

## Networking Event – Emerging Themes in Work with Young Men

### Introduction

In May Partnership for Young London hosted a networking session on emerging themes in work with young men. The overarching aim was to identify how effective our practice is in relation to this area of informal education and outline tangible outcomes for taking this work forward together. 42 organisations were represented from the voluntary and statutory sectors, with presentations from the [London Borough of Hackney](#), [Working With Men](#) and [QPR Community Trust](#). By way of introduction, colleagues were asked to express their motivation for attendance. Their responses included wanting to connect with others delivering work primarily to young men - suggesting the need for more joined up approaches to how we work; learning more about theoretical models for analysing aspects of young men's lives; sharing strategies for measuring outcomes and gaining resources to deliver work more effectively. This briefing sheet provides a general overview of the session and some of the salient points raised.

### Identity – How are Young Men Defining Their Masculinity?

Whilst we were mindful of the dangers of seeing young men as one homogenous group, there are key issues affecting large enough numbers of them to alert us to patterns in their experiences – some of which give cause for concern. This was the main impetus for running the session. There was a recognition from those present that social expectations of men have shifted in the post-industrial era leaving men with negligible access to safe spaces to (re)define masculinity on their own terms.

Masculinity and femininity are more fluid concepts now than in previous generations, providing more scope to explore what [Judith Butler](#) describes as, the performative nature of gender.

Conversely, the academic Coles' (2009) research on gender theories suggests a desire from some young men to maintain a fixed sense of masculinity. Furthermore, he asserts that not all young men are able to 'use their masculinity as a resourceful strategy in their everyday lives' (Stahl, 2017, p.286). His work, along with that of Stahl (2017), demonstrates how young men within the same demographic groups 'jostle for legitimacy' in an effort to stabilise their masculinities, through the process of othering<sup>i</sup> their peer groups (Stahl, 2017, p.284). Data from academic research chimed with findings from participants at the session that fundamentally, young men need more opportunities to examine what it means to be a man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They also require the means to reclaim a positive male identity - the media, in particular, was cited as constantly undermining and misrepresenting them.

### The Role of Education

Education was a key focus for this session as it was felt to be a useful starting point for looking at young men's personal and social experiences. Robust data over decades has documented the link between low educational attainment and poor outcomes in adulthood. Despite this, young men from poorer socio-economic groups are persistently failed by the mainstream education system in the UK. This results in them underachieving in education which subsequently impacts other key areas of their lives such as employment options. There has been little progress towards tackling this at a structural level over the last four to five decades. The presentations from the three organisations demonstrated how necessary it is for young men to have access to vocational routes into employment and opportunities to nurture the capabilities needed to make a successful transition into adulthood, as these are often thwarted through the formal education system.

## Young Hackney

Chris Murray and Simeon Dixon-Marriot from the London Borough of Hackney presented '[Improving Outcomes for Young Black Men](#)'. The project was chosen as an example of good practice for several reasons. Hackney is adopting a systemic approach to raising outcomes for young black men. This is a longitudinal study lasting 15 years which will create medium and long term impact on the lives of a generation and a cultural shift in the wider community about how young black men are perceived and treated. Every strata of service provision must account for how they are producing positive outcomes for this target group. A Theory of Change has provided a clear framework for identifying outcomes, testing assumptions and the causal links between the different strands of the project. Integral to its success has been designing programme content and delivery with young men and securing the buy in of key decision makers in local and central government.

The framework for the project is replicable - there is an intention to deliver the work in the future to young women. It would be useful to explore if it could also be adapted to meet the needs of other demographics of young men who fall from the radar. For example, young, white, working class men as well as young, black, working class men relentlessly produce low academic outcomes. Coard (1971) argues that there is a direct correlation between teachers' low expectations of boys from African Caribbean heritage and the stubborn, self-fulfilling prophecy of failing they can fall victim to. However, young black males are creating what Harding (2010) refers to as a 'turnaround narrative' to address years of oversight, but it appears that there has been less dialogue about mobilising systems to address the critical educational needs of young, white, working class men.

## Key Points Raised Following Hackney's Presentation –

- Success is increased with the buy in of lead members of local councils and senior civil servants with an initiative of this scope.
- It is essential that all young men have the opportunity to discuss the concepts of culture and identity as these are basic aspects of everyone's life - irrespective of nationality or ethnicity.
- Our work needs to provide young men with 'a sense of self'.
- Sport is one of the key methods used to engage young men but there is enough flexibility in the programme to be able to draw on other interests they may have such as music, creative writing and other art forms.
- Keeping a journal is one of the methods used by the young men to reflect on their involvement in the programme. The act of [journal writing](#) helps to process emotions and heal from challenging experiences and is considered to be particularly beneficial to men.
- As the Hackney model is replicable; could other local authorities roll it out to disenfranchised groups of young men in their boroughs in the future?

## Working With Men

Political, social and cultural shifts have tackled key aspects of gender inequality. A refreshing outcome has been to build young men's emotional literacy and resilience. However, poor mental health is often still stigmatised and men are less prone to discussing intimate emotions and seeking support than women. [Professor Louis Appleby, Chair of the National Suicide Prevention Advisory group in England](#), reports on the urgent need for men to feel able to access support when they need it without feeling ashamed.

