

**Societal Pressures and Their Impact on Adolescent Males**

by

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## Abstract

Adolescent males are suffering due to pressures and expectations imposed on them by society to behave in certain ways. This paper explores the negative impact these pressures are having on this demographic both on their wellbeing and their sense of safety at school. The research describes the mental health issues that boys are experiencing as they try to navigate this already difficult developmental period in their lives. We pose the question: How can school community create a safer emotional environment for boys to flourish? This is explored by looking at the following themes: Theme #1: Mental Health Issues being experienced by adolescent males. Some of the mental health issues highlighted were how boys are feeling isolated while they suffer in silence. We looked at the roles of school and families in helping or hindering these youth. The research found that adolescent males cannot be their authentic selves. They feel pressure to not rely on social connections and drop friendships as they transition from elementary to middle school. Theme #2: Behaviour expectations/gender biases. This theme examines some of the gender biases and expectations imposed on youth by society and in particular, at school by trusted adults. This is causing many to underperform academically as too often negative messages become “truths”, leading to negative self-concept. Theme #3: Improving school culture and mental health of school community. In this third theme through the lens of humanistic and belonging theories, we see the different ways that school cultures can be improved to treat each individual in an equitable and fair manner. Finally, in chapter three we list recommendations on how to develop and nurture a healthy and safe school community for all members to feel a sense of belonging. Some of these recommendations include community service opportunities, groups and clubs, helping staff become more attuned to themselves and those around them.

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## **Adolescent males need to feel safe to succeed**

### **Societal Pressures and Their Impact on Adolescent Males**

#### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

##### **Introduction**

Adolescent males are being punished by society due to gender biases. Negative explicit and implicit messages around behaviours and performance expectations are being directed towards boys by trusted adults. They are having to make up for the toxic masculinity era and as punishment, are receiving conflicting messages on what is expected of them from society. Society wants them to continue to conform to a selection of the traits of masculinity such as being tough, reliable, and dependable. We now also demand that they put others first, are sensitive to those around them, not show weakness, and deny their true identities to satisfy the needs of others. But they are expected to do this alone, without friendships. These pressures are pushing them to the edge of society. Their mental health is suffering, and they are falling behind at school. This is having a negative effect on their self-concept.

Enough is enough. Adolescent males need our help. They are vulnerable too. We need to let them know that it is not just okay to be their authentic selves but that is who we want them to be. They need to develop friendships and know that they should nurture and develop old and new connections throughout their lives. They need to know that seeking help for mental health issues is not a weakness but a strength. They deserve to be valued by society for who they are. We need to help them feel a sense of belonging and safe at school so that they too, can be successful and thrive. Educators have a duty of care to each and every individual student in the community.

## **Background Information**

Prior to the Me-Too movement, toxic masculinity was a serious problem in society and still is in many parts of the globe. Thankfully much is changing for the better and a more fair and equitable society is beginning to emerge with more women and girls having a voice and agency. We still have a long way to go but this is very positive path in the right direction.

Unfortunately, in the wake of this evolution, there is a demographic in our society which is taking the fall for behaviours of their parents and grandparents. The current generation of adolescent males are taking the blame and too often being punished for how men behaved in the past (Irvine et al., 2018). We used to expect men to fit a certain, narrowly defined role. Society had a clear stereotype (albeit, negative and damaging) to which men and boys were expected to adhere. Now, things have changed, and men and boys are expected to conform to new expectations set by society. They are expected to continue to conform to many of their previous roles but now we have piled on a myriad of additional rules for them to try to learn and follow. It is confusing and they are struggling to keep up (Morin et al., 2013). Their mental health is suffering, and they are being ostracized by society as we expect them to take the torrent of defamatory comments thrown at them. They are expected to cope alone yet, make way for others to succeed as they are being told they are not good enough. Eventually, they begin to give up and give in to these pressures and validate the negative messages turning it into negative self-talk. They are being forced to choose between relationships and authenticity as society does not allow them to find and express their true identities (Maté, 2022).

Over the past twenty years in my roles of parent and of teacher, too often I have witnessed negative treatment of adolescent males by society. This has happened in playgrounds, classrooms and during conversations and attitudes towards these vulnerable members of our

society. Starting from when announcing that I was expecting my first son, the reactions were mostly of people feeling sorry for me as it was assumed that it was going to be much more challenging to bring up boys than girls. Assumptions are made and conclusions drawn about behaviours simply based on gender.

During my years as a substitute teacher, I am constantly being “warned” by colleagues about this “boy” or “groups of boys” in the classes that I teach. I hear conversations about boys and young males too often in the pejorative sense. They seem to be punished excessively for behaviours that educators appear to think acceptable from girls.

These attitudes and negatives messages and assumptions around boys’ behaviours simply based on gender are having a negative effect on how boys see themselves. They are beginning to write themselves off as failures as they constantly hear, and begin to believe these negative views to be true (Collins et al., 2021). Adolescent males are beginning to fail at school; when teachers’ perceptions are that boys are constantly misbehaving (Mullola et al., 2012), they will eventually accept that there is no point in proving them wrong and feel defeated, deflated and downtrodden.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Adolescent males are struggling with mental health, feeling inadequate, and underperforming at school (Mullola et al., 2012). Much of this is being caused by low expectations and negative messages from society, and especially from trusted adults. In recent years, especially since the Me-Too movement, boys are too often taking the blame for the faults of previous generations of toxic masculinity behaviours. Today, adolescent males are expected to be everything to everyone; tough, sensitive, reliable, dependable, and so much more (Irvine et al., 2018). Youth begin to believe these negative views about themselves and as a result, develop low self-esteem and poor self-concept (Keiser et al., 2019). Boys are suffering alone and in

silence as society expects them to be independent and not seek help for mental health concerns. It is also too often considered a weakness for adolescent males to rely on friendships which further isolates them. Peer friendships are necessary to nurture positive self-concept and sense of belonging (Lande et al. 2007).

**Research Problem:**

Adolescents are suffering from gender normative expectations which dictate how they should behave. This is causing them to suppress their emotions, deny themselves the close connections they had in early childhood, and become increasingly isolated and alone which can lead to suicide (Cleary, 2012). These rules and expectations are imposed by people youth look up to and who are closely connected to them, such as parents and trusted adults in school communities. Although all genders and the whole school community suffer as a result of these gender normative circuits and perceptions, this paper will focus on adolescent males, and the impact and damage these expectations are causing to their well-being and sense of safety at school.

In the recent past, boys were expected to conform to very specific social constructs of masculinity. The definition of masculinity was and continues to encompass what has become known as toxic masculinity which is based on boys being pressured to be tough, athletic, highly active, stoic, self-reliant, self-motivators and to not express their emotions (Irvine et al., 2018). Chapter two in this paper which is based on literature research will show the negative impact this widely accepted gender norm has had on the mental health of young boys and adolescent males.

More recently, in the past twenty years boys are under pressure to conform to additional complex societal expectations of behaviour as well as continue to fit the traditional role which

previously was a more simplistic, linear definition of masculinity. Now, as well as fitting the traditional definition of what it means to be male, boys are also expected to be sensitive and caring, compassionate, excellent listeners, high achieving as well as all the traits traditionally associated with being female (Randell et al., 2016). These perceptions of how boys are and should behave are preventing them from finding their identity and being their authentic selves.

A lot of progress has been achieved to ensure that girls have equitable opportunities, and much is being done to incentivise girls to broaden their career options. For example, they are being incentivised to choose science subjects at school and university. Girls only clubs have been established in many middle and high schools as well as in communities outside of schools. Girls are encouraged to take the initiative and to be confident leaders. These are positive and progressive steps in the right direction and need to continue in order to nurture and empower our girls.

It is now time to listen to this generation of adolescent boys and learn from them what life is like from their perspective. Are they struggling to find their identities? Why are they not feeling empowered to speak out and express their emotions? Do they feel forgotten, abandoned by society?

### **Purpose of the Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to create awareness around what life is like for young adolescent males in the current social climate, especially at school. Research shows that the life space of this demographic is highly complex and challenging to navigate (Starrs, 2019). They are constantly under pressure to behave in certain ways and often punished for being themselves and for not behaving in ways which are expected of them (MacLean et al., 2010). Often nothing they do seems to be right. This pre-conceived labeling and tendency for society, educators included,

to place unbearable pressure on boys to behave in certain ways is causing them to lose their way in life, fail at school, and live on the edge of society. At a time when they are trying to discover their identity, society is dampening adolescent boys' voices, destroying their self-esteem and causing them to feel lost and often unwanted (Pollack, 2006).

The school community and especially educators, can turn this around. We have a duty of care to all students in our community. We must help them feel safe so that they may succeed at school and flourish when embarking on their next life chapters.

### **Research Question or Thesis Statement**

How can school community create a safer emotional environment for boys to flourish?

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Theory underpinning my work:**

Humanistic, Person-centred theory (Carl Rogers) and Belongingness Theory (Baumeister and Leary).

In Rogerian counselling theory which is based on empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard, the individual is encouraged to be their authentic self. By becoming more aware of who they are, individuals can grow in confidence to be better able to cope with life's challenges. This person-centred approach can be applied to a school environment to help develop and nurture a healthy, accepting holistic community. Active listening and relational therapy is a way of being. It does not have to be limited to a one-on-one, client-therapist approach. It can be infused into the school culture (Vernon & Kottman, 2009). Carl Roger's phenomenological approach to relationships encompasses the importance of the personal environment as well as the individual's sense of place. Rogerian theory can be applied alongside the theories of Belongingness. This paper

will explore how a Humanistic person-centred approach to promoting healthy school culture goes hand in hand with Baumeister and Leary's theory of Belongingness.

### **Significance of the Study**

Expectations imposed by adults in schools are placing unbearable pressure on students to conform to traditional gender norms. This is having a negative impact on the mental health, well-being, and success of adolescent males. They are suffering in silence and are being shoved to the edge of society. The rates of completed suicides is significantly higher among males than females in western countries (Cleary, 2012). Boys are not the only ones who are suffering due to these gender biases; the school community and the rest of society are impacted in negative ways. This is a systemic issue.

Girls are also being burdened with gender boxes as they are expected to be quiet, attentive, and high achievers. Teachers and staff speak so openly in the pejorative sense about "boys" that it is widely accepted and engrained in many school cultures that boys are "difficult", and "troublemakers". When adults in schools are sending these overt messages about boys, the whole community adopt these attitudes, condemning them to fail, or at least to have a miserable time at school.

We need to help teachers and school staff become aware of the deep and long-lasting damage their perceptions of boys are causing, not only to this demographic, but also the rest of the community. Teachers need to shift attitudes towards fair treatment of adolescent males. The school culture should provide a living example of acceptance and a caring, nurturing, safe learning environment. It should embrace differences and the unique individuals within. It should embody interconnectedness and support. Students would then not undervalue themselves to the extent that they feel worthless. We need to help them transition to the next stage in their lives

with better self-awareness, confidence in their abilities, and self-worth. This will have a positive impact on how they treat themselves, others, and society.

