradition suggests the topic is an important source of significance in their lives. That awareness was further reinforced in observing boys’ interest in discussing their questions about the long-term value of tradition.

During the two years required to complete this study, new topics emerged as worthy of investigation. These topics are somewhat wide-ranging, and include social networking, the environment, and animals. These topics worked their way into conversation with boys because they engaged interest and because they were meaningful in boys’ lives at the time.

As with virtually all topics, boys were hardly ever inclined to romanticize or sentimentalize themes like nature. Instead, boys’ most fundamental reflex is to evaluate whether the world is at risk of losing precious resources, and what can practically be done about it. Despite this pragmatism, the data ultimately address what is missing in boys’ lives, as well as what is there. The observations and interactions that comprise these data seem to tell a story about origins and tradition that complements what we have already learned.

### Connecting with an Original Self

The notion of an “original self” is borrowed from the author Thomas Moore who spoke of that self as someone “who came into this world full of possibility and destined for joyful unveiling and manifestation.” To me, this concept is central to the playfulness and enthusiasm I repeatedly encountered in meeting with boys. It is a concept which also echoes this study’s first dimension, *Becoming Myself*. While congruity and the notion of an original self are continuous, congruity refers to how a person is shaped by formative influences, and how to honor the truth of that form.

One’s original self predates these influences, and thus speaks to something more instinctual, and more reliant on the energy of being alive. There were dialogues when it was harder for boys to access their natural energy, but over time and with relaxation it never failed to emerge. Looking back at the dialogues it seems fair to conclude that **the playfulness and curiosity observed comprises a kind of archetypal boyishness**. When the term “boyish” is used, it is often applied as a positive signifier of male youthfulness. Here, however, it seems important to clarify what makes such a trait desirable—what does it point toward that compels so many of us to protect the sanctity of youth?

An important part of connecting with the “original self” has to do with how boys understand masculinity. **Although boys were aware of cultural stereotypes regarding masculinity, they were also aware that those attitudes differ from one group to the next, and that they evolve over time.** Getting them to voice that awareness was a consistent challenge. There appeared to be a hesitancy to commit to a definition of masculinity until a critical mass within discussion groups had engaged the topic. One prominent observation of this part of the dialogues was that boys’ default was almost always to define masculinity from the perspective of a male. When the limitations of this perspective were challenged, boys adapted.

Notably, boys proved to be keenly interested in female perspectives of masculinity, and especially those of adolescent females. To an extent, this interest was unsurprising, with boys thinking about how to attract females. Yet there was another side to their interest that hinted that their personal perspective was contingent upon knowing with clarity what others thought.

But please get to the point, do girls care more about our minds or bodies?

I’ve learned to be a better listener. Don’t try to do all of the talking.

I think girls are changing though, I’ve even seen it in the last couple of years...mostly because of *Facebook*...people know your profile before they’ve even had a chance to know you. That’s a big difference with boys because I don’t think we judge girls that quickly.

You have to be sporty and charming, that’s what girls like.

Generally, participants conveyed a sense of being quite satisfied with the state of boyhood. They occasionally complained about work load, social restrictions, and the burden of *Facebook*, but there was no sense that boys felt as though their lives felt alien to them. Most boys seemed focused on finding the greatest possible number of opportunities to be their natural selves. **There is a prominent, but unspoken confidence among boys regarding their instincts and inclinations.** In essence, few boys conveyed any sense of being apologetic for their interests, wants, and needs.

Down time is the best time.

It’s so different here at night [boarding]. We get along really well. I mean we also get along during the day but at night it’s different.

My psychologist says I’m fine...I just need to be me.

Definitely when I’m hiking...that’s the only time I feel totally relaxed..like it’s just me.

Hitting the drums..totally pounding them. It may sound like noise, but no.

Boys also referred to having different roles, shifting between the roles of son, brother, friend, student and teammate, often within a single day. These roles have different meanings for boys and they spoke of the necessity to adjust their outlook accordingly. **The most fundamentally different roles described were those of son and student.**

When I’m here [school] I just try to keep moving...you do what you’re told and that’s fine. At home I feel like I can let down a bit. It’s good, you need both, but I couldn’t do what I do here if it wasn’t for the difference at home.

If you get in trouble with your parents they're going to be more understanding.

I honestly don't think my mother knows how hard I work even though I know she is proud of me. I have to go into another gear to do the work.

My parents are proud of me, I think, because of everything I do. At school it's mostly about my school work, which I expect.

Boys clearly conveyed that they rely on the unconditional love of parents to offset the stress they often feel in meeting expectations at school. Where such love is unavailable, boys experience both stress and signs of depression. It was surprising how openly boys discussed this issue—not so much identifying themselves as being depressed, but acknowledging the complementary relationship of family life to school life.

If I don't get home on the weekend I'm a wreck.

It's a relief to get home.

My mom hugs me as soon as I get home, and sometimes I need that.

The days when my dad has time to pick me up are special. I know we're going to talk.

Important concepts about masculinity are absorbed by boys from their parents, and teachers at school. The most notable difference was that boys said they would be much more comfortable discussing a "moral failing" such as breaking a rule, letting someone down, or being involved in bullying with their parent as opposed to a teacher or headmaster. The explanation for this difference was not unexpected—basically, boys feel as though a parent is more likely to apply punishment contextually rather than as an established rule.

Another side of the "original self" might be understood as **archetypal cultural attributes**. With this possibility in mind, **boys were asked to explain what it means to be a boy of their particular nationality**. Usually, this was a difficult question for participants to answer. In part this may have reflected participants' limited exposure to boys of other cultures, and thus a lack of a comparative reference point. Yet the difficulty also seemed to touch upon boys' reluctance to define themselves along narrow terms.

We work very hard at things and we're friendly.

I think we are more open minded, more willing to see things internationally.

We want to get things done...we're competitive.

We accept everybody.

I'm not sure we are different. Wouldn't it be different for every group. People say we are friendly, but I don't know.

