

Of Locusts, Looming Tsunamis, and Letting It All Out

The Men's Group and The Brotherhood
at Matamata College

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With special thanks to James Norris, Head Boy of Matamata College 2010, and Mitchell Green, Sports Captain and House Leader of Matamata College 2010, as well as to all the young men who contributed so much to the groups.

Abstract

In her work as a school counsellor, the first author was concerned for the emotional resilience and welfare of the high school's senior male students. This article details the participatory action research she undertook—in association with the other two authors—to address this concern. The first author established a pilot programme designed to investigate the potential of mentored self-help groups for Year 12 boys who wished to expand their range of emotional tools. One group of volunteers from Year 13 were mentored by the second author, a counselling professional from outside the school, and they offered expert commentary on their recent experience of Year 12. A second group comprised of Year 12 students spoke freely about their concerns surrounding expectations from both school and the wider community culture. Their meetings became a keenly anticipated part of their school week and they formed alliances that were new and supportive. They were enthusiastic about keeping their group going into the future and also mentoring new groups in 2011 for boys moving up into Year 12. The article examines the development of both the Year 13 and Year 12 groups and reflects on the findings from the pilot programme, focusing on the viability of the continued operation of similar groups within the school.

Keywords: school counselling, group work, male students, participatory action research, emotional literacy

Background

In her role as school guidance counsellor at Matamata College, a medium-sized New Zealand secondary school, Judith Kelleher has frequently been made aware of emotional shortfalls among the school's senior boys.¹ A good deal of the difficulty seems to arise from differing rates of maturation, be it physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. Stressed relationships often impact on the boys within their families, with girls, or among various configurations of "mateship" groupings and sports teams. From a variety of sources other than the boys themselves, such as teachers, girlfriends, mothers and sometimes fathers, school reports, at-risk meetings, and consultations with careers staff, Judith gathered information showing that many 15- to 17-year-old males in her school needed to find new resources for their emotional toolkits. Many did not understand the need for a range of emotional tools in the first place.

In Judith's counselling room, very few young men "own" their difficulties because, in general, telling a counsellor that you are feeling bad can be somewhat akin to amputating a limb for a troubled 16-year-old male. Counselling can be seen as a process that, like losing a limb, strips away power rather than offering alternatives.

During 2009, in her school counselling practice with those young men who did make it into her room, Judith noticed, more than she had previously, that there was a recurring and pervasive loneliness that bordered on desolation among a few of the young men. She realised that the earlier, senseless death of one of their number in a motor accident had been a powerful but barely acknowledged source of sadness for quite a few students in Year 13, the final year of high school. As well, there was at least one other incident that had resulted in life-threatening injuries for one of the local boys.

Both the death and the near miss had brought shock, grief, and confusion with them, much of which lingered, particularly for some of the boys. It seemed to Judith that girls in the same age group had generally developed better strategies for dealing with these terrible losses. This is a pattern of response that will be familiar to other school counsellors who are supporting students dealing with loss and grief.

Judith decided to "do something about the boys," and that "something" evolved at its own pace over the school year into an innovative programme. An acknowledgement must be made of the goodwill of a group of senior male students at Matamata College who saw the potential of this initiative. By investing their belief and energy in the work, they made the resulting programme their own, ensuring that it would continue for the next group of senior male students.

1. The voices of the three authors have been combined throughout the body of this article.

A driving question was whether or not an emotional literacy programme for Year 12 and 13 young men would actually work. It was decided that a participatory action research approach could offer a means to investigate this possibility. Participatory action research is a process that brings theory and practice together. Bradbury and Reason (2011) state that:

a primary purpose of action research is to produce knowledge that is useful to people in everyday conduct in their lives...action research is about working toward practical outcomes and also about creating new forms of understanding, since action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless. (p. 2)

Action research is traditionally practised by teachers and principals in schools and classrooms. It is an experiential method “to obtain knowledge that can be applied directly to the local classroom situation” (Southard, 2006, p. 2).

A pilot programme involving 10 to 12 male students who had completed Year 12 seemed a good way to open the action research process. The purpose of this pilot group was to investigate whether such a programme could be attractive and relevant to our senior male students and to establish the bones of the programme by exploring the topics that would be most useful to them.