### **Outline of the Remainder of the Paper**

The rest of the paper will comprise of chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 is the literary review chapter. It is comprised of three themes which also have sub-themes. These themes are: Mental health issues being experienced by adolescent males. This first theme will demonstrate how alone so many boys feel as they try to cope and wade through these difficult and often lonely teenage years. We will see how society contributes to their isolation and compounds their suffering by imposing expectations on them causing them to deny their emotions (Cleary, 2012). It will consult current research on the state of mental health of adolescent males and see how this is affecting their self-concept and their ability to succeed at school.

The second theme is: Behaviour Expectations/gender biases experienced in school communities. Here we consult research on the adverse effects of stereotyping on children and youth today. When views about someone are relentlessly directed at them, especially by someone older or a position of power and they are not allowed to express their authentic selves, that person begins to believe what they are told about themselves. This causes confusion and disconnection from the self during a time when adolescents are trying to discover their unique and authentic selves (Rubin, 2012). We will see how alone and isolated many boys have become as they often feel abandoned and expected to fend for themselves. This exclusion is causing severe loneliness and pressure to behave in ways that society dictates. In today's world, boys are expected to make way for girls as society grapples with finding a balance in the wake of the Me-Too movement and the emergence of more positive attitudes towards women and girls. Supporting girls and women is an important momentous move in the right direction. It has not

come early enough given the history of toxic masculinity and how that has impeded girls and women from having the same advantages from which boys and men previously benefitted.

According to Pollastri et al. (2016), this feeling of loneliness which many adolescent males are experiencing can be reversed when boys are allowed to be their authentic selves and they are then more likely to develop more friendships.

However, let's not punish and mistreat our boys in the process of making way for girls. Schools are responsible for creating a safe environment for all students to thrive, no matter their gender. Society still wants boys (who too often tend to be referred to as "young men") to "take it on the chin" and be a "real man" and stay in the background supporting the needs of others before their own (Irvine et al., 2018). This is sending the message that adolescent boys are not worth caring about. When reinforced enough, they begin to believe these negative messages and stop caring about themselves (Collins et al., 2021).

Finally, the third theme in the literature review chapter: Solutions to improving school culture and well-being explores ways in which society, and especially educators can create and nurture a more accepting, equitable and fair school culture so that all students can thrive. It will show how important the role of staff is in improving and maintaining a healthy school community and culture. Staff may need some help with their own well-being and self-awareness before they can begin to be present for their students. According to Wendel et al. (1994) it is important to adopt a holistic approach when building a healthy school culture and this involves catering to the well-being of all community members including staff as well as students. Collegiality among staff can be nurtured on many levels and contributes to team spirit and a healthy environment (Osterman, 2000). When they feel a sense of belonging in the community, adults will know how to create this kind of support system for the more vulnerable members of

the community. Teachers can lead by example, actively demonstrating kindness and acceptance and helping create a welcoming, safe space for all to flourish.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Society is placing such high demands on adolescent males that their mental health is at risk, and they are suffering alone and in silence (Pollack, 2006). Today's boys are expected to continue to fulfill all previous expectations of what it is to be male such as to be leaders, gentlemen, chivalrous, strong, stable. But they are now expected to be that and much, much more. They must also be sensitive, accommodating, progressive, silent, excellent listeners, calm, high achievers, mature, tough, and understanding of the difficulties experienced by girls and women (Randell et al., 2016). They are expected to be everything to everyone. We are on the right track for girls, now we need to figure out how to not neglect the needs of boys.

### Three themes that address my research question and rationale for choosing them:

**Theme #1:** Mental Health Issues being experienced by adolescent males.

This opening theme in the Literature Review will bring together research on the current state of adolescent males' well-being with particular emphasis on their mental health. Good mental health is imperative to self-concept, motivation, self-awareness and positive social relationships. There is a concerning number of boys who are struggling with mental health and other aspects of their lives such as relationships and academic success. In this section we will look at how adolescent males are suffering, often in silence, and the impact of their struggles on their mental health, identity, connectedness, and success at school.

**Theme #2:** Behaviour expectations/gender biases.

In this section we look at the burden and pressure of expectations imposed on boys by adults they look up to and take guidance from. Gender normative boxes are complex but negative attitudes and messages conveyed by society are received and understood by boys. Adolescent

males are aware, and often live in fear of negative consequences if they try to resist by being authentic or dare to find their own identities. Theme #2 will delve into the research on the biases, expectations and gender normative perceptions that school staff possess regarding male students.

**Theme #3:** Improving school culture and mental health of school community.

Many educators are not conscious of their treatment of students in school communities and the unhealthy culture these attitudes create. School staff need help to create awareness and become more in tune with the negative impact of gender normative perceptions on youth in their care. They also need some assistance in how to change school cultures so that every individual has an equal opportunity to thrive, not simply survive, the school years.

The aim of this third and final theme in my Literature Review is to suggest some solutions to improving school cultures and help make them safe spaces for students to thrive. We will incorporate two theories into this section: Roger's person-centred theory and the Belongingness Theory of Baumeister and Leary (1995). We will look at how schools can offer staff self-awareness training and professional development to improve school culture and enhance the school experience for all students.

### **Mental Health Issues Being Experienced by Adolescent Males in School**

For many, adolescence is a very difficult period of life with considerable cognitive, physiological, social, identity, and developmental changes taking place. During these vulnerable years, because of the social, hegemonic, conventional constructs of masculinity, too many adolescent males and young men deny their emotions (Cleary, 2012). For many, instead of enjoying this period of discovery, finding new friendships and interests, and exploring their identities, they instead feel shame and question who they are, while losing sense of self. In their study of emotional expressivity and social adjustment in which 178 students from Grade 10, 11,

and 12 participated, Polastri et al. (2016) found that the ability to express their emotions allowed participants to build better quality friendships and they also felt less lonely. This aligns with the findings of Cleary (2012) who states that the environment in which young men exist can have a detrimental effect on their ability to express their emotions and that the denial of their emotions and subsequent loneliness, in extreme cases, can lead to suicide.

According to Verzeletti et al. (2015) the loneliness which is caused by the suppression of emotions can perhaps be combatted by provision of training programs to help adolescents build strategies to help themselves become more aware of the feelings they are experiencing and be better able to self-regulate. In their study which looked at the well-being of 633 Italian students between the ages of 14 and 16, Verzeletti et al. (2015) found that the strategies of cognitive reappraisal (CR) skills resulted in better well-being in the participants. Their study also indicated that as they advance into this turbulent decade, the psychological health of adolescents deteriorated, i.e., 14-year-olds reported higher psychological health than 16-year-olds. This would indicate that it is important for staff at middle and high school to be aware of the potential increased deterioration in mental health of their students, especially as school itself can be a stressful environment.

Adolescents need to feel accepted for who they are and have the confidence and strength to be able to adjust to social situations. This is critical to making positive choices in friendships and well-being. Pollastri et al. (2016) found that when young males can express who they are with authenticity, this leads to less loneliness and better-quality friendships. In order to be able to build these quality friendships, adolescents need inner confidence which will give them the agency and self-esteem to know that they are not invisible and do have the choice to use their own voices and that those voices will be heard (Pollack, 2006).

However, a common theme that has emerged from the research, is that many adolescents do not have the confidence to express their emotions and instead, avoid seeking help, either professional or from friends. Chandra and Minkovitz (2006), in their study of 274 eighth graders from two middle schools in the U.S. found reluctance to seek help to be particularly prevalent for boys. Instead, feelings tend to be suppressed which results in increased problems with anxiety, loneliness, isolation, and sometimes use of drugs. Lack of self-compassion and self-esteem seems to be rooted in many adolescents' feeling a lack of self-kindness and self-worth.

According to the research of Chandra and Minkovitz (2006), stigma was a major deterrent in help-seeking behaviours, especially for boys. More boys than girls were unwilling to seek help in any form. Some of the barriers to using mental health services included students' embarrassment about what their peers would say, or that others would think they were different, weird, or weak. In the study more boys than girls reported that were they to seek help for mental health, their parents would disapprove. This is a strong indicator of the need for parents to be included when school leadership is working on improving school culture. Parents are very much part of the system, as are all staff at the school. Teachers and other school staff can help reduce the stigma that exists around help-seeking in various ways. They can bring in professional speakers to talk on the subject and invite parents to attend, teachers can have in-class discussions with students on the topic of mental health and this is perhaps especially important for male teachers.

The most important thing teachers can do to reduce the stigma around seeking help for mental health issues is to treat all students in the school in an equitable and fair manner without differentiating between genders. We will discuss later in this chapter how teachers can become

more attuned to their own emotions and how they can embrace those in their community with a more respectful and accepting way of being.

### ***Suffering in Silence: The Role of School, Families, and Self-Compassion***

The middle and high school years are a time when children's lives change dramatically in terms of physiological, emotional and social development. This is a potentially vulnerable period in young lives. During this time, adolescents are beginning to want more independence and distance from their parents and seek connections elsewhere, mostly with peers (Lindsey et al., 2017). As they go through physiological and emotional changes, they are also transitioning to middle or high school and there could be turbulence at home also. These factors can all contribute to the mental health of these vulnerable youth. Often, this age group are no longer considered to be children. Boys in particular, seem to suddenly be expected to behave like adults and as such, are given labels such as "young man" thus robbing them of their childhood (Lindsey et al., 2017). The researchers also believe that boys are denied their childhood because of the adult labels placed on them by society. This pressure to behave in certain ways is confusing for these youth who were children just yesterday, suddenly considered adults today. They need to be supported if society is going to place such demands on them. This is where community and school play a crucial role in helping these vulnerable youth.

As they begin to spend more time at school, the significant role schools play in supporting adolescents' mental well-being cannot be underestimated. Accordingly, Morin et al. (2013) believe that "secondary schools play a crucial role in the development of adolescent's self-esteem." (p. 1967). Morin et al. (2013) explain how secondary schools can have a positive or negative impact on students' lives as the school environment is in itself, stressful. Students' transition into, and experiences of secondary school co-inside with a time when they have

particular developmental needs (Morin et al., 2013). If their needs such as autonomy, intimacy, identity formation are not being met at this important time of transition, students are at the risk of suffering severe levels of low self-esteem if they internalize the feeling that they are unworthy of attention (Morin et al., 2013). This is also in accordance with the research of Lindsey et al., (2017) who found that African American boys are suffering from not being able to express emotional pain. They are internalizing their feelings and this suppression of emotions can present as laziness in the eyes of some parents and their inability to self-motivate can have the compounding effect of worsening the feelings of shame of isolation. Lindsey et al. (2017) also point out that many caregivers are reticent to acknowledge that their young loved one is in emotional pain. As a result, many feel alone and see no way out other than to commit suicide, which is what happened to DeShawn, a 14-year ninth grade student who Lindsey et al. (2017) describe in their article Boys Do(n't) Cry: Addressing the unmet mental health needs of African American boys. These adolescents, according to Lindsey et al. (2017) need to express their feelings to peers and for many, school is the conduit to finding friends in whom they can confide. In line with this, Keizer et al., (2018) found that levels of self-esteem drop when children reach adolescence before they begin to increase again during late adolescence. However, there are many factors that can aid or impede this increase in self-esteem during such a volatile period.