I believe we are quiet. I've seen shows from America, and people are practically insane.

We don't get into patriotism that much, although people would like us to.



Teachers were not surprised to learn that boys found this question difficult. A geography teacher in Singapore eloquently explained the role of socio-geographic factors such as emigration and scarcity of land, in diffusing a sense of local identity. Other teachers wondered how boys could maintain any sense of continuity in their lives given the extraordinary effects of technology, and especially social networking. *“I believe that question would confound our students. I’m not sure it’s even relevant in the age of the internet and Facebook.”*

It was clear that *Facebook*, whether valued or not, is having an extraordinary effect on boys’ identity. Boys have become facile with this technology, and many have elected to use it for strategic social purposes—as a means of leveraging popularity, attracting girls, and undermining the social status of peer competitors. **Boys speak openly of constructing an image that reflects an ideal self rather than an actual self.** In doing this, many boys seem to be expressing a desire to show others what they believe others want to see. Accomplishing this construction is perceived as a useful skill rather than something that is morally or psychologically dangerous. Boys seemed to accept that this is the way the world has evolved, these are the tools they have been given, and it is up to them to take the best possible advantage of the “rules.”

Everyone does it, you have to, or else...

You do what you have to do.

I would never want to bring someone down, even though it has been done to me.

It’s fantasy...it’s not really harmful...everyone knows it’s just for fun.

It remains to be seen how social networking will affect the long-term ability of males to connect with an original self. The desire to reconnect with that self has traditionally been understood as a longing for purity and innocence. Among boys interviewed for this study, just the opposite seems to be most prized. Most boys seemed eager to shed innocence in the interest of what they perceive as the pleasures of adulthood. Notably, the intensity of this interest is greatly diminished when discussing stress or significant problems. During times of stress, boys continue to be clear about their desire for a dependent relationship with parents and, in some cases, peers.

## Care of the Wild

An interesting theme of some of the dialogues was the implicit wish of boys to move freely between the realm of the wild and that of civilization. Few boys expressed a pronounced preference for one over the other, although most indicated that their daily lives are heavily weighted toward being around other people and negotiating city life, rather than spending time in “nature.” **Boys openly expressed their enjoyment and awe of nature, but did not think of being in nature as a spiritual experience,** even as there was a hint of the sublime embedded in their discussions of nature.

I don’t find it [forest] more spiritual, but it is more relaxing...you feel very calm...you can recharge.

I love being in nature, I wish school was in nature. It kind of is, but it would be nice to be outdoors.

My earliest memory is of sitting in a tree in our front yard, just before I fell and had to go to the hospital.

Most boys convey that “nature is a place to escape and see the world as it should be.” In this regard, nature is one facet of boys’ ideal world. **Boys’ interest in being able to move freely between the woods and city may well be a sublimation of their desire to seamlessly connect with both instinctual and regulated aspects of their personal experience.** In many ways, the essence of this sort of psychological transition seems to occur multiple times within the course of a school day.

It appears that one reason boys value going to a boys’ school as much as they do is because they connect with both poles of that continuum. Specifically, in various places throughout the dialogues boys referred to the additive regulatory component of being in a boys’ school. Boys are aware that their “wildness” will emerge in a variety of contexts—but the structure and mandate to become disciplined—in a way that feels masculine—is a beneficial aspect of attending a boys’ school

Perhaps because the dialogues took place within schools, boys often spoke of experiences with deep nature that had been part of school outings and in school curricula. Along these lines, several boys were especially appreciative of teachers and other staff seeing them in the context of nature. When they spoke of these experiences, they seemed to be suggesting that a part of themselves is revealed in deep nature that is fundamental to knowing the wholeness of their selves, and which they want to have observed by people who have known them only as a “student.”

We were swinging on this rope when Mr...saw us from the water...I just liked him seeing us that way. It’s not better, just different I guess.

Teachers commented on their concern that boys do not spend enough time in nature. Some teachers attributed the problem to the pace of contemporary life. *“There is no time, and it’s a shame. I can’t imagine being as nature-deprived as my students. They’re having a childhood that is strange to me.”* Other teachers openly wondered whether school should be more inclusive of natural spaces. *“I try to get my kids outside whenever I can. Last week we were sitting in this strong wind, blowing everything everywhere, but at least we were outside.”*

Important questions about the relevance of deep nature to boys remain unanswered. Are opportunities for competence in deep nature (hiking, exploring, climbing, camping, hunting) significant? Is nature still an essential location for the growth of maturity? Do contemporary boys need their own version of a “vision quest”—an experience to assist with the transition to manhood? Or, do boys now undertake their vision quest more socially, in civic spaces? Is nature essential to boys, or is the idealization of nature a middle-age adult projection of what boys *should* value? (As perhaps embodied by recent books like *Last Child in the Woods?*)

One indication that nature continues to play a vital and comforting role in boys’ lives was the interest boys had in discussing animals. Boys in some countries, especially those in South Africa, conveyed an especially strong interest in and awareness of wild animals, while boys in other places primarily referenced domesticated animals. When animals were discussed, the youngest participants in the study spoke with assertive confidence—there was a strong sense that discussion had moved to a terrain on which they had given substantial thought, and where their values were unambiguous. In all places, there was a sense that boys identify with animals on multiple levels. Animals seem to represent wildness and freedom, but no more than they represent a sense of belonging, context, and comfort.

We live in two worlds, technology and animals.

My dog is as important as a friend. My dog is a friend.

One of the best things about Year 9 is we have chickens. You get to take care of chickens if Mr...chooses you.

Boys are boys, girls are girls, but chickens are cool!

Boys young enough to still be actively engaged in watching cartoon animals were not a part of this study, but it seems fair to conclude that as boys become old enough to part ways with their favorite fictitious animals they need to replace that animal presence in their lives. Many boys, owing to circumstances and limitations, do so through family pets, and caring for these animals clearly plays an important role in their lives.

Our dog is a part of the family. She goes everywhere with us.