Judith believed that work such as this could be best done initially by a mature, well-qualified, and experienced male who had knowledge of group process and dynamics. Dr Roger Foggitt, a member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors, agreed to develop the pilot in Semester 1 of 2010. The first group was made up of Year 13 boys, shoulder-tapped by the head boy, who had seen the potential of the programme when consulted about its possible usefulness. He was an “expert” on Year 12, having so recently completed it very successfully from both an academic and a social perspective. He was enthusiastic from the outset and set about using his considerable mana among his peers in recruiting a diverse and interesting sample of fellow Year 12 graduates. One was the sports captain, who was equally intrigued by the possibilities.

Theoretical influences

In conceptualising this group, Judith drew on the ideas of three theorists and practitioners, who were used as a foundational impetus to begin the work.

In 1996, Daniel Goleman laid out the attributes of people with high levels of emotional intelligence. They are, he said, well-developed in impulse control, self-

esteem, self-motivation, mood management, and people skills. Goleman observed further that:

men who are high in emotional intelligence are socially poised, outgoing and cheerful, not prone to fearful or worried rumination. They have a noticeable capacity for commitment to people or causes, for taking responsibility and for having an ethical outlook; they are sympathetic and caring in their relationships. Their emotional life is rich, but appropriate; they are comfortable with themselves, others, and the social universe they live in. (p. 45)

Nigel Latta's work with young people has become well-known nationally, and his book *Before Your Teenager Drives You Crazy, Read This* (2008) has been a constant source of material for Judith to offer bewildered parents who are dealing with "difficult" boys. His humour, sanity, and realism underpin his pragmatic approach to supporting young people as they grow into their own personalities.

Young men of 16 to 17 are transitioning, says Latta (2008), from a stage "where we see the first real signs of the man to come" (p. 79). Further, "even though it might appear that he is only ever living in the now, he will have the growing awareness that his actions define who he is and what kind of man he will be" (ibid.). There is "an increasing sense that soon he will be standing on his own feet, and living the life of his own choosing" (p. 80). This emerging seriousness of purpose and capacity for reflection are what Judith hoped would encourage these young men from Matamata College to share some of their stories, hopes, and dreams about the path they were now on so that all could benefit from their individual experiences.

Andrew Fuller is a clinical psychologist from the University of Melbourne's Department of Learning and Educational Development. He is widely respected for his seminal work in consulting with communities and lecturing about resilience in young people. Fuller is clear that the most important asset both boys and girls can have is a sense of belonging. In his paper *Valuing Boys, Valuing Girls—Celebrating Difference and Enhancing Potential* (2002a) he says that this sense of belonging is central to all the research on resilience, which is in turn the most powerful protective factor and the strongest antidote to suicide, violence, and substance abuse for our young people (see also Fuller, 2002b).

Judith wanted to explore the possibility that a self-directed group for the school's older boys could build a sense of belonging that would allow the work of the pilot project to proceed comfortably and purposefully. Fuller (2002a) cited Australian

research that found that belonging to and fitting in at school was a dominant need, and that in an increasingly complex, fast-moving society it is important that schools provide opportunities for “a level of care that goes far beyond traditional roles” (p. 3).

Time put aside to actually talk face-to-face may present a rich opportunity to these young men who belong, according to Fuller, to “a click and go generation” (Fuller, 2002a, p. 4) in which many young people live virtual lives, without close family or friends they can talk to. Rather, he says, they have people to watch TV with and others they can text message (ibid.).

Action Research Pilot, Part 1: Matamata College Year 13—“Men’s Group”

“The looming tsunami”

A representative group consisting of 12 male students drawn from Year 13 was brought together in early 2010 to discuss the main issues affecting progress and wellbeing for Year 12’s and the most appropriate ways for their school to address these. Not only would they consider what might be offered, but also the how, where, when, and by whom. They met on ten occasions, the group reducing from 12 members to a stable group of seven by the fourth session.

The “group work” and methodology

The students were introduced to the facilitator, Roger Foggitt, at the first session and given an outline of the rationale for the group, emphasising that this was a “men’s group.” The facilitator then talked a little further—introducing himself in more detail—before suggesting an intended way of working, noting that it was their experience as students who had just completed Year 12 that was important to the overall purpose of the project.

Each student then introduced himself, commenting (at the facilitator’s suggestion) on what he felt had gone well for him in Year 12 and what had not gone so well. All present were assured that they could decide what, and if, anything was to be shared in the group. As facilitator, Roger summarised what he had understood to have been shared, explaining that this was how the group could work together henceforth—if they so wished. His role was primarily to ask key questions as well as to maintain agreed-upon safeguards concerning confidentiality and trust, which were, in turn, jointly explored and agreed to. In this way, a group “contract” was established.