In their self-report study of 542 adolescents who were 14 years of age on average, Keizer et al. (2018) found that although peer relationships are important during early and mid-adolescence, the attachment with parents continues to be significant in terms of how youth see themselves. This indicates that the quality of parent and family relationships continue to be highly important for the mental health of these youth and therefore also, their levels of global self-esteem (Keizer et al., 2018).

The risk of internalizing the belief that their needs are unworthy of attention can also lead to more negative self-judgement and increased anxiety. This ties in with the findings of Barry et al. (2015) who found that when adolescents believe their experiences are unique to them, they are less likely to share them. Consequently, they feel increasingly alone and become more self-critical. In their research on adolescent self-compassion, Barry et al. (2015) also found that adolescents who suffered from high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms had little or no self-compassion. Whereas self-compassion had a positive association with self-esteem. This study's participants comprised of 251 male adolescents aged between 16 and 18 years in a residential school. The researchers suggest that promoting self-compassion could be a good intervention to help with positive self-perception in adolescent males and which in turn can help reduce aggressive behaviours. Although the study was conducted using voluntary self-reporting methods, the researchers are of the opinion that such reporting methods help promote more self-awareness which is beneficial to participants (Barry et al. 2015). In line with Barry et al. (2015), Lindsey et al. (2017) also promotes awareness both where parents and educators are concerned and for the students themselves. Lindsay et al. (2017) provides a list of five "plausible strategies" (which we will delve into later in this section) for families, educators, and community members to become more in tune with the mental health needs of adolescent males.

### ***Authenticity or conformity/self-denial and consequences for friendships***

Emotional distress experienced during adolescence can become compounded if youth continue to feel the need to internalize and suppress their emotions. In their study of 52 young Irish males between the ages of 18 and 32 who made at least one suicide attempt, Cleary (2012) found that these young men were suffering from immense emotional pain from which they had been suffering for many years leading up to the suicide attempt. Many, even during the in-depth

interviews carried out during the research, still had difficulty expressing the specific nature of the sadness or anxiety they were feeling. There was a lack of self-awareness in many of the participants. It is not surprising that when youth from early adolescence feel they must internalize and suppress their emotions that they become increasingly disconnected from their own feelings and less able to identify with self as the years pass. Gabor Maté explains how suppression of the authentic self in the form of disconnection from self can create life-long trauma which he refers to as small-*t* trauma (Maté, 2022). This disconnect from the self would also have detrimental implications for forming positive relationships with others.

The qualitative study by Randell et al. (2016) asked participants to reflect and describe their personal life experiences and to share by giving some insight into the pressures and expectations regarding the complex modern masculinities confronting them daily. In their study carried out in Sweden, in-depth interviews were conducted with 33 adolescent boys aged between 16 and 17, Randell et al. (2016) found that in order to maintain their mental health and well-being, adolescent boys must carefully manage how they express their emotions in tandem with navigating different masculinities.

As modern masculinity is no longer defined as a linear hegemonic notion, today's adolescent boys are expected to conform to numerous roles and expectations of how to behave and standards to live up to in our complex society. Two constructions of masculinity were identified and addressed by the participants: Gender-normative masculinity and non-gender-normative masculinity (Randell et al., 2016). Gender-normative masculinity comprises two sub-categories; masculinity defined by *toughness*, and masculinity defined by *sensitivity*. Non-gender-normative masculinity was defined as *sincerity*. The boys in this study explained how they feel the need to conform to different masculinities in order to express their feelings. For

example, if they are in a public place, they feel the need to behave or present themselves in certain ways which conform to society's expectations of how a young male should behave. There seems to be an expectation constructed by society of how boys should perform within the gender-normative and non-gender-normative parameters. They could be compelled to mask their true feelings and play the role of the tough guy which protects them from feeling shame and being alone.

Being ostracised from peers is a severe judgement for simply wanting to be oneself, especially for teenagers. This shows how punitive our society can be when our survival mechanism is forced to become activated, and the need for attachment outweighs the tension scales in the attempt to balance attachment and authenticity. According to Maté (2022), attachment and authenticity are two core human needs. If our sense of attachment is not satisfied, this yearning will outweigh our need for authenticity and we are at risk of not being true to ourselves, and therefore will be less self-aware and self-accepting. This will have a negative effect on one's self-concept (Maté, 2022).

One outcome of the study by Randell et al. (2016) was that some male participants expressed the view that it was unfair that it was acceptable for girls to express their emotions and not for boys. One youth expressed this feeling as follows: "But I think that guys have a very hard time too, and no one writes about that, which makes it hard to be an emotional guy who shows that he's sad." (p. 492).

By daring to express their emotions or sensitive feelings, boys risk being vulnerable and considered weak, and therefore some may share only those emotions or problems which are 'acceptable' (Randell et al., 2016). MacLean et al. (2010) note the punitive pressures that adolescent males must endure compared to girls. They found that, as well as reluctance to report

physiological illness, boys are less likely than girls to express their feelings because of gender stereotypes. This balancing act that young adolescent males must navigate and the “manage it yourself attitude” (MacLean et al., 2010, p.495) from society must be exhausting for these boys.

More needs to be done in schools and society to encourage and support these young males to be accepted for who they are, and to feel able to express their emotions and seek help on gender equal terms (Randell et al., 2016). Being able to help friends in need was very important to participants in the Randell et al. (2016) study and gave them the confidence to seek professional help for those they care about. Armed with the skills to reach out on behalf of others, they may be more able and willing to seek help for themselves when needed.

Adolescents who have strong supportive peer friendships are often more resilient and more likely to be capable of adjusting to different social situations (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). Pollastri et al. (2018) would add that adolescent boys who can express their feelings with close friends are more likely to be healthy and continue to maintain good friendships.

Lack of self-confidence partnered with fear of being judged by friends and the perception that seeking help is a sign of weakness was found to be a barrier preventing adolescents from seeking help (Radez et al., 2019). This was common to all the studies in the Radez et al. (2019) review paper with male only participants. However, they also found that students who felt they had supportive networks of friends and/or family were more likely to be able to seek help. Hall-Lande et al. (2007) point out that despite the many discussions in research regarding negative influences of peers during adolescence, they found that teenagers who have close healthy friendships have decreased risk of psychological health issues. They advocate the important role that parents, and educators can play in facilitating the development of friendships at home, in the community and within the school environment (Lande et al., 2007).

In their RCT study of 1,130 adolescents who received intervention by giving teenagers the tools to seek help, Lubman et al. (2016) found that the group who received the intervention were more likely to seek professional help. In the study carried out by Lubman et al. (2016), 1130 Year 9 students from 21 schools in Australia participated in the intervention which took place over two class periods with a follow up session one month later involved providing students with information on how to seek help when needed. This was done through on-line surveys, videos, and classroom activities such as vignettes. The purpose of the in-class activities was intended to help students identify when a friend needs help and to know who to reach out to for help. The intervention also had the educational component of helping students understand some of the misinformation and myths around mental health and substance abuse. One of the aims was to break down barriers to seeking help from mental health professionals. One resounding result of the intervention was that 50-75% of participants reported increased confidence in their ability to help a friend seek help for depression.

It is important to note that this type of intervention is aimed at helping the students gain the knowledge and build confidence so that they can help others. An important by-product of this type of education is that each student will also now have the knowledge and skills, and confidence in their ability to recognise in themselves when they might need help. They will most likely be able to reach out to peers or trusted adults for help and know that there is no shame in asking for help. This is knowledge that will assist them throughout their lives.

Agency and choice in seeking help were important factors in the studies carried out by both Lubman et al. (2020) and Radez et al. (2021). They found that adolescents were more likely to seek help with emotional issues when they felt like it was their own choice.

If adolescents are suffering in silence and feeling isolated, we educators need to listen and learn about their needs and act on ways in which we can help them not just survive but thrive at school.

### **Behaviour Expectations/gender biases experienced in school communities**

Choice is something that has been stripped from our children since they were very young, especially when it comes to education. Children as young as four years old have been marched along to this place called school. Parents then force their young, often kicking and screaming into these buildings with strangers and leave them for the day, every day, every week, for years.

Humans in the western world at least, have been forced to accept that they do not have the right to choose. If this is what they have been trained to accept from the age of three or four, why would they think they have the right to be themselves or to express opinions from then on. We have so many expectations and place so much pressure on our young to behave, perform and conform, yet expect them to also be “mature”, independent individuals. This section will address some of the expectations that responsible adults impose on students in schools with a focus on adolescent males and how this effects their well-being and feelings of safety.

We will delve into the research regarding expectations imposed on youth by responsible adults in the school community. We will explore the impact of masculinity stereotyping, labelling, and gender normative braces that boys are placed in by so many, often on an ongoing daily basis. Secondly, we will discover how such gender boxes are affecting these boys as individuals, how it is hampering their success, and how they are being denied the ability to express themselves, find their unique identities and how this prevents them from feeling safe at school. Finally, we will explore the impact these expectations and pressures are having on the school community, and relationships within.

### ***Gender norms becoming societal “truths”***

Masculine identity constructs continue to exist despite the great leaps that have been achieved in recent decades for better equity and understanding of gender biases in society. Until recently, it was widely assumed and accepted that masculine norms were linear and simple to understand with performative gender rules for both males and females from a young age (MacLean et al., 2010). Society still puts pressure on young men to behave in certain ways and stay in the Man Box (Irvine et al., 2018). The Man Box 2018 study involved gathering the views of 1,000 men between the ages of 18 and 30 across Australia in the form of an online survey. The questions in the survey are based on what is known as The Man Box. The Man Box is a set of beliefs which society has imposed on young men which pressure them into behaving in certain ways. The survey included questions on such topics as relationships, self-sufficiency, health and wellbeing, physical appearance, by-stander behaviour, and violence. The aim of the study is to find out directly from young men if and how much they are influenced by these rules and to what extent they internalize expectations imposed by society. The Australian study found that society successfully communicated expectations it has on how young men should behave. The pressure to behave in certain ways is reinforced as they navigate through life. Two-thirds of young men in the Australia study said that they have been told since they were young boys that the “real man” behaves in certain ways, and they have felt pressure to conform to these ways to be accepted by society. This pressure is reflected in close relationships as well as macrosystems (Irvine et al., 2018). The Man Box study has been conducted in several countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Mexico.

Today, boys and young men must fulfill the traditional masculine role such as is expected in The Man Box and be sensitive and sincere and possess all the other character qualities perceived to be attributed to girls (Randall et al., 2016).