We've had two dogs die. We always have to have a younger dog for when the older one dies.

When I pet her I feel relaxed...I wish my dad pet her more.

I've had gerbils since I was nine.

I'm going to be a veterinarian.

Boys living in areas where they have contact with larger or wild animals have a different relationship with this realm of life. For these boys, animals are often symbols of freedom, might, or the unknown.

You're never going to forget seeing your first elephant.

Lions are unpredictable...they're exciting.

I'm taking a gap year to be a jackaroo [cattle ranch hand].

Based on the comments of boys, and the obvious value they place on being with animals, it would seem to be a mistake to ignore the prospective value of their presence on school grounds. Many science teachers keep small animals or fish in classrooms, but **important questions remain as to whether larger animals, requiring boys to engage in the "purposeful work" of caring for them, could also find their place within school communities.** In urban areas, this might involve working cooperatively with zoos, or possibly coordinating trips to areas where students could encounter animals in natural settings. There are nearly unlimited possibilities for combining such trips with curriculum.

Everywhere that boys were interviewed there was a sense of **order and compliance** among participants. This behavior was similar to what might be observed in a range of settings on most school days. It might be tempting to conclude that this sort of compliance is the net effect of an oppressive set of rules, and the fear they inspire. But discussion with boys about rules suggests a different interpretation.

You don't mind the rules...it's just the way this House does things. This is a strict House.

They [rules] keep you out of trouble. The only time I had trouble was before I knew the rules well enough.

To fully appreciate why boys and young men often gravitate toward and appreciate rules, it's necessary to consider what boys' "nature" really implies. In my view, this is an issue often confounded by society, and particularly those seeking to "civilize" boys. For example, when a rogue, poorly behaved male is described as being an "animal," as such individuals often are within popular culture and parlance, the reference is made on a false premise—that animals are inherently disorderly, resistant to hierarchy, and prone to individualism. Yet that is not the nature of animals. To the contrary, animals tend to be accepting of hierarchy and protocol, even when competition is involved. Animals do not feel personally diminished by their rank within a pack, group or herd.

Boys, also, may elect to test the permanence of their rank, but don't generally convey worry about being momentarily unable to improve their position within a group. (Of course there are exceptions to this rule, but the same could be said of any behavioral tendency.) By extension, it seems reasonable to say that when boys are being orderly and compliant, they are indeed acting in accordance with an inner "wildness" which is consistent with both origins and tradition in their lives. This was a difficult question to broach with boys due to its inherent abstractness, and the young age of participants. Overall, it is an idea that lies outside of the scope of boys' immediate interests, and few boys felt prepared to offer a strong opinion. My interpretation of boys orderliness is offered here as consideration for their formative attachment to animals.

## Tradition

This study involved visiting 20 IBSC schools. Although the chief reason for those visits was to interview boys, each visit also included an opportunity to see the school operating under normal conditions. There was ample evidence of tradition within those operations. Boys were observed attending assemblies, drilling as cadets, preparing for an annual food drive, attending chapel, rallying for athletic competition, and preparing for major examinations among other school traditions and rituals. Everywhere I visited, the visual trimmings of tradition were amply evident. These include walls laden with plaques and trophies, school banners, lists of Houses and Housemasters, and important school accolades. To fully understand the role of tradition in boys' lives, we should remind ourselves that children and adolescents have a different frame of reference for time than do adults. For example, one year is a relatively large chunk of a young person's life. Boys think of each academic year as being its own unique passage, marked by different challenges and benchmarks. As they look back upon their education, they see important rites of passage accomplished in each phase. There seemed to be a cumulative effect of this retrospection, with boys drawing upon these elemental experiences to construct a personal history. The clarity of that history seems to be related to boys' confidence. In this way, traditions seemed less relevant as a form of connection with the past, than as an opportunity for structure and identity in the present. This observation is consistent with the overall tenor of "here and now" that shapes boys' assessments of school programs and activities.

I remember how I didn't know anybody...how all I wanted was friends.

I knew it would be different [middle school], but I didn't know how different. It's been good, although I have to be more focused.

It's [Year 12] amazing. Have you seen our lounge? We have our own space. It's something you know about and you look forward to.

Last year my whole focus was on soccer. It was like my classes were not a worry. This year I am much more concerned with doing well. It seems like it counts more.

Boys also alluded to the notion that there is a difference between traditions that are observed and those that are lived. Within the context of school, boys could describe many traditions that were observed and incorporated within a typical school day or week. However, the traditions they find most relevant are those in which they actively participate. This group of traditions spans a continuum from low to high activity. Low activity traditions include activities such as sitting quietly in assembly and going to chapel; high activity traditions might involve welcoming new students to school, going on a school trip designated for a specific year, participating in a group community service, or speaking at a school assembly.

**Traditions that involve a high level of participation are memorable for boys.** In most cases, boys expressed pride and identification with schools' most public traditions. The hope of so many boys to be remembered by their schools suggests that for the vast majority, school is both a dominant and positive presence in their lives. School traditions enhance interest in belonging to something that is larger than oneself, and also reinforce a sense of belonging.

I think all the pictures and awards are there to remind us that you can do something [great].

You don't choose to belong, but you do belong anyway. After a while you accept that, and feel pride in it.

One of the most visible aspects of tradition had to do with school uniforms. Generally, boys seemed to accept the role of uniforms, even though there was a great deal of variance in how carefully they wear them. For younger boys, the colors in uniforms, and the design changes that occur in uniforms as boys get older, was an important point of awareness. The only objection boys voiced related to uniforms had to do with having to wear hats that they did not feel were practical, or clashed with contemporary styles.

It's difficult to feel like myself when I'm wearing that hat.

You draw too much attention to yourself.

We have three different hats...why so many?