Each subsequent session began with the facilitator summarising previous discussion, checking whether this was the common recall, and reminding the participants that trust and confidentiality continued to apply, followed by suggested questions/prompts,

all unfolding from the point of view of what being a Year 12 student was like. At the eighth session, three different models of what might be offered to Year 12's were presented for evaluation and discussion. A homework task was offered at that point, with a copy of the group's preferred model being taken away for closer examination so that full consideration could take place at the penultimate session. The group was also presented with a draft report, prepared by the facilitator, for joint approval before the final session, where agreement on the report was realised.

Issues arising during group discussions

The need for better tsunami warnings

Everyone was glad to have completed Year 12, a year in which students face intense pressure from the national assessment system. No one wanted to go back and do it again. All had experienced intense focused pressure, with college staff asserting: "You must work harder;" "This is it;" "No slacking," and "You have to get good marks." Difficult compromises between competing subjects, interests, and demands had to be made in order to ease pressure and comply. There was agreement that the "boys only" class in which some of the group had participated was a very positive experience; it was helpful not to be distracted by girls. They emphasised, however, that the right teacher(s) had to be involved for it to work as well as it did for them; it was clear that the nature of the relationship between teacher and class was fundamentally important. It was not sufficient just to have a male-only setting. Interestingly enough, their model of good practice was a particular, widely respected woman teacher.

Despite the "official" warnings, Year 12 had still been a "shock." They said "it felt like you were on your own" and "you were just left to get on with it." It became clear, however, that this was not just about exam performance and the associated stress; there were other significant, unrelenting, unavoidable demands, such as sports activities (very powerfully felt by most); a part-time job (very serious for some); girls and parties (universally felt)—all of which appeared to "peak" at this time. Above all, there was a huge sense of "being tired all the time" as a result of an enormous expenditure of mental, physical, social, and emotional activity.

Be that as it may, something new and potent had also arrived: alcohol. For some of the students it had been there for a while, quietly making its presence known. Now, alcohol was insistent that it be acknowledged and invited into their lives on a permanent basis.

These social forces did not leave much room to recuperate and refresh: "It all just seems to build up;" "It's just so full on!" There was lively and earnest discussion on what

more they might have done to make this easier for themselves. However, the most disturbing realisation was that the “warnings” they had been given were quite possibly misleading. One student summarised thus: “You get this tsunami warning, and it’s overstated. The impression you get is that the schoolwork is going to overwhelm you, and it doesn’t, not really, you just get on with it. It’s the social stuff that overwhelms; it just explodes—yet there is no warning; this is the real tsunami that’s coming.”

The content of this social “wave” then became the focus of discussion over several sessions: parties, girls, holding down part-time jobs, and coping with social drama more generally. But of stark and unequivocal concern to them all had been the arrival of this new kid on the block—alcohol—that had impacted uniquely and strongly on each and every one by this time. It was the ubiquitous nature of this new component in their lives that was, in their opinion, the most disrupting and disturbing element for Year 12’s. One member of the group summarised (in a resigned, fatalistic manner) thus: “It’s the New Zealand culture to binge drink, and you can’t do much about that... You just have to get on with it, like it or not.”

What can be done?

The boys agreed that the school should offer increased self-care support. However, in their unanimous view, this should be equally available for their female peers—albeit in segregated format. Although girls were seen as somewhat better able to deal with and to manage emotions (“It’s like they have something in their head that we don’t”), they were seen as no less vulnerable to the effect of this tsunami.

During the eighth session, three possible models for action were examined:

- (a) A course with its own curriculum, with specific subject areas such as self-awareness, personal decision-making, managing feelings, handling stress, etc.
- (b) A skills-based training programme, possibly based on Goleman’s emotional intelligence approach, with specific skills training according to particular competencies, such as self-awareness, motivation, and empathy.
- (c) A resource, such as a handbook for managing emotionally unsettling experiences, possibly based on the handbook *The Journey Through* from the New Zealand organisation Skylight (Bohm, Dickinson, Irving, & Saw, 2009), with practical themes such as “Stuff happens,” “Reactions,” and “Expressing it.”

Outcome

It was concluded that options (a) and (b) presented similar major difficulties. For instance, the two options had substantial content that would probably compete with

the ongoing school curriculum, thereby creating further pressure. Learning would need to take place in small groups, which would be administratively difficult, and they would probably have to commence well before Year 12.