Many young boys and men understand and feel compelled to adhere to the rules of the Man Box (Irvine et al., 2018) as these rules continue to be enforced by society. As many adolescents spend more time at school than at home, teachers and school staff have the opportunity to lift the pressure that boys have been subjected to since an early age. Unfortunately, instead of trying to dismantle the Man Box, teachers and administration teams often reinforce gender rules and make negative assumptions regarding boys' behaviours and academic abilities based on social constructs and stereotyping. Mullola et al. (2012) found that teachers perceive boys at school to be distracted, and to have low educational competence. In my experience over the past five years as a teacher teaching on call or a substitute teacher, I have found that when teachers meet with me or leave me notes prior to my teaching their classes, I am invariably warned about certain students or groups of students. I cannot recall one time when a teacher has "warned" me about the girls in the class. Instead, the usual line goes something like "watch out for this group of boys" ...or "I need to warn you about this boy..."

If even strangers are being warned of "the boys", it is not surprising that eventually "the boys" will become an issue or "misbehave". This imposed belief will become a truth, even for the young males, as what is the point in being any different if they are branded by not only their own teacher, but also by a stranger who has not even met them yet. This is having a detrimental effect on these young males as they are suffering socially, academically, and are being forced to disassociate themselves from their true selves. During the very time in their lives when they need to find their true identities, these young boys are being forced to deny themselves the opportunity

to self-discover and become confident in who they are as individual human beings. This is a loss for them and for society.

This “halo effect” of the subjective perception that teachers have of students has an impact on how teachers treat students (Mullola et al., 2012). What is concerning about this is that many teachers seem to unknowingly "write-off" students even before they have met them or had the opportunity to build a positive relationship. Assumptions are being made about how boys and girls will behave and perform. Mullola et al. (2012) found that boys mostly don't seem to fit in to the idea of the ideal student. They also found that teachers perceived boys to be less mature than girls and rated boys as more “difficult” than girls. The assumptions that boys cause more trouble is rooted in teachers’ gendered beliefs resulting in a “body-reflexive practice” where boys are being placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy in schools (Collins et al., 2021). Teachers’ assumptions of ability are contributing to a gendered pattern of boys falling behind girls in academic attainment (Collins et al., 2021).

These biological beliefs based on gender and masculinity and assumed gender differences about students as learners is having the negative effect of becoming “truths” for not just teachers but everyone within, and outside of the school community (Collins et al., 2021). Young males' perceptions that they are expected to adhere to traditional masculine norms (Wilson et al., 2022) which includes low academic achievement, can lead to a self-fulfilling negative stereotype threat which can cause boys to perform at low academic levels (Hartley and Sutton, 2013). When boys are repeatedly told they are not going to be successful at school, eventually they themselves will begin to believe this stereotype threat to be true (Hartley & Sutton, 2013).

**Man up and be everything to everyone, but alone; how much more can they take?**

Today, the phenomenological space in which boys exist as individuals is more complex than traditional linear masculine norms; they now feel the pressure of fulfilling the traditional role expectations as well as having to be everything to everyone. Adolescent males are being pushed more and more to the edge of society. They are expected to be independent, tough, and strong and to not rely on anyone else, even friends. According to Starrs (2019), young adolescents yearn to be understood for where they are at in life; their “lifespace”, the place in which they exist and how life is experienced for them. They want to be seen, understood and treated with compassion by those around them. Starrs (2019) emphasizes the importance of de-shaming, re-framing and supporting young adolescent males in helping them to find meaning in life. These are important in helping with trauma but can also be used, along with compassion, in how we treat those around us on a daily basis.

Keiser et al. (2019) found that boys are less likely than girls to have a best friend. This is not by choice but as a result of society’s subliminal way of portraying this basic need as a weakness. Adolescent males are expected to no longer rely on close friendships around the time of puberty whereas it is generally assumed that girls will continue to maintain and develop close friendships as they grow older and maintain them into adulthood. Often adults go out of their way to help girls build friendships but assume boys don’t need this assistance. One way of helping boys to build connections in the community could be to join an out of school club. Such clubs are difficult to find specifically for adolescent males.

There are some great community agencies in our city which offer programs to help youth feel valued and give them a safe platform to make friends and express themselves. One such organization here in Victoria is Big Brothers, Big Sisters. They offer many programs such as mentorship for younger students and clubs where students who would otherwise struggle

socially. One such club within the organization is called B You. It used to be called Go Girls. Although the name has changed, it still only welcomes those who either identify as female or gender diverse. It does not provide space for adolescents who identify as male. This organization used to offer an equivalent program for boys, but it is no longer running.

This trend is something I have noticed in schools also, where adolescent males don't have the same provisions as others. In one of the middle schools in which I teach, there is a girls only running club as well as other clubs which only welcome girls. Recently, some of the boys asked me why the girls get to have clubs that others are excluded from and expressed how this feels unfair. I understand. It is difficult to explain that perhaps society is now trying to make up for not providing opportunities for girls in the past, but today's generation of youth are not at fault, yet they are suffering.

We are sending the message that boys don't deserve to be treated fairly and don't deserve to have friendships. This means adolescent males are left with becoming more and more isolated and alone as they develop and grow. While navigating the turbulent teenage years, and when they need them most, boys feel the pressure to shed early friendships as they move into adulthood. They are forced to conform to the traditional toxic masculinity role including bravado (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012) in order to survive. They are becoming more and more isolated and lonely. Way (2013) found that boys place enormous value on close friendships with other males, especially in early childhood and adolescence. Friends were critical in their supportive roles, giving them permission to share emotions and thoughts with close peers they could trust with their deepest secrets and problems.

This shows that friendships are just as important for boys as they are for girls, yet adolescent (and younger) males are being pressured to abandon these friendships as early as

puberty even though they long to keep them (Way, 2013). This close intimacy in the form of trusting peer friendships is essential to maintaining mental health for these boys. Many are experiencing loss and unable to express the grieving from which they are suffering because they rightly perceive that their voices will not be listened to, or that this is simply what society expects from them (Way, 2013). For those who do find the courage to speak about their feelings, there exists the underlying fear of shame in sharing sensitive emotions (Randell et al., 2016). Sometimes the anticipated, or actual consequences of authentic emotional expression are too severe to risk. So many young males understand that the only option is to submit to societal expectations and suppress their emotions rather than suffer the consequences of being labelled psychologically weak.

Boys have learned to accept that they must manage alone. They understand and respond to biased messages communicated by those around them, making them aware that they expected to manage alone (Collins & Gazeley, 2021). Way (2013) expresses the tragic effects of the current culture and its treatment of adolescent boys. As boys grow older, they flounder and begin get lost in life and “their emotionally sensitive and astute voices become fearful and wary” (p. 206). Polastri et al. (2016) found that helping adolescent boys to improve their social connectedness and social well-being could help them nurture friendships and the ability confide in close friends which in turn helps maintain mental health.

It is important that adolescent boys are not just given permission but encouraged and provided opportunities to develop and nurture close friendships. Within the school community this could be done by the facilitation of clubs, e.g., D & D club. This is a soft and non-threatening approach to helping young students who share a common interest to meet others in a social setting with like-minded peers. This acceptance and support must come from society and

specifically from trusted adults including parents and adults in the school community. Currently this support is not being communicated as part of the culture of many schools. Many parents at home are supporting their adolescent children and showing them that they value their uniqueness and encourage expression of emotions and individuality. But students spend a decreasing amount of time at home as they grow older. The global construct of self-esteem is very dependent on a child's relationship with their parents. When there isn't a strong attachment relationship with parents, the supporting role of peers becomes more significant (Keizer, 2019). However, peers and all students in the school community need to know that they will not be shamed, shunned or treated in a negative way for being their authentic selves.

Adolescents need to feel buoyed and supported in their path to discovering and expressing their unique identities. Encouragement to become confident young individuals is not being clearly communicated by many trusted adults. School cultures tend to relay the opposite, that students conform to gender normative boxes rather than giving individuals freedom to be themselves. Instead, young males feel they can only be authentic when they are alone (Wilson et al., 2022). This is where teachers, school counsellors, administrative teams and other adults in schools play an important role; they need to make it clear that all individuals are welcome, and embraced for the unique beings they are, and treated fairly and equitably. If adults in the school community live and act without judgement, students will sense this and feel accepted for who they are and know that they are allowed to be themselves without negative consequences.

### ***Oblivious staff v's be/aware students***

Students are aware of and have become sensitive to teachers' biases, and whether these attitudes are being communicated explicitly or subliminally, it is felt and understood by most students. This brings a sense of being defeated and submissive acceptance that there is no point

in trying to express how they feel as it falls on deaf ears. For trust to exist, students need to perceive that they are supported by staff at school (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012). Such support has the effect of buffering students' resilience and self-esteem, producing positive outcomes in self-concept and academic achievement. Unfortunately, many adults in the school community are not aware of the negative messages they are conveying to individual student members and to the student body as a whole. It is too often embedded in the school culture.

Parents are very influential in the early years of childhood. However, teachers spend more time with adolescents than parents and have great influence on those in their care. Students are aware of the gender normative and subjective perceptions teachers and school staff have of their behaviours, teachability, learning abilities and traits (Mullola et al., 2012). According to Hartley and Sutton (2013), male students are aware that they are subject to more disciplinary actions than most, and that they are often assumed to be low achievers by teachers. Conversely, teachers and staff are largely oblivious to the circuits being created in the school community and the negative effects this is having on individual students, student body, and the community as a whole.

These consistent negative stereotype threats being imposed on boys causes serious damage to self-esteem, confidence, trust in adults and in themselves and their ability to be successful at school. Male students are at risk of taking this low self-concept into adulthood and carrying the feeling of being inferior throughout their lives. Not only will they be carrying feelings of sadness and loss due to giving in to the pressure to drop close friendships and go it alone (Keiser et al., 2019), but they also have to endure the shame of being considered underachieving and incapable students. This is largely due to the experiences they are subjected to by teachers and other trusted adults who impose their expectations of how youth should

behave. These staff perceptions of students are based on assumed genders and gender norms (Hartley and Sutton, 2013) and associated presumed abilities and traits. Staff hold the power to have a negative or positive effect on the school culture and students' well-being.

Support and encouragement devoid of judgement from teachers and staff in the school environment can have very positive impacts on students' lives, having the power to boost students' self-concept, academic performance, and ultimately their success at school (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012). Teachers have the opportunity to lead by example in promoting identity development, including masculine identity development, for all students in their care by introducing school-based initiatives (Wilson et al., 2022). Teachers can start building a safe school community by modeling kindness and acceptance and by creating a welcoming environment for all community members. The power of kindness and compassion cannot be underestimated. School staff can promote positive self-concept in each student by stopping the cycle of gender normative perceptions. They can help students reengage in their learning by encouragement and promoting and modeling acceptance, and by embracing students for the unique learners they are. Adolescent males too often give up trying to express their unique identity, as they know it's a losing battle. Behaviour is driven by needs (Rubin, 2012) and the needs of many adolescent males are too often not being listened to, nor met. Eventually, they are simply going to behave in the ways teachers and other adults perceive and expect them to behave.