Tradition also seemed to be present in attitude as well as school rituals and celebrations. For example, one of the most significant indicators of tradition was **faith in outcome**. This source of belief was an ever-present aspect of discussion although, in retrospect, it was rarely brought to the surface or fully articulated. Virtually all boys interviewed implied an expectation that their education would better position them to succeed in the world. There was a sense among boys that following the steps laid out for them by families and schools would lead to important and enduring life advantages. This attitude was most apparent among boys who were literally following in their fathers' footsteps.

In this regard there was also a distinct difference between boys' perspective of tradition as entitlement and tradition as opportunity. Specifically, some boys have found themselves in IBSC schools by a combination of chance and good fortune. Often, these are boys that come from less advantageous socioeconomic backgrounds, and who demonstrated a strong awareness of the

potential benefits of their current educational path. For these boys, tradition is less something to be taken for granted than to be gripped tightly as a bridge to a better life than might have been anticipated a few years earlier. For some boys in this study, tradition is more weighted toward obligation, but there was a cohort who were more inclined to view tradition as a sign of opportunity. This observed dichotomy served to reinforce the power of tradition to signify inclusion.

When my mom told me I was going here...at first I was angry, I didn't want to change... but now I can't imagine if I didn't.

I've been given a good opportunity and I know that. I need to work hard and remember what I've been given.

There's a thousand things that could've happened to me, but they didn't. Where I come from is very poor...almost no one goes to a school like this...this is paradise compared to my old school.

I want to be part of everything I see.

Overall, faith in outcome, as expressed by boys seemed to be less a matter of logic, such as linking actions and their prospective consequences, than it was a matter of faith in a proven path to a good life.

Origins and traditions are important sources of meaning for boys, although they often operate below the level of conscious awareness. However, on that level they play an affirmative role in shaping identity, regulating impulses, and reinforcing spirit. Tradition helps us to understand why boys find satisfaction in being creatures of habit, yet it also helps us to understand the frequent need of boys to test boundaries and social codes. To encounter the natural and spontaneous spirit of boys inspires belief that the search for an "original self" is alive and well. The shape and focus of that search necessarily changes from one generation to the next, even as elemental traits like playfulness and being competitive remain much the same.

The challenge for those of us invested in honoring tradition, and helping boys to explore the significance of their "origins," is to step back from what feels reflexive or "right" to ourselves. Doing so enables us to detect what is relevant and truly significant to boys. If "tradition" is understood as something fixed and impermeable, then the principal task of "traditionalists" is to bend boys to the will of history and its mandated traditions. But what if subscription to tradition is better understood as an attitude through which one honors a connection to something larger than oneself, which is at the same time malleable and open to interpretation? It seems likely that traditions such as these will feel most inclusive of all, living on as a potent historical force, guiding and comforting boys for generations to come.



## CHAPTER 3

# Creating Schools of Significance

**As evidenced by the findings of the previous chapter,** this IBSC global study has led to a wealth of insights, explanations, and ideas. We have learned much about sources of meaning and purpose in boys' lives, including the social and cognitive factors that activate boys' spirit, conviction, and creativity. Yet even with this cache of information in hand, we can't be fully satisfied with this endeavor until we've translated its findings into a set of prospective initiatives. In essence, these initiatives are my recommendations for those inclined to take action on this study's findings.

Distilling specific recommendations from the broad range of data collected has been a difficult task. Inevitably, isolated yet valuable insights get left behind in the interest of focusing on the most pertinent areas of action. In each of this study's major dimensions of significance there has been abundant data from which to construct viable school strategies. Yet my challenge has been to assess priorities based on the weight and strength of boys' responses. To that end, I have identified five areas of recommended action, each of which encompasses more specific initiatives reflective of a core concept. Making this list of recommendations overly programmatic would undermine the "purpose" of this chapter (and my faith in the creativity of IBSC schools), yet leaving recommendations overly broad could leave readers with too many unanswered questions about where and how to take effective action. Consequently, this chapter is a bit of a balancing act. I've tried to provide enough detail so as to make recommendations plausible, yet enough latitude that schools will not feel as if I am prescribing generic programs, or being insensitive to differences among school cultures. Readers who have questions about these recommendations, or ideas of their own, are welcome to contact me.

As prelude to more specific recommendations, it is my strong suggestion that schools read the Five Dimensions section of this report carefully, and adopt these dimensions as a lens for examining school philosophy and curricula. The findings of this report are the most current and comprehensive collection of boys' subjective priorities, insights, and values available at this time. These data provide a solid foundation of key concepts for thinking about purpose and significance, and suggest many possibilities for how schools might appraise their current programs and institutional purpose.

I believe the findings of this study point to a *new horizon in boys' education*, and that we are by extension mandated to conceptualize and implement new opportunities and pedagogy. Caring about boys—their whole person—requires us to act on what we know about fostering their spirit and potential. Clearly, boys are complex human beings whose needs and interests are evolving. The global community of educators represented by the IBSC, as well as others, should be engaged in a collaborative experiment to create schools of significance. We have data and substantial experience to guide us. As a global community of educators embraces this new horizon, we should be buoyed by the confidence of experience, creativity, and a willingness to take risks. We need, then, the very same traits and courage we wish to instill in boys.



## Time and Space for Dialogue

The most primary observation learned from this study was the obvious satisfaction boys take in discussing their values, opinions, and life perspectives. Consequently the most basic recommendation made here is for schools to provide time and a forum for conducting these types of conversations with students. This meta-suggestion implies a fundamental shift in how schools frame contact with students. Specifically, this study mandates that we rethink those contacts with respect to their meaning and significance in boys' lives. We have seen that boys are paying careful attention to what is said to them, and are hungry for a kind of guidance that is best found at school. It follows, then, that schools should step back and undertake an evaluation of how they manage communication with boys. Such an effort is not about improving communication skills *per se*, but should focus upon how boys perceive both formal and informal interactions. While informal interactions may be more or less taken for granted, these appear to be the interactions along which boys are often most attentive, and they are eager for interaction that feels personal. This effort is in many ways the foundation of rapport, trust, and an inclination to listen deeply. Because many schools allow for discussion as a component of pastoral care, house meetings, or advising, the findings of this study might provide an excellent starting point for those discussions. While the approach to dialogue will likely vary from one school to the next, there are some important considerations that have come to light, and are worthy of special consideration.