## Mental Health Projects

Leslie Mitchell from Working With Men presented [Emerging Needs in Young Men and Mental Health](#). He discussed a new piece of work being funded through non statutory services dedicated to providing additional emotional support to young men. Leslie outlined the approaches he uses - which are bespoke and start from the point of 'meeting the young person where they are at'. His work highlighted one of the cornerstones of effective youth work - building trusting relationships.

## Key Points Raised Following Working With Men's Presentation -

- We need to reframe how we talk about our mental health to diffuse the stigma.
- It is important for practitioners to confront their own shadows when delivering work on mental health – we need to know what our own vulnerabilities and triggers are so that we can be most effective when engaging with young men.
- Youth workers/informal educators need to be transparent about their own attitudes and preconceived ideas around mental health.
- We need to be aware of the various masks we wear and how they impact on the relationships we are trying to build with young people.
- A key aspect of the work with young men is helping them to 'get beyond the rage'.

What manifests as rage may be borne out of trauma. Professor [Brené Brown](#) defines societal injustices such as racism, homophobia, islamophobia, disablist discrimination and poverty as trauma and states that 'the biggest casualty of trauma is vulnerability'.<sup>ii</sup> Her research demonstrates that trying to 'armour up' to avoid feeling vulnerable means we also risk denying ourselves joy, creativity and innovation as vulnerability is the birthplace of these experiences too.

- There are several steps that young men can take to improve their mental health immediately, these include: getting enough sleep, eating a balanced, healthy diet, drinking water and avoiding screens when trying to wind down and prepare for sleep.
- There was a request for pointers on how to initiate work with new groups of young men, the first steps to identifying approaches are to assess need and work intuitively.
- We need to cease developing mental health projects in isolation and adopt a more holistic approach, so that nurturing emotional wellbeing is implicit in everything that we do.

## QPR Community Trust

Sports such as boxing and football have traditionally been used to enable young men to channel energy and more extreme forms of emotion. More recently sport has been used as a lever for young men to access other forms of youth provision. Jack Kelly and Pablo Blackwood from [QPR Community Trust](#) were asked to share how their work enables young men from diverse communities to develop personal and social skills and act as a stepping stone into employment and training.

### Key Points Raised Following QPR Community Trust's Presentation-

- Football is an obvious starting point to engaging young men because for many it is like a modern day faith. It works as a 'hook'. However, it is recognised that there are other methods – as with the Young Hackney initiative – to encourage young men to access support services.
  - It is important to use innovation when designing programmes for young men as they do not all like sport.
  - Being associated with QPR raises young men's sense of self-worth.
  - There have been some (albeit limited) opportunities for employment through the programmes that QPR run for participants.
  - The opportunity for male role models and mentors is key to young men's development.
  - Taking young men out of their normal environments and giving them opportunities to engage in healthy competition for QPR raises their sense of self-worth.
  - These programmes help grow internal and external capabilities in young men. QPR draws on the theory developed by [Carol Dweck](#) of fostering a growth mind-set.
- Dweck has produced research evidencing the benefits of adopting a growth mind-set as a strategy for problem solving. Her work demonstrates that approaching difficulty with a willingness to navigate through obstacles to arrive at solutions nurtures character traits such as perseverance and tenacity. It also builds neurons in the brain which enable us to expand our skills-set and get smarter!
  - In reality breaking down barriers that prevent young men from going into the default mode of a fixed mind-set to avoid feeling vulnerable and 'stupid' can at times be challenging. Working within the framework of a growth mind-set requires the patience and commitment of the young men on projects and the staff supporting them.

## Recommendations for Next Steps

We used feedback from the group discussion following the presentations and comments from the evaluation forms to identify how this area of work can be driven forward.

There were common themes in the presentations which were indicators of success, such as being explicit about the key outcomes and aims of a project. New projects were underpinned with clear, theoretical frameworks and identified systems for measuring progress. There was a strong element of flexibility built into the delivery of projects to accommodate changes and periods of reflection. A central tenet of best practice is designing in consultation with service users.

Recognition was made of the need to engage, to a greater extent, with families and to involve them at the strategic level of researching and developing projects. Better outcomes were achieved when service providers utilised networks more efficiently and shared data across services.

This work should be integrated into other cross sector alliances such as [A Vision for Young Londoners](#) and we should profile the emerging themes in work with young men at existing events such as BAM (Being a Man) or a future conference of our own. We should link with key leads such as the Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Cohesion, Matthew Ryder, inviting him to address how he can improve the lives of young men through his current portfolio at City Hall.

There were requests for more practiced based sessions where resources and theories could be tested to some extent rather than only being described, and a chance to explore the experiences of other marginalised communities of young men such as young asylum seekers and other 'invisible groups'.

The offer from [Young Minds](#) to lead on a session exploring mental health has been the catalyst for setting up a steering group. Two meetings have been held to plan another event in September.

Opportunities should be created to hear from service users – understanding their stories is central to learning more about current service provision, it is also a useful measure of good practice. Young men's voices should be the golden thread running through any narrative about their lived experience.

Sandra Vacciana

## References

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**Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity**,  
D. Das, 2016

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<sup>i</sup> Professor Stuart Hall asserted

Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' (the language of consciousness here betrays us) that they are representations that representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them. (1996, 6)

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<sup>ii</sup>Brené Brown Video SXS Wedu 2017 Daring Classrooms, 2017

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