Adolescents are too often not being allowed to express themselves in ways which are personal to them. Children (and adults) need to feel accepted for who they are, they need a sense of place and belonging. Students strive for mastery, independence and generosity (Rubin, 2012).

The school community should be a safe place where students can grow in the knowledge

and trust that they can do this safely and flourish. The school culture should provide this secure space for young people to feel safe and grow with encouragement and support from the community in which they spend most of their time. There are ways in which school cultures can foster safety for adolescent boys. These will be discussed in the following section.

### **Solutions to improving school culture and well-being**

Teachers are members of the “helping” profession. And the ultimate beneficiary of their help are the students under their tutelage and care. Adults who are part of the education profession go to work every day with the purpose of imparting knowledge to the younger generation. Their role does not stop there. Teachers and school staff have an enormous impact on the social and emotional well-being of the students in their care. Their role is not only to educate the children on academics, but they also have a crucial influence on that child’s experiences of community and acceptance. The ultimate goal is to set each student up for success as they navigate through life’s journey. This is an enormous responsibility and undertaking for educators and before they can help their students, it is imperative that teachers feel supported and a sense of belonging so that they can spread the support blanket out for their students.

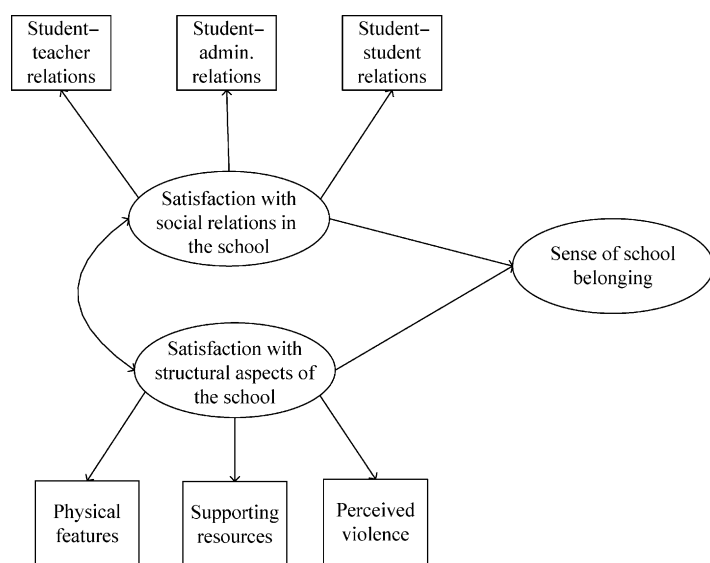
The health of the staff in a school will have a direct impact on how they see, treat, and interact with the students in their classrooms, hallways and school grounds. They have the power to set a positive example by showing compassion, being attuned to the needs of those around them and by themselves being respectful and accepting of all members of the community.

Before staff can lead by example, they themselves need to be aware of what it means to belong to a school community. They need to feel that they belong to the whole school system, not just the adults or their group of teaching partners, but the larger community and what that means to them and others within.

### *It starts with staff*

Just as the human body is a system with the mental and physical well-being wholly interdependent and intertwined, so too is the school community, as are so many other systems and sub-systems which make up society. Cemalcilar (2010) explains interconnectedness in his proposed model for how students feel a sense of belonging when social and structural aspects of being part of a community are satisfied. In his proposed model below, we can see how interconnected, interdependent, and important all aspects of community living are to creating a sense of belonging for each student in the school system.

Cemalcilar's (2020, p. 246) proposed model for sense of school belonging



In his study, Cemalcilar (2020) looked at school climate and its impact on student's sense of belonging. The study involved collecting data from 799 Grade 7 and 8 students from 13 schools in Istanbul, Turkey. Although it identifies and incorporates the importance of relationships students have within the school community, it is limited in its scope in that the focus is on the students. What is missing in Cemalcilar's model is all the other relationships that make up a whole school community. Cemalcilar (2020) hypothesized that the development of

positive feelings towards school are influenced more by social relations than the social environment. The study was focused on gaining insight from the students' point of view, and it found that students were more likely to succeed academically when they feel their school is a caring and supportive environment (Cemalcilar, 2020).

Education in the form of imparting knowledge on children and youth is the main reason schools came in existence however, it is a much more complex eco-system, with many inter-dependent relationships on which a school depends in order to thrive. A caring and supportive environment is comprised of many more relationships besides the relationships detailed in Cemalcilar's proposed model which is limited to relationships between students and students, students and administration, students and teachers. While all those relationships are integral components of the school system, there are so many more relationships that necessitate a healthy school community. Wendel et al. (1994) believe in a wholistic approach to school success and set up Project Success to discover what makes school successful. They interviewed 491 of 1000 school administrators who were nominated as outstanding administrators by leaders of professional organizations and institutions in the United States. The administrators provided their thoughts on why they believed their schools are successful. A main commonality among the administrators' responses was that none of them focused solely on the students. Rather, they spoke of the importance of the whole community, the systemic, wholistic approach to school administration. Several spoke of the importance of empowerment and motivation of teachers. Something that permeated through the research was the humility of the administrators and how they continue to learn from those around them. The main theme that emerged from the submissions of these successful leaders was their respect for all members of their school

communities and the importance of involving all stakeholders in the creation of a sense of belonging. This included staff, students, and parents.

In her review of educational research which focused on the point of view of the student and their need for belonging in the school community, Osterman (2000) emphasizes early on in her paper, the importance of collegiality among teachers in the school community. The relational nature of community, along with trust and safety are highly significant in creating a sense of belonging for all members. According to Osterman (2000), collegiality among teachers is one of the most important aspects of creating a healthy working, social and emotional environment. Collegiality could take many forms such as teachers working in teams, encouraging each other personally and professionally, setting up clubs and/or groups together, and socializing within and outside of school. It also empowers teachers and brings them a confidence in their ability to perform and deliver, thus creating a healthy social and work environment among staff.

When school staff feel appreciated, supported, accepted, respected and safe, this feeling will be organically, as well as intentionally passed on to other members of the community, including the students. When comparing a traditional school to Starlight Academy, a non-traditional school where students reported feeling a strong sense of belonging, Johnson (2009) also found that it is very important teachers feel supported by their administrative team. Teachers interviewed in the study noted that knowing they have support from administration helps them establish and maintain healthy relationships with students, parents and other community members. For them to be active agents of change, Edwards (1995) also states how important it is for school staff to be aware of and given the opportunity to fulfill their own sense of belonging and the benefits that collegiality and community brings.

**Attunement leads to belonging and belonging is contagious**

Edwards (1995) also stresses the need for students to feel a sense of belonging and that for teachers to be able to create a classroom with a culture of belonging, the teacher must first feel that they belong in the school community. The researcher refers to Adlerian psychology, whose basic construct is the need for every individual to belong. Edwards (1995) makes a poignant point that if students feel like they belong in school, they will feel like they have a place in society as school is the student's society. In their study, Edwards (1995) also posits that the school counsellor is in an ideal position to bring the whole community together and help foster and nurture a school-wide sense of belonging. They can play an important role in helping teachers and staff become attuned to their own need for belonging.

Armed with this awareness, teachers and staff can work towards creating a safe school culture and maintaining a sense of belonging for all (Edwards, 1995). The paper outlines various ways in which this wholistic healthy school culture can be achieved. School counsellors could put inspirational notes in staff mailboxes is one idea, among others. They could consult with administration to find ways to bring teachers and staff together, ways that would be appreciated and accepted by that unique community.

It is important that staff don't feel pushed into corners or forced to do something they are not comfortable with doing. This is where the school counsellor needs know their community and be transparent in their intentions and to communicate, consult and collaborate with all staff members to ensure that everyone is aligned. Lewis et al. (2023) concurs that creating a caring community is the cornerstone of building a sense of belonging for all members of the school community. In their paper on creating caring and challenging schools, the authors describe how it is possible for students to succeed at school when the emphasis is moved away from intellectual ability and competitive academic tasks. They noticed how deflated students were

who did not win awards in the school science fair. As a result of this attunement to their students' feelings, the staff at El Rio Elementary school made a simple yet monumental change in order to be more inclusive and meet the needs of all students. They redesigned the science fair the following year and instead held a "family science festival". The festival was successful in its goal which was to bring a sense of belonging to all students, it also met friendship and participation needs. Families were invited to participate in the hands-on fair, so all members of the school community were given the opportunity to come together and share in the successes of the students. The authors believe that by creating an engaging curriculum with a caring community, they appealed to the intrinsic motivation of the students and sparked a love of learning through nurturing a sense of belonging.

The teachers took pride in their roles as catalysts to helping students to be inspired and complete their projects. Parents were involved from home and felt welcomed to come and see the displays, and the students took pride in participating in this collaborative, shared purpose and commitment to one another. They felt safe in an environment which was accepting, fair and kind. The success of this change from science fair to family science festival is just the tip of a potential iceberg. The sense of community and belonging spread throughout the whole community and engaged all children in the school. Such projects have far reaching possibilities and in this case, achieved the intended goal of promoting fairness, kindness, helpfulness and responsibility; all qualities which foster pro-social behaviour and a sense of belonging. The community now has the impetus and motivation to continue with such community building projects (Lewis et al., 2023).

When students know that teachers and staff are supportive and want them to succeed, there is a school-wide connectedness and sense of belonging that is felt throughout the

community. This supportive environment is buoyed by the awareness and attunement of all to the needs of those around them. Teacher attunement was also the foundation for the study conducted by Norwalk et al. (2016) on how teachers who are aware of what's going in the school can foster a sense of belonging among middle school students who feel victimized by peers. This study was part of a larger intervention research program called the Rural Early Adolescent Learning (REAL) in which Grade 6 teachers in the 20 intervention schools were given activities during professional development programs to help them become more attuned to the victims of bullying in the school. The purpose was to find ways in which teachers can foster more positive peer relations among students by being aware of and intervening in situations where students felt bullying was taking place (even if the teacher would not in the past have considered such behaviour as bullying). The researchers found that throughout the school year, teacher attunement and responsiveness to students' peer relations was directly linked to students' sense of school belonging.

This attunement helped foster a safer and more supportive school environment. This study can be applied to school relationships in general. And teacher attunement can serve as a preventative measure of proactively bringing students together by promoting collegiality and kindness. When students see that teachers are paying attention to what's going on around them and listening to students, the students will feel supported, cared for and part of the school community. The students will, by osmosis adapt and adopt this way of being, creating an ecosystem which welcomes and embraces all its members. This is a recipe for success.

### ***Setting students up for success***

Success of each student is the aim of every school, and the definition of success has evolved over the years to no longer simply mean academic achievement. If we are to help

students succeed at school we must care for the whole person, not just the academic achiever. Recently, and especially post covid, we as a global society have become more comfortable with being open and authentic about mental health and social and emotional needs.