- Dialogue is by definition a reciprocal process. While it is important to give boys a chance to discuss aspects of their life and school experience, it will be helpful if **dialogue begins with both schools and staff acknowledging their own values, and the subjectivity of those values.** The latter part of this strategy is essential to setting the tone for constructive exchange (boys report becoming more trusting and engaged when adults use interesting self-disclosure), and giving boys the courage to say what they believe. Although a school's principles of conduct and character may be reviewed at school assemblies, dialogue can be an invaluable starting point for better defining other aspects of school values. These topics might include a school's perspective of the purpose of education, and ideal outcomes for students. This focus heightens boys' regard for the seriousness of school and the thoughtfulness that has been invested in their education. As an extension, early phases of dialogue might also address boys' roles within families, and how boys negotiate the priorities of families and school, particularly when those values are different. Making these considerations explicit is the pushing off point that boys have said is so valuable to them. Although boys may disagree with values that are presented to them, they need and deserve clarity about how their school understands the purpose and outcomes of education.
- If dialogues are to be meaningful and gain traction, they should honor the thoughts and ideas of students. In this regard, **it will be helpful if schools can define specific ways in which boys can help shape the trajectory of their education.** Although boys are accustomed to having some choice in school classes as they reach upper school, they might further benefit from being able to define a focus or significant theme of their education. Enabling this opportunity affirms the expectation that boys as young as 10 years old will make decisions about where they want to concentrate effort and how they want to be assessed. (Such an initiative is an important seed of doing "purposeful work.") Most importantly, boys should be given an opportunity to co-create non-curricular work as described in the recommendations below. The vitality of boys'

education, and indeed the essence of boys' spirit, comes from a sense that important decisions are in play, and that their voice matters —the essence of having “personal agency.”

- Searching for authenticity has proven to be a topic boys are eager to engage. Yet as compelling as that topic might be, boys often have difficulty accessing their thoughts and articulating their perspectives because they lack suitable language for describing themselves and their differences. **Schools that want to meaningfully engage dialogue should work toward defining a shared language of authenticity.** A language of authenticity is a means for boys to explore their natural and true selves, and to parse that self from stereotypes, clichés, and more superficial self-descriptors. For example, having words and terms for personal traits, differences, masculinity, and social perspectives would be a crucial boost in confidence for a great many boys. In addition, a language of authenticity would help to connect boys with their individual core values, and to understand how those value do and do not surface in their lives. It is a language comprised of words and terms that are a lens for both self-examination and self-understanding. Most importantly, a *shared* language could make it easier to have a school-wide discussion about how and where authenticity emerges in boys' lives. Ideally, it would be a language that is introduced at school meetings, assemblies, and in the curriculum, much the same way that elements of school character are now often integrated. The essence of this idea is to acknowledge the fundamental and ongoing interest of boys in becoming themselves. Achieving this milestone, in observable ways, is central to boys' sense of personal achievement. For schools to engage and propel this process affirms solidarity and a culture of social-emotional sophistication.
- Boys between the ages of 9–12 have a tendency to quickly form an association with a group when they are included in formative meetings and plans. The youngest participants in this study were the boys most likely to express sorrow that the dialogues had come to an end. This phenomenon seem to reflect the dynamic social development going on among younger boys, and also underscores the benefit of holding structured meetings where boys can voice their perspectives on school and related social dynamics. These sorts of dialogic interactions are critical “table-setters” for the years to come. For example, providing a forum where younger boys are listened to carefully, and where schools can demonstrably act on their ideas, provides a needed counterweight to the “orderliness” which younger boys often view as their principal mandate.
- There are many topics that dialogue groups could potentially focus upon, but one of the most reliably engaging for older boys has to do with **perspectives of masculinity**. Openly discussing masculinity is a way of addressing the transition to manhood that is always occurring at schools. It is a topic that invites civil reflection. Every boy has some stake in this topic, and feels something that is worth expressing, whether or not he initially realizes it. As with other discussions, a key outcome is to establish concepts against which boys can push off in the interest of better defining their individual views. It has proven important for boys to understand that the concept of masculinity differs, depending on who is defining it. Inviting guests to comment on this topic, or appointing a range of school personnel of both genders to opine on this issue is valuable. It is especially important that boys explore how their own perspectives of masculinity change from one phase of life to the next. In this regard, masculinity is not something to be addressed intensely over the span of a few weeks, but is a topic that boys should return to as their experience and insight evolve.

## Validating Multiple Narratives

There are many stories that comprise the lives of boys. In some cases, boys have lived such extraordinary lives that a single story cannot capture the complexity of their personal journey. Within every institution, these stories exist both above and below the surface of awareness. Making their acknowledgement more public enriches social interaction and sheds light on boys' attitudes toward school context, curriculum, and school values. Boys have reported that they often conceal aspects of their story because they are concerned about public interpretation. A surprisingly large number of boys feel as though their personal story deviates substantially from the norm, and they consequently inhibit expression of those perceived differences. Validating that boys' lives have multiple narratives has value on several levels. It normalizes the differences that boys feel about themselves, and encourages sharing of those differences. Validation also serves to make within group differences an aspect of school identity and pride, and gives boys confidence to pursue a broader range of life trajectories. Perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that the meaning of boyhood is, to some extent, defined one life at a time.

- **Schools have an opportunity to take positive action to help boys capture self-knowledge and record personal history.** The ultimate goal of building self-knowledge is to help boys discover their uniqueness, and to make more informed choices for themselves as their lives unfold. This process could be approached by encouraging boys to build a self-knowledge portfolio beginning in the earliest years of their education. Lower school boys could be oriented to the mechanics of this archive, and might be industriously engaged in constructing it. For this initiative to have sufficient gravity, it needs to exist in “real” space and be accessible to boys at different points in their education. A self-knowledge portfolio could be a repository of school artifacts such as assessments, creative projects, and memorabilia which track boys' path through school. This portfolio might be particularly valuable during adolescence when boys are eager for clues about individual differences—and how those differences should inform educational and vocational decisions. Self-knowledge can also be gained through active discussion, and would thus be an important topic for the dialogues discussed above. Boys are engaged by the question of how such knowledge can be gained, and how to increase their chances of achieving self-understanding.
- Another means of validating diverse narratives is to experiment with new **recognition rituals**. Boys spoke repeatedly and affirmatively about wanting to be recognized by their schools. They are well attuned to public recognition rituals and are eager to see themselves acknowledged in that context. Certainly, it is useful for schools to think broadly about what traits and accomplishments they want to recognize in the interest of being as inclusive as possible. While academic and sporting achievements are reliable sources of public recognition in most schools, it might be equally valuable to celebrate a school's best creative writers, most visionary technophiles, and exemplary altruists. These boys do receive some recognition, but the degree and manner of recognition are important considerations. In many cases, cultivating a school atmosphere where staff and students are encouraged to share a private and affirmative word with those deserving, will be equally beneficial. In celebrating a broad range of accomplishments, schools affirm the presence of different narratives within the school community. Experimenting with new ways of recognizing individual accomplishments may be especially helpful. For example, if a lacrosse stick or cricket bat on the wall, accompanied by a plaque of names, serves

to honor a school's greatest athletes, how would the same school honor its most innovative thinkers, and most selfless contributors? This very question is one to which boys would likely have some interesting responses. There is also potential here for schools to interact with outside communities in new ways. For example, "student ambassadors" who might get school credit for accomplishments within those communities.

- **Teachers should be acknowledged as historians of boys' lives.** Because teachers have a vantage point distinct from parents, they are a source of perception and feedback that becomes increasingly valuable to boys as they reach adolescence. Boys expect that teachers who have known them over a number of years will have accrued a unique collection of observations and insights about them. Periodically summarizing these observations would be of intense interest to a majority of boys. Specifically, it might be useful if schools find constructive ways to provide students with more personal observations made by teachers. Those observations, though more anecdotal, could reflect upon major dimensions of significance in boys' lives. In this way, school staff could feel assured they were providing feedback highly relevant to boys. The constructive sharing of this information is likely to deepen relationships, and to be formative in boys' understanding of themselves. By extension, these relationships can potentially enhance boys' authenticity by helping them to see important recurring themes or tendencies in their lives, and what these observations suggest about core values and individual purpose. Where such efforts have been made, boys have read these assessments carefully. They are particularly eager for feedback about personality, social skills, and vocational potential.
- Throughout the dialogues it was clear that parent awareness of what was happening in school was important to boys, and essential to activating boys' sense of purpose, effort and focus. Along these lines, it would be helpful for schools to **engage families in an open discussion of the purpose of school**. Such a discussion would address the implicit values and benefits of school, and also elaborate a school's beliefs about how these ideals are achieved. In some schools, these discussions are carried out casually, but formalizing this type of communication would reinforce the hopes and expectations of individual schools. This information would likely find its way into family discussion, and could also be a reliable platform for negotiating conflicts when they arise. It would be especially helpful to engage fathers and sons in a retreat designed to improve mutual understanding. It would be helpful to boys if their parents understood more about current school issues. Boys are particularly eager for their fathers to see them developing their own identities and, as with teachers, would like to know that fathers accept a role as historians of their lives. (Most boys believe their mothers have already adopted this role.) Encouraging fathers to track changes in their sons more closely would be viewed by boys as an expression of emotional support. The more understanding that parents have of boys' development, the more likely it is that they will play a constructive role in fostering natural interests and congruity. At present, most boys do not believe their parents have a realistic understanding of how hard they work.
- The narratives that shape boys' lives are frequently informed by the exercise of various school traditions. Boys are receptive to and interested in school traditions, and are eager to be included in rituals that promote inclusion and identification with their respective schools. However, many boys believe that for them to effectively identify with school, school has to identify with them first. This is a complex issue that touches upon the ego-centrism of childhood, and the tension between that ego-centrism and institutional culture. It will be especially helpful if

schools can **accommodate a degree of interpretation in exercising school traditions**. For example, boys who have some latitude in how to recognize the transition from one phase of school to the next, or how to honor high achieving classmates are more likely to feel they have some ownership of tradition and related rituals. This type of latitude also reinforces that boys can write their own story, even where they have to do so within parameters.

- **Many of the schools visited on this study have a religious affiliation, and in those schools religious values generally form the school's identity and mission.** That being said, most of the boys interviewed for this study expressed lukewarm commitment to religious ideas and a hesitant attitude toward religious practice. This perhaps warrants further inquiry for those institutions. Before reaching conclusions, we should consider if the group forum of these dialogues made it difficult to declare faith. The impasse between the religious intentions of schools and the disaffectedness of boys is not easy to resolve, but would seem to invite some type of response on the part of schools. Does religious education have to be reframed so that it feels more relevant to boys? Should its integration into school life be more reflective of the psycho-social concerns of boys, as reported in this study's dimensions of significance? Is the pragmatism valued by boys at odds with the more abstract nature of belief? Should school chaplains occupy multiple and diverse roles on campus, so that boys can access them under a range of auspices? (Where I have observed this, it is working well.) While we might assume that searching for significance leads us to boys' relationship with religion, the data say otherwise. Still, boys have many existential questions, and do not always realize how those questions are related to faith and religious practice.