Paying closer attention to children and adolescents' wellness has allowed us to better understand their struggles as students in our schools today. We have seen the effects of isolation that too many adolescents experience today. Educators must, through awareness and attunement, ensure that we neither condone nor contribute to the alienation of youth from society. Instead, we must take steps to support our youth and allow them to trust that we are there to help them succeed.

Adolescents react to being treated as "other" and rejected by society by pulling away from those around them. According to Calabrese (2003), the alienation of adolescents has become a serious problem in society today. Their research paper explains how during this period in a person's life when they experience many different environments, adolescents are pushed to the edge of society due to attempts to control them. One way in which youth have responded to this is to create a counterculture where they are rejecting many of the activities and goals set up by adults in the traditional school system (Calabrese, 2003). Society is showing youth that if they do not adhere to societal norms of acceptable behaviours, they will be rejected and worse, we will make no effort to understand their needs. When they don't feel loved, adolescents tend to further alienate themselves from society. Calabrese (2003) explains how when adolescents don't feel needed, they feel more alienated by society. Alienation brings such feelings as powerlessness, isolation, normlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement. The authors state that a way to reverse these negative social constructs is for society to stop using segregation

to control adolescents. Society segregates adolescents in three forms: from adults, from peers by age and grade, and from peers by intellectual ability (Calabrese, 2003).

Edwards & Mullis (2001) believe that schools can reduce these feelings of alienation and social isolation and promote a sense of belonging by creating opportunities for students to find and become involved in a social interest. They also believe that students and staff who feel a sense of belonging at school will pass this on to others in the community and help the school culture overall. The researchers suggest that a way to develop a sense of belonging at school is to follow the three C's of belonging which was developed by Bettner and Lew (1989) and Albert (1996). The three C's of belonging are: Connect, Capable, and Count (Contribute). The three C's are described as follows: Connect; the researchers suggest that the school design scheduling so that teachers have time to connect with peers and each other. Capable; giving the students more choice gives them agency and power in their education which in turn helps them to feel capable and confident learners. Contribute; as adolescents already pull away or are made to feel alienated from society, one way to include them more is to give them opportunities to volunteer in areas of interest, such as food banks, animal shelters or care homes (Edwards & Mullis, 2001).

Peer relationships was an area that Osterman (2000) examined in their paper on belonging and how students need to feel part of the school community. They point out that boys in particular suffered from a lack of reciprocated peer friendships at school. They also found that boys are less likely than girls to feel a sense of belonging at school as they feel less accepted by their peers. Adolescent males are less likely to reach out to peers for emotional support than girls which has a direct effect on friendships, psychosocial development, self-esteem and motivation, hence success at school.

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), perceived threats to social bonds lead to psychosocial struggles and emotional problems which present as anxiety, loneliness, and relationship problems, all of which struggling adolescents suffer today. Ma (2003) also found a direct correlation between self-esteem, social climate, protection, and a sense of belonging. In her study which included data from 6,883 Grade 6 students and data from 6,868 Grade 8 students attending 240 New Brunswick schools, Ma (2003) found that alienation was the most significant reason for students' lack of a sense of belonging in school, and that this feeling of alienation stemmed from low self-esteem. When students didn't value themselves, they felt they were not valued at school. School climate was important for students in creating a sense of belonging. For the Grade 6 students, being surrounded by caring peers and teachers was important. Whereas for the students in Grade 8, fairness was a key component in students developing a positive sense of belonging.

Fortunately, this is not rocket science. Again, it comes down to relationships. The Ma (2003) study showed that when students feel they are treated fairly, and they are safe in an environment where they are surrounded by supportive, caring adults they can allow themselves to build bonds with peers in their school community. As a result of this study, Ma (2003) hypothesizes that one solution to helping students feel a sense of belonging at school is participation in school activities.

The other obvious solutions are that adults in the school treat students with fairness and respect, that they listen with authenticity and unconditional positive regard to each individual in the community. When students know that teachers and staff genuinely care and are kind, this will allow students to trust their intentions, and to emulate this behaviour towards themselves and other community members. This is reassuring for educators.

The good news is, we can turn this around. We educators have the ability and power to foster a sense of belonging for all students in our schools. Johnson (2009) takes the topic of trust to the next level. She notes the importance of allowing students to have choice in their lives, trust them to take control of their lives and how this is connected to relatedness. Relationships are very important during adolescence. Specifically, positive connections with caring teachers have a direct link to motivation, effort, values, and feelings around teachers' support, and therefore trust. The creation of a trusting, caring climate in the school community can mitigate alienation and feed the psychosocial need for belonging which is especially important during the vulnerable adolescent years (Johnson, 2009).

In their study of one traditional school and a non-traditional school called Starlight Academy in northwestern United States, Johnson (2009) found that students in the non-traditional school felt respected, accepted and supported by others in the school community. They also felt a strong sense of belonging and this was due to many positive intentional ways in which the school was run. Starlight Academy teachers make a point of getting to know the students. Students were trusted to take ownership of their own education. For example, they were given the choice to attend a class if they were not interested. This meant that students attended classes because they were interested and motivated to learn about that topic. They knew and appreciated that teachers were giving them the power of choice and placing a lot of trust in their ability to take agency over their own education. This strengthened relationships between students and teachers. The study also found Starlight Academy fostered trust through positive relationships throughout the school community, including those of student-student, teacher-administrator, and student-teacher. Johnson (2009) also notes the importance of collegiality among staff in the school environment and how this fosters a sense of belonging.

It is clear from the research reviewed in the preceding theme that for students to succeed at school, they need to feel that they belong to the community. It would seem simple, however there are many components to a thriving microsystem such as a school community. All the parts are interdependent and interconnected and each one must be healthy for the whole to thrive. The school environment is the perfect place for students to be given agency and choice. It is a place where they should feel safe and supported by caring staff and buoyed by a curriculum which helps them feel motivated and capable of succeeding academically and socially. It is the perfect launching pad to prepare them for navigating larger social environments.

It is important that all members of the school community feel safe and supported and not just the students. When the staff feel a sense of belonging, they are more energized and motivated to focus on being attuned to their students' needs. When school staff feel appreciated and valued, they are more likely to foster this in their students and as a result a thriving, trusting community is likely to grow organically from this supportive environment.

### **Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions**

#### **Summary**

The title of this capstone is Societal Pressures and Their Impact on Adolescent Males. We explored the research on this topic by looking at three themes. They are I. Mental health issues being experienced by adolescent males, II. Behaviour expectations/gender biases, and III. Improving school culture and mental health of school community.

The first theme is Mental health issues being experienced by adolescent males. This opening theme highlighted the extent to which adolescent males are currently suffering with their mental health and mostly in silence, which is having a detrimental effect on their self-esteem (Morin et al., 2013). When self-esteem levels tend to drop during early adolescence anyway, it is even more difficult for young males to rebuild later when they are faced with barriers such as societal pressures to behave in certain ways (Keiser et al., 2018). Many boys are suffering from severe anxiety and loneliness and have little or no self-compassion (Barry et al., 2015). Boys are suppressing their emotions and severing friendships due to the difficulties in trying to fulfill all the different definitions of masculinity society is expecting them to satisfy (Randell et al., 2016). They are under unbearable pressure to behave in certain ways such as suppress emotions and deny friendships which is causing them to become disconnected from their authentic selves. According to Maté (2022) self-concept is affected in a negative way when the need for self-acceptance and attachment are not satisfied.

In the second theme, Behaviour expectations/gender biases in school communities, we delved into research on some preconceived ideas about how different students, depending on their assumed gender, should behave in schools today. We look at international studies such as the Man Box (Irvine et al., 2018) which shows the pressures young males are under to conform

to traditional definitions of masculinity but in today's world also expected to be so much more. We explore how teachers assume boys to behave badly and underperform at school, perceiving them to be not as academically competent as the girls (Mullola et al., 2012). A big concern about these stereotypes is that boys will believe them to be true (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). Sadly, Collins et al. (2021) found that this perception by teachers that boys are less academically capable than girls is indeed affecting their performance at school. This will in turn have a negative effect on self-esteem, and self-concept. The compounding effect of being perceived by trusted adults to be incompetent at school and having to drop friendships (Keiser et al., 2019) because society believes young boys should not show weakness by having friends, is making young males feel isolated and unwanted.

Finally, we looked at Solutions to improving school culture and well-being. The overwhelming findings in the research consulted for this section was that respectful relationships and embracing equity in the schools are key to developing a healthy community. The school principals interviewed in the study by Wendel et al. (1994) overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of inclusion and the empowerment of teachers as well as students for a school to be successful. Osterman (2000) concurs that collegiality among staff is important to the success of the whole community. In accordance with Baumeister and Leary (1995), Edwards (1995) believes that it is important for the teachers to first feel a sense of belonging before they can share and nurture this in the students. When trusted adults in the school community are attuned with how they and others are feeling, Edwards (1995) found that the community can work on creating a healthy school culture. All members need to feel respected and cared for and as a result, a sense of belonging will develop and thrive (Lewis et al. 2023).

School should be a place where all students feel welcome and safe to express their individuality and to be their authentic selves. We have seen that too often this is not possible for many. This paper has taken a closer look at how adolescent males are being stunted and hindered from being true to themselves. This imposed disability is causing them to lose self-confidence and feel lost. Their self-worth is suffering, and they often are made to feel like they don't fit in at school or in society.

All is not lost. Along with Edwards (1995), several researchers in the field have found that when everyone in the school community is cared for and valued for the unique individuals they are, the whole system will thrive. We have seen how important it is for all members of the school community to feel a sense of belonging and to be accepted and embraced. When teachers treat each other with respect and acceptance, they are more likely to be kind and welcoming to students also. When we listen with unconditional positive regard, and provide a safe learning environment, free of judgement, students will begin to feel free to be their authentic selves. With acceptance and authenticity will come more self-awareness, self-acceptance, increased self-esteem and confidence. This is what educators want for their students. Armed with awareness and a sense of belonging ourselves, we can create a safe space for students to thrive.

### **Recommendations**

We educators are the responsible adults in the lives of these youth and much of their time at this age is spent at school. We need to take the lead in helping these vulnerable members of society to feel like they are valued and there is a place for them. Not only should space be created for them to feel valued and that they belong, but we also need to show them that we want them around. Their contributions are welcome and as much as they learn from us, we also benefit from what they have to offer and share with those around them. There are so many ways in

which we can demonstrate to students that they are important contributors to our world. Some of which are as follows:

### ***Wholistic Approach***

The school community comprises students, parents, staff, teachers, and the wider community. It is important for schools to not get caught up in a cocoon mentality. Simply remembering that there is more to a student's life than the subjects they are doing at school or the way they behave when in this building could alter how we see the individuals around us. Teachers and staff also have a lot to contribute and have interesting lives outside of their work.

The whole system is comprised of hundreds of interesting, unique individuals who have so much to offer. Wendel et al. (1994) highlight how important it is for school administration teams to empower teachers as this acknowledgement helps motivate them to do the best they can. This in turn is felt by the students who will develop a positive attitude towards school and are more likely to succeed. A ripple effect reaches out to the wider community as students relay their school experiences at home and community organizations in which they participate.