## **Emotional Intelligence and Psychology**

Teaching psychology, beginning in primary school, is one of the most important curricular initiatives 21st century schools can undertake. Given the social and vocational directions of our evolving world, it is difficult to understand the mandate to teach chemistry, physics, and trigonometry, but not psychology as a primary subject. Data from this study suggest that boys have a keen awareness of the necessity of understanding human psychology. They would like to be more informed about factors that influence their behavior, learning, social relationships, and male identity. Introducing boys to a basic vocabulary of emotions at the primary school level is practical and beneficial. Many schools integrate this within existing pedagogy, but there is substantial room for growth. More schools could build on this knowledge as boys enter middle school, and then make behavioral science a cornerstone of upper school education. (We cannot afford to mistake social-technology savvy for social sophistication, and should not assume that the former automatically builds the latter.) Acquiring psychological insight is an excellent foundation for understanding the typical emotions and conflicts that surface in school from one week to the next. Making psychology more explicit would lead to clear advantages, such as how to devise strategic study strategies, how to cope with loss, and how to manage the pressure to become sexual before one is ready, to name only a few examples.

- **The topic that boys would most like their schools to teach them more about is social skills/emotional intelligence.** This topic should be covered both within social science curricula and in relevant counseling groups for boys. Data from this study suggest that boys are eager to engage the cognitive aspects of social skills through debate and discussion of contemporary



social issues. A solid approach to teaching social skills within a school setting would require boys to examine scenarios taken from the school community, apply acquired analytical skills, and then devise solutions. Reinforcing this type of critical thinking in primary school would not only be beneficial but would likely be met with great enthusiasm. Primary school boys demonstrate great engagement in thinking about the moral dimensions of social interactions, and appear to become notably more relaxed and confident as these issues surface in group discussion. There is also substantial opportunity to apply the lens of emotional intelligence to contemporary socio-political scenarios—this was an especially interesting prompt for boys during the dialogues. Active social skills programs are an acknowledgment of increasing empirical evidence of the relevance of social skills to life success. In that regard, it may be useful for schools to address these forms of competence in selecting prefects and other student leaders.

- **Communication skills** are extremely important to boys, representing a highly valued form of social competence. Boys have indicated that they value spoken communication to a far greater extent than written communication. Previous research has indicated that public communication tends to be more important to males than private communication. Schools should engage this distinction and assist boys by establishing parameters for successful communication in both contexts. In an effort to normalize this process, and to relieve stress, schools might develop specific forums for communication practice—emphasizing social-emotional communication skills. This subset of communication skills represents a key point of vulnerability for boys, and thus a significant opportunity for increasing their confidence. A greater return on these efforts will be realized if intervention begins before age eleven, when the neuronal pathways are far more active, and receptive to greater development of networks of retention. Clearly, these skills are relevant to far more students than those few who might elect to participate in a debating team. Completing school with a solid foundation of communication practice would likely be an accelerator of social competence in the years to come.
- It is of immediate importance for schools to **address the influence and burden of social networking**. While boys acknowledge that they spent hours per day on *Facebook*, they are also clear in stating that they find this to be a social burden, and an unproductive use of their time. In recent years, schools have emphasized the importance of helping boys understand the social codes of online communication, including boundaries of acceptable behavior. Boys will continue to need this type of clarity and supervision, but also have an immediate need for a broader discussion of the relevance of social networking in their lives. It's unrealistic to expect that schools can fully monitor *Facebook* usage, but it would be strategic to help boys to feel more confident and less isolated in expressing skepticism about the value of social networking.

## Purposeful Work

This is a unique cultural moment with respect to boyhood. Specifically, boyhood has become longer than anyone could have imagined a century ago. It takes far longer to complete the schooling now accepted as a prerequisite for “success.” Parents routinely refer to young men in their twenties as boys, and in some cases continue a level of caretaking and oversight typically associated with much younger children. Boys are confused about their status during adolescence, and need clarity about what it means to become a man, and when that will happen. Meaningful work is emancipating for boys when that work is congruent with their ideal selves. Pursuing this

sort of purposeful work is endemic to living well. It helps to eliminate the frequent misconception among boys that work is what you rush through to get to “fun.” Purposeful work transcends fun—it is the path of confident happiness.

- **Educating boys with vocation in mind** may be one of the most useful initiatives of this new horizon in boys’ education. By letting go of antiquated notions of a linear relationship between school and career we cultivate a new perspective, more respectful of how education and vocation are intertwined. Educating boys with vocation in mind means that they will be introduced to different types of work at an early age, and will be encouraged to experiment with the particulars of different types of work as their identities and interest are developing. Research has well established that boys are self-selecting for career aspirations as young as age 12 or 13; school curricular and co-curricular experiences should reflect that reality. Prohibiting boys from participating in any type of meaningful work until their mid-twenties stunts maturity, inhibits a reality-based orientation to adulthood, and in the worst scenario, promotes a failure to launch. Frequent excursions to see and interact with people at work, opportunities to try doing skilled tasks, and a chance to meaningfully participate in service and craft are essential to the next generation of men.
- It will be essential to **help boys experiment with various types of vocational roles**. The most effective way of helping boys to assimilate the experience and perspectives and feeling of doing a particular type of work is to give them a job to do. By job, we should not infer chores, but activities that are self-defined and congruent with personal interests. Making the basic distinction between work and labor is a crucial cognitive leap for many young men. If, as I have suggested, boys are substantially better at recognizing what is of value to them than they are at naming it, then what implications does this have for how boys discover their calling? Should boys choose community service or senior project options from a simple menu of choices, or should some type of self-assessment be required prior to making this choice? So often, boys make decisions about these components of their education based on convenience, degree of perceived difficulty, or what another boy has chosen to do. But what if another set of criteria, based on the hope for congruity, were established to help boys think about their choices? For example, working toward translating authentic interests, core values, and ideals into viable options is potentially as useful as the work that results. Having to engage this type of creative and critical thinking is a primer for thinking about careers, and emphasizes how important it is for work/career choices to have ecological validity—they should flow logically from aspects of selfhood rather than temporal, situational factors. Boys could potentially become oriented to making these choices early in their educational careers, and could gain substantial experience with smaller decisions of this nature, at a younger age.
- **Urgency, necessity, and recognition** are critical factors in producing the adrenal response associated with boys’ effort and achievement. To an extent, it is possible to expose boys to urgency and necessity within school curricula, and those opportunities should be exploited for their affirmative psychological effects. Because these needs are of paramount importance in boys’ lives, schools may also have to partner with communities in the interest of creating experiences capable of instilling a sense of urgency and necessity. Connecting boys with the tempo of life outside of school could be both stimulating, and a useful introduction to adulthood. Boys have said they would like to be engaged in activities that include manageable risk, deadlines, and significant



consequences. Within this perspective, there seems to be an important intuition about preparedness, conviction, and—especially—the desire to see a difficult task completed. Arranging such opportunities is certainly a challenge, and historically beyond the requirements of a school. Yet where schools can offer such opportunities they will be addressing perennial, but under-appreciated needs of boys and young men.