We all have lives outside of school and it is noticeable how students light up when asked about an interest or hobby they have outside of their formal education. School does not define them. It is important to not make assumptions about individuals based on such things as their behaviour at school, name, or gender. Instead, we can ask them their opinions, listen to their views, and learn from them.

### ***Invite Community Members***

A good opportunity to bring all community members together can be to invite an outside professional to speak or present in an area of their expertise. This might encompass a wide range

of individuals, from a local gardening expert or university professor to a motivational speaker. A parent could fulfil this role.

There are many benefits to creating a culture of learning from outside professionals. It is a useful exercise in introducing students to possible future career opportunities. When students have been made comfortable with attending such presentations, the school counsellor or a team of educators could invite experts in the areas of mental health to share their knowledge with the community. In chapter two we referred to the research of Chandra and Minkovitz (2006) who discovered some of the barriers to seeking help with mental health related issues, especially among boys. Unfortunately, one of the barriers for some young adolescents is that they fear the disapproval of their parents were they to express the need for help with mental health issues. Bringing in a professional in this field to come and present to all community stakeholders, including parents might promote open discussion and help in reducing the stigma around all genders seeking help when needed.

This could be an enriching experience which all stakeholders can share. This shared community experience could bring them together, create discussion and even spark interest in delving into the subject matter more in the form of class projects or simply sharing the experience with family members at the dinner table that evening.

### ***Include Parents***

Too often when children reach Grade 6, whether it's due to pressure from other children or societal expectations, they tend to not want their parents to be visible on the school grounds or involved as much in their lives. This could be due to push as well as pull factors in that these young pre-teenagers might be at the early stages of finding their identities and needing more independence so trying to create more distance between them and their parents.

It is noticeable how present parents are at elementary school field trips and other events organized by the school. It is also understandable that young adolescents seek more independence when they can walk themselves to school and do more things unsupervised. However, this does not mean they want to be abandoned. Often, young people desire the same level of parental involvement in their lives as before, but they struggle with the perception that it might not be seen as ‘cool’. This is a fine balance for parents and difficult for families to find the sweet spot. Educators are in a powerful position to be able to include parents who want to continue to be present in their children’s lives yet also allow space for these youth to demonstrate their ability to be more independent. There are opportunities the school can take advantage of to bridge this gap.

The school can include parents by communicating with them when the students do something good or worthy of praise. This could take the form of a simple email to parents recognizing that a student held the door open for them that day. This is a simplistic example, but too often parents only hear from school when something bad happens. The school could also invite parents to events held at the school such as an exhibition, however small. El Rio Elementary school is a great example of how beneficial and enriching it can be to include parents in the lives of their children. Lewis et al. (2023) found that when the teachers at this school moved the emphasis on academic attainment to sharing achievement, this had a very positive effect on the school community. They changed the science fair to “family science festival” where parents and family members were invited to share in their children’s learning and achievements by coming to the school to see the projects the students had created. The students were more motivated to learn and do well knowing that their families were coming to see their work, and

the parents felt included in their children's lives. This could help them feel more connected to their child during a time when often the youth is pulling away.

### ***Parent Advisory Council (P.A.C.)***

The parents who elect to be part of the Parent Advisory Committee in a school are usually very enthusiastic and eager to be helpful and contribute in whatever ways the school needs assistance. If the PAC is kept in the loop as to what is going in the school, they can be a great source of contact to the wider community. They can also really help with raising funds to purchase things such as outdoor equipment or fund field trips.

They could also help in other ways; when I interviewed the director of a local organization Big Brothers, Big Sisters (mentioned earlier in this paper), they explained how difficult it is to find adult male role models for boys and this is the main reason for closure of the 'boys club' program. This could be a good opportunity for the PAC to collaborate with the school and such an organization to fund such a program or to find a parent to volunteer and perhaps lead a school club with guidance from an outside agency and the school.

It is important to include and show appreciation to the parent advisory committee as they could be an important resource. And they would no doubt be very grateful for acknowledgement in the form of updates from the school of the ways in which the school have used or benefitted from their contributions.

### ***Beautification of Buildings and Grounds***

It is noticeable how different the middle schools look both inside and out compared to the elementary schools. Teachers in elementary schools place much importance on displaying the work of the students in their class on the walls within and in the hallways outside their classrooms. This has many benefits. It shows not only what the students have been learning, but

also that the teacher is proud of the effort and work their students have produced. This pride is felt by the students, and they are given the opportunity to admire their work and recognize the achievement of the class as members of the same team in a shared endeavor. Other community members get the opportunity to admire the work displayed as they pass by, and this can be a great reason for community members to interact with one another in an easy way.

It can be more challenging for middle schools to decorate their classrooms and hallway notice boards as students are not with the same teacher throughout the school day. They may not have as much time to work on long term projects due to a busy timetable and Exploratory changes each term, however often at middle school, classes are grouped for many reasons. Ma (2003) found that when students participate in school activities, this helps them feel a greater sense of belonging. School activities does not have to be limited to clubs and groups; it could also include collaboration with various teachers and students to create murals or other such projects to enhance the physical environment. All the classes in the 'blue' team or "div. 4", for example could work on a project together as often teachers in these designated groups collaborate anyway.

With encouragement from administration by communicating with teachers and perhaps offering materials or supplies, the intangible benefits of sharing students' work with the community could help students feel pride in their accomplishments and a sense of belonging.

At the middle school level, students could take this a bit further by designing and maintaining a garden on the school grounds, painting areas for outdoor games such as a chess board or tic tac toe. Partnerships could be set up with local organizations such as a gardening centre to assist with this. I have seen some great examples of this in a few schools in my district and it has the effect of making the school feel inviting and opens opportunities for conversation

with community members. This kind of involvement and contribution to the school would help students take ownership of their school and give them a sense of pride.

### ***Trust in Teachers***

The teaching staff also need to feel that they are valued and given agency and freedom to contribute to building their community. Administration and the school counsellor have the ability to nurture strong working relationships with the staff. This could be as simple as visiting teachers in their classrooms for two minutes during the day to say “hi”. Casual check-ins of this nature can contribute to sharing knowledge and getting to know the teachers better. During passing interactions in the hallways, teachers could share an interest they have or a hobby such as knitting or playing chess. With this awareness, the school counsellor could suggest or find out if the teacher would be interested in sharing this passion with students by hosting a regular informal gathering or by setting up a club. This could be done during lunchtime and afternoon advisory. This would be a great way for the teachers to practice and share something they enjoy outside of school within the community. And it is a way for teachers to connect with students and students to meet other students who have shared interests.

### ***Social and Emotional Learning (S.E.L.)***

Teaching social emotional learning is beneficial to students and the school community on many levels. All elementary and middle schools in my school district have access to the SEL program, Second Step. This program was designed in the United States and is a comprehensive package which includes lessons tailor made for each grade and for the term or stage at which each grade is at during any given time in the school year. For example, the lessons in the unit designed for Grade 6’s in the Fall term are themed around transition and what it’s like to move from elementary to middle school. It is designed to build life skills such as self-awareness with

the aim of giving students the tools to be able to self-regulate when needed. These classes can be conducted in an informal manner in the form of discussion. This a great opportunity for students to not feel under pressure to contribute but also to listen to those who do contribute and realize that they might be having very similar experiences and are not alone. It could also be a way for students to connect with each other early in the year. If the school counsellor is teaching the program (which I did this year), this is a great way for them to meet the students and describe their role as counsellor and trusted adult in the building. When the counsellor teaches SEL, this is an opportunity to give the homeroom teacher some respite from teaching and helps build a relationship between them.

### ***Welcoming Environment***

Beginning from day one of the school year, school staff can set the tone showing they are approachable by offering a friendly smile and a welcoming greeting in the hallways. This simple welcome goes a long way to contributing to the health of the community. All adults in the building can start doing this and the students will invariably do the same. It is contagious and lightens the atmosphere in the building and is one way of demonstrating a community which is supportive and embraces all members.

Also, the very beginning of the year is the best time for the school counselling team to introduce themselves to the student body. It is important for all to know who the counselling team members are and what their roles are within the school. The team could comprise teacher-counsellor and youth and family counsellors. These could be very beneficial practices for building relationships and rapport as the year progresses. This can be done by simply arranging with the homeroom teacher to step in during advisory for five minutes, or it could involve diving straight into SEL in the first week as a segue to introductions. This is a good use of time as some

middle schools spend the first week organizing classes and assigning teachers to students. Such initiatives can help set the tone from the outset that the school is a welcoming environment (Wilson et al., 2022). This will help build rapport with students in general. It is also a gentle way of letting them know that counsellors are available to meet individuals on a one-on-one basis if they wish to confide in a trusted adult during the school year.

### ***Team with a Common Goal***

The role of staff, and educators including school counsellor are varied and vast and they are usually extremely busy. When all trusted adults are working towards the goal of helping the students succeed, they can work as a strong team. The definition of success in education is not simply straight A's or academic results. The "new" BC curriculum has thankfully moved away from a focus on academic attainment and letter grades. We are moving in the right direction in acknowledging the importance of supporting the whole person in the school community. Their needs for agency, autonomy and affiliation are also important. Cemalcilar, (2020) emphasizes the significance of relationships in the school community. For everyone to succeed and thrive, the common goal must be to support and nurture the needs of the whole person and hence, the system. Social needs are as important as helping support students with their academics. Osterman (2000) concurs that peer relationships are very important to student success.

There may be times when some people are busier than others but when there is a concern about a student and they know they can ask for help or consult a colleague knowing there will be support, this helps build a strong, trusting community. This could involve just flagging a student who is having a bad day and needs a high five or helping a colleague with a field trip or offering to help with a project in a spare block. Offering to help each other in this capacity can be very

beneficial in building rapport among staff and this collegiality would emanate throughout the school community.

### ***Transitions***

Making sure the move from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school are as smooth as possible is an important aspect of every middle school educator. This can be unsettling for many students. Keizer et al., (2018) found that leading up to early adolescence, children's self-esteem begins to suffer. This is not helped by unsettling external factors such as moving to a new school. For many, moving from elementary to middle school can be a time which causes anxiety, and the child is forced out of their comfort zone because of the move but also, they may lose many of the friendships developed since kindergarten or earlier.

At certain times during the school year, middle school learning support teams, along with administration and counselling teams are busy meeting with elementary and high schools, discussing each student who is about to transition to or from their school. Key team members along with teachers have an opportunity to support students even before they enter Grade 6 and ensure they get the support they need going into high school. It is especially important that the school counsellors are present at transition meetings so that schools can help each student settle into their new environment.

### ***Attunement and Attending Meetings***

Staying connected involves attending meetings and keeping up with what's going on around us. It is important for school staff to be present at meetings such as School Based Team, staff, and professional development days. Staying in touch helps with relationship building but also being in the loop and being a source of information if needed.