- One of the most novel steps a school can take with respect to moral education and purposeful work is to **provide boys with an opportunity to care for living things**. Boys' relationships with animals, for example, remain some of the most powerful in their lives. Beyond their significance as symbols, schools might consider acknowledging the emotional and cognitive benefits of animals. Boys spoke openly of the comfort they get from being near domesticated animals. They are equally engaged by the projections they experience in relation to large and wild animals. In schools where boys have an opportunity to care for animals, there is no lack of enthusiasm for doing so. Although we might associate such activities only with younger children, they have a high degree of relevance for many adolescents as well. Learning to shape one's disposition toward animals as one ages is a fundamental, yet often unarticulated aspect of growing up. Another form of purposeful caretaking pertains to plant life and growing things. Creating a small garden of vegetables is an excellent way for boys to learn about sustainability, local economics, and biology. A garden also represents a bridge between the cognitive elements of school culture and the practical aspects of a service community. Beyond a small garden, boys said they would be interested in more ambitious ventures related to the environment if they were made available to them. For example, could boys be enlisted to help retrofit their school for energy efficiency? Wouldn't such an approach amplify the purpose of education, while providing substantial opportunity for public recognition?

## Creative and Intellectual Achievement

There is a tremendous amount of creative and intellectual work being done at IBSC schools that deserves to be acknowledged. This work is distinct from academic achievement but is no less worthy of school pride and discussion. If creating a school of significance is in part measured by boys' capacity to contribute ideas, demonstrate innovation, and think creatively in the broadest sense, then affirming intellectual achievement should begin early in a boys' education. Encouraging intellectual contribution provides a bridge from achievement to purpose and relevance. Just as academic achievement draws upon a spirit of perseverance and self-discipline, intellectual achievement draws upon inquiry, speculation, and experimentation—traits that are dormant among many boys until they are challenged to transcend their immediate context and goals. The creative work of boys is sometimes difficult to see because it involves a hybrid application of skills. Yet such applications foreshadow the novel solutions needed by a world of hybrid problems.

- Perhaps the first step in affirming creative work is to think broadly about how creativity is expressed among students. It seems especially important to **carry the creative energy of primary school through upper school**. Why should the creative initiative of younger children suddenly be lost when middle school arrives? Boys believe that they are being practical as they suppress creative interests during upper school, but is such a choice valid, or does it reflect a short-sighted construction of the world that marginalizes the benefits of creative work? Can

boys be meaningfully engaged in creative activity that feels as though it is congruent with the emergence of vocation and a sense of life purpose? How can we effectively represent our affirmation of creativity in the learning spaces/walls of adolescents as well as we do those of younger boys? A perennial constraint in this area has to do with limitations of time. It won't be feasible for most schools to create additional units of classroom time for creative pursuits. Yet persistently valuing the creativity of boys as they move into middle school and beyond—reflected in curricula, co-curriculum options, community service, and vocational exploration—would reinforce the relevance of creativity, and would assert a school's right to emphasize its own philosophical priorities.

- **Let's work together to make the artistic production of boys more visible around the world.** Not only does this affirm belief in creative pursuits, it serves to broaden public appreciation of the complexity of boys. Too often, boys and their interests are thought of in the narrowest of terms—perhaps even more so with respect to boys' schools students. The work currently being done by boys in a variety of media stands in opposition to those perceptions, as it underscores the imaginative, intellectual lives that many boys lead. My own observations suggest that school plays are as important a tradition to boys as school athletics, academic achievement, and good character. To an extent, the way that boys think of themselves will always be shaped by the expectations of others. The creative work of boys is an excellent starting point for public dialogue about the nature of 21st century boys.

Creating schools of significance is less a matter of starting prescriptive programs than it is a matter of attitude. Ultimately, a school's significance lies in its relevance to students. Some aspects of this relevance may not be perceived by students until after the years of their education. Yet most aspects of the school experience are relevant in the here and now. Education is not *for* life—it *is* life. The current project has taught us that boys are eager for those experiences; this research has joined together boys' voices from around the world, effectively forming a chorus of ideas. Our willingness to act on what boys have said is a measure of how seriously we regard their perspective, and whether we can accept that 21st century education is inherently more reciprocal than decades past. Despite this change, the new horizon this research points us toward promises to elevate the value of education and affirm the skills of educators.

As much as we might be attuned to honing purpose in boys' lives, our collective purpose as educators is to prepare students to meet the world. In that way, contemporary educators continue the legacy of their forbearers by helping to bring boys into a world of possibilities. We can pursue this goal with an understanding that a life of congruity is the prize to be realized. Everywhere one looks today, boys can be observed searching and stumbling for direction, seeking mentors who will be their guideposts in the quest for fulfillment. This is not the abstract search for self of generations past, but is instead a search for what it means to be a boy and man in the world, now. For over a century, the best minds in social science have taught us that the meaning of our lives is found in the people we love, and the work we do. We have a tremendous opportunity to equip boys for both endeavors; this can be our legacy and tradition as much as it is theirs. ■

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In a couple of instances I have cited specific references within the report, although many other books and articles have informed my thinking on various topics of this research. I include the most influential of those works here for anyone who might be interested in further reading. I have placed an \* next to those titles believed to be especially important.

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