Being attuned to what is happening around them and truly listening to the needs of the community are critical to a healthy community. Communication among staff is important to the smooth running of a school. Norwalk et al. (2016) found that when teachers are attuned to what's going on in their classrooms and among students, they care more aware of possible bullying or victimization and put a stop to it early. This early intervention helps nurture healthy peer relationships among students. It is also important that educators do not make assumptions based on pre-conceived ideas around who tends to bully and who tends to be victims. Too often male adolescents are accused of bullying behaviour when we have not always sought the whole story.

A few years ago, it was brought to my attention that a Grade 7 boy had been bullied incessantly by a girl in his class over a period of several months. It started with verbal abuse and evolved into hitting him on the head with a book whenever they were in English class together. The teacher just laughed it off or ignored it. Eventually, the male student had had enough. He shouted at full voice at the beginning of class one day "stop!". The girl started crying and was upset at his reaction, so the teacher consoled her. The teacher immediately took the male student out and reprimanded him. When I heard the boy's story and learned that he had been harassed for months leading up to this incident, I asked him why he hadn't done anything about it. He said he tried but everybody thought it was funny and made light of it even though he was suffering. He knew he couldn't defend himself because she is a girl, so he just had to take it. What would have happened if a male student was physically and mentally abusing a female student? How long would he get away with this kind of behaviour?

At times we all need to pull together, especially post covid as there are many adjustments that students are being expected to make over the past few years. It is interesting how many students have been taking time out of classrooms and unable to sit for long periods of time. In

several of the schools where I teach the issue of absenteeism has been prevalent. This has included students not attending school at all or refusing to sit through lessons in the classroom and choosing instead to pace the hallways or seek out a quiet place to sit alone. In these situations, students themselves are not necessarily aware of why they are rejecting being present in the classroom, but we educators must take this on board as students are trying to tell us something. Staff can flag certain students they are concerned about, and all look out for them when there is communication between team members. It is great when the staff work as a cohesive team together finding alternative ways of meeting the individual learning needs of students.

### ***Student Counsel***

One way of helping students use their voice and providing them an opportunity to feel they have some agency in their education is to help them organize a student counsel. There could be a student in each class representing their class in regular student council meetings. They could take turns in doing the school announcements. It is important for the student body to hear their voices echoing back to them rather than just the adults. This will help them take ownership and participate in the running of their school.

### ***Clubs/Groups***

Setting up clubs is one of the most significant steps towards helping students feel a sense of belonging in a school. Ma (2003) drew a direct correlation between self-esteem in students and a sense of belonging. Schools are social systems where it is relatively easy to set up clubs and provide a place where youth can find a common interest and connect with others in a safe space and feel that sense of belonging. According to Osterman (2000), peer relationships and a need to feel part of the school community are important to student success. This is in alignment

with Baumeister and Leary (1995) who emphasize the importance of social bonds in their theory of belonging.

We educators can find out what the most desired clubs would be and assist the students in the organization of getting clubs started. We can gather information in many ways about what clubs would be popular in a school in a particular year. We could create a survey for all the students to complete, or we could speak with staff members who know the students well. One excellent resource at our middle school is the Librarian. She is an amazing educator who cares deeply about the students, holding meditation sessions on a regular basis and lunchtime clubs. She is very in touch with all students and having a great rapport, is attuned to their needs. She was able to instantly suggest several clubs that she thought would be in demand as she offers some clubs on a small scale but would like to have more capacity. As well as staff, the students themselves are the best source to consult directly when trying to find out what kind of clubs or groups they would like to join were they to be offered. This approach proved a very successful option for setting up a new club at my middle school this year.

At the beginning of the year at the middle school in which I am doing my counselling internship, I started chatting with a Grade 7 student in the hallway as he was taking a rest from a P.E. class. He mentioned that he would love there to be a Dungeons & Dragons club in the school and that he thought there would be a lot of interest. He was right. I set about organizing it immediately after our conversation and now we have 20 students who meet every Tuesday during lunch and advisory.

During the initial few meetings at the beginning, the students who didn't know each other were quite nervous around new people. Now I am so happy to see them joke around and go to other tables to inquire about their game and see them interact at other times during the school

day. It is perhaps worth noting that we have 17 male students in the club who would otherwise mostly be alone somewhere around the building during recesses. We had a very successful field trip at the end of the year when the club walked (very excitedly) together to the local board game café and played D & D for the afternoon.

### ***Community Service Opportunities***

Providing adolescents opportunities to help in the community gives them a sense of worth. This helps with self-confidence and creates relationships with others outside the school. It also gives others, perhaps older adults an opportunity to interact with teenagers which may not be possible otherwise. Edwards and Mullis (2001) found that social interest helps reduce feelings of alienation in youth and helps develop a sense of belonging. In Victoria there are numerous opportunities for people to volunteer, whether in clearing weeds around parks or helping at seniors' homes.

### ***Collaboration with Other Classes, High Schools, and Elementary Schools***

Moving on to Grade 9 can be extremely daunting and stressful for many middle school students. However, if they are familiar with the high school to which they will be transitioning in the future, this may not cause so much anxiety. Teachers could organize for high school choirs to come and perform at middle schools and middle schools could attend performances, exhibitions etc. that the high school is presenting during the school year. This would create more familiarity for the students both with the buildings and being around older students.

Middle school students greatly benefit from a buddy program which is already in place and thriving thanks to relationships built up between many schools in our school district. The buddy program is where classes in more senior grades are paired with younger students. In elementary schools, this often involves Grade 5 students going to a Grade 1 class once a week at

an allotted time so that each student can read to the younger ‘buddy’ they have been paired with. Both groups usually really enjoy and benefit from this partnership. The older students feel a sense of responsibility, and this helps build their confidence, and the younger students have role models and help with their reading. These partnerships also exist between middle schools and elementary schools. A Grade 8 class I recently taught were very excited about spending a day playing games with their Grade 1 buddies. The senior students had spent a lot of time creating games such as a bowling machine that they had built out of cardboard boxes.

These kind of partnerships and enthusiasm for leadership and mentoring roles shows that students need to be provided with opportunities to help them succeed and thrive during their adolescence.

## **Conclusions**

The title of this paper is Societal Pressures and Their Impact on Adolescent Males. All students should feel safe and be able to succeed at school. A shortfall which is affecting many adolescent males currently is that they are struggling at school and adolescence feels like purgatory. During a time when young boys should be finding their identity, becoming more independent, and expanding their social worlds, for too many adolescent males, society is telling them they are not good enough, or not wanted or appreciated for who they are. They are often alienated and don’t feel safe to be their authentic selves. Too many are suffering in silence. Adolescent males are not creating this environment. It is we adults who need to take responsibility and we adults who need to help students be successful at school. We need to not discriminate. We need to respect and take care of each individual in our care. Every child matters. So, how can we do this?

The question posed through this capstone was, how can school community create a safer emotional environment for boys to flourish?

Many research articles, books and theories were consulted to explore the pressures boys are having to endure today. A strengths-based approach to addressing these systemic issues can be drawn from humanistic and belonging theories which have been referred to in chapter two.

Humanistic, Person-centred theory (Carl Rogers) and Belongingness Theory (Baumeister and Leary) are good starting points.

In the literature review, we addressed some of the mental health issues that adolescent males are currently having to deal with, simply because of their gender. This is compounded by the developmental time in their lives and a possible myriad of other personal, family related issues that they are most likely trying to wade through along with transitioning to new schools. All this can result in a several very turbulent and traumatising years for many youth.

This first theme looked at the roles that families and schools, and society can play in hindering or helping adolescents with their mental health. We saw that too many boys are suffering in silence and feel worthless with little or no self-compassion. Society is telling them to drop friendships they had in early childhood because “young men” should be able to manage alone. The second theme addressed behaviour expectations and gender biases imposed on young males today. They are being told by trusted adults that it is not acceptable to be authentic but instead to conform to society’s debilitating yet extensive expectations around how boys should behave. Negative messages are being explicitly, implicitly and subliminally communicated to youth according to gender and assumed associated behaviours. Teachers warn teachers about the “boys” in the class. Society seems nervous to see groups of adolescent male friends together. If these negative messages about a certain group in our society is being reinforced daily, even the

boys themselves will begin to believe they are “truths”. They become doomed to fail as they will never be permitted to be themselves, having to constantly fulfill expectations set by society. These unreasonable expectations are going to have negative effects on our children’s health. Instead of protecting them, we are targeting them.

Educators must become more aware of the impact they have on young people in their care. This is perhaps especially important during the adolescent years as this is when, for developmental reasons among others, youth begin to spend less time with their parents so are influenced increasingly by society. And school is the child’s society. For this reason, educators must take their responsibility of carer, positive role model, and locus parentis very seriously. We need to be aware of how we see and treat each individual in our school community and make sure we listen with unconditional positive regard and not make assumptions based on potential biases or personal history.

Finally, we looked at how we can improve school culture and mental health in the school community. The administration teams in every school have a huge responsibility of care to it community members, starting with the staff. Leading by example must start with the principal and their team who need to set the example of how to nurture a healthy community culture. Before students can feel a sense of belonging, staff must experience this first. The staff must be given direction and shown respect and that they are valued for who they are and their contributions to the system of which they have chosen to be part. Being attuned to the staff and nurturing a community of participants who respect one another nurtures a sense of belonging and a healthy community. Every student must be treated with the same respect and valued for the individuals they are and encouraged to be their authentic selves. They must feel safe so that they can succeed and flourish at school.

In my recommendations section, I have not offered solutions which target the adolescent male. This is intentional. I could say, we “must stop doing this or that”. My reticence around lecturing school staff about how to treat or not treat students has a risk of coming across as accusatory or condescending. There may be times when it is necessary to point out to staff members the impact of their behaviours on individual students and the culture. Many are not even aware of negative impacts passing comments they make might have on students. It is important to get a read on the school culture and where necessary, invite someone in to present to the staff on how to build a healthy school culture and create a safe space for everyone to feel safe and succeed. In my capacity as school counsellor, if I felt it would be beneficial to a particular school, I would collaborate with the administration team and suggest giving a presentation during a professional development day on my capstone findings and make it more general. The aim would be to create an awareness among staff on how students should be treated and the dangers of making passing comments about individuals or groups.

Everyone (student and adult) should be treated with respect and valued for their individual contributions to the community. We need to listen with unconditional positive regard, and lead by example.

The recommendations put forward have been suggested as a result of research and experience working as a teacher teaching on call and from doing my counselling internship in a large middle school for the past year. By putting in place and acting upon all my recommendations described above, my hope would be that through this wholistic approach to setting up a comprehensive school counselling program, that by osmosis but also intentional action, the school would become a healthy welcoming place to be. It would become a place where friendships are made, everybody belongs, feels safe to be their authentic selves and looks

forward to greeting and being greeted on arrival. All coming from a strengths-based approach to counselling and learning and being.

Kindness is contagious, and kindness and compassion are at the core of what I would like to achieve as a school counsellor. A healthy community is what we aim for and that involves all those within and so many more.

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