The resource-based approach appeared to address the above limitations, and *The Journey Through* had the important attraction of being home-grown and embracing biculturalism, for example employing Māori images, terminology, names, and concepts. It was also something that could be taken home so that parents could know what was being done in college for their sons concerning personal and emotional issues. One comment was: “Maybe they [the parents] would benefit from reading and using this as well.” However, one important concern was expressed, namely, that some of the more dramatic scenarios depicted could cause some students to feel that their life stories were not directly comparable, and the booklet could thereby be seen as not really for them. The group took home copies of *The Journey Through* to look at in more detail and for further discussion at the penultimate session the following week.

Conclusion and recommendations

At the ninth session, a draft report was discussed and amendments made. It was agreed that *The Journey Through* could be given to all students in Year 12 as a resource book. However, it was considered essential that if it were, it should also be presented in workshop format to ensure that its relevance was fully explored and understood. It was agreed that this should occur early in Year 12, for girls as well as boys, with consideration given to self-selection for subgroups. While the boys’ group need not necessarily require a male facilitator, whoever led the group required relevant skills. Most significantly perhaps was the unanimous, strongly held view that the unique opportunity they had experienced to meet and share ideas and feelings in a non-judgemental and facilitated way had been extremely valuable in itself and ought to be available to others, and not only the men.

Action Research Pilot, Part 2: Matamata College Year 12—“The Brotherhood”

Jason Hansen had been in the school completing a counselling practicum for two terms when the Year 12 group was brought together. He had established good working relationships with a number of the school’s male students already, and it was fortuitous that, while not a permanent member of staff, he was present, available, and eminently suitable to facilitate the Year 12 pilot group.

Establishing the group

The first official meeting of the Year 12 men's group, in semester three, included seven of the eight students invited, along with the head boy, the sports captain, and members of the Year 13 Men's Group. This first meeting included introductions and a brief discussion about the intention of the group. Ground rules for the group—such as respect for each other and confidentiality—were discussed. Jason was impressed with the way the boys took for granted that these aspects would be present among them.

During an initial meeting, the students selected for the group spoke of the positive and negative aspects of being in Year 12. They felt they now received increased respect from their teachers, had a greater leadership role, had study periods and enjoyed respect from their peers. Negatives included feeling pressure to succeed and having to work harder. Year 12 was a big step up and these realities hit hard. The young men talked about having the support of mates and of being able to burn off steam together in the weekends. "Only one day till the weekend" was the commonly held attitude. Teachers, they thought, used shock tactics to get them to focus on work.

The group perceived differences between Year 11 and Year 12. One was greater freedom in the senior year as a result of some having drivers' licences; the "discovery" of alcohol was another. Most of the young men had done some drinking before Year 12. Now, as signalled by the older boys in the Men's Group, the tsunami loomed: greater quantities of alcohol and expectations that they would drink more.

The group talked about having "the one big night" that for some was "the one *bad* night" where they drank too much and had a wild time. Most of the session was spent talking about drinking alcohol: the effects, particular experiences, and the difference between drinking at a party and drinking with a few mates.

Jason believed the group had begun well and had the impression that the boys enjoyed the chance to talk of their experiences in an open and frank forum, without fear of judgement or repercussion.

Taking ownership

The second session was solely for the Year 12 boys and started with a summary of the major points from the previous session. During this second meeting, the boys began to speak of "The Brotherhood," the name they used for the Year 12 group. The Brotherhood extended beyond the group meetings and was about friends looking out for each other.

Alcohol, again

The group talked more about drinking habits and it was apparent how prevalent the influence of alcohol was in their lives. The group acknowledged the ability of alcohol consumption to teach hard lessons, some of which they had already experienced. They talked about drinking to the point of memory loss. At least half the group had drunk themselves to the point of “coma” or blackout/unconsciousness.

Other matters that arose this time were individual attitudes toward drugs, and what to do with grief. The boys believed they would have the support of their mates if an event arose in their lives that would demand a time to grieve.

Locusts

Many of the sessions featured large amounts of food that the students had brought along with them—chips, lollies, biscuits and fizzy drink—and that they devoured like a roving pack of locusts while talking. This illustrates the very relaxed atmosphere that prevailed throughout the sessions. Jason wondered if the food offered a distraction from having to sit in a circle and talk. How much of this focus on food was about nourishing their bodies while they were feeding their hearts and spirits?

Being a man

The third session’s focus question was “What do you think it means to be a man?” One response, “stepping up to the plate when you have to,” was acknowledged unanimously by the group.

However, they observed that being a man in their town seemed to be all about rugby, beer, and having sex. They talked about being a “gentleman” and what they thought this meant. One group member’s definition of being a man was about “knowing limits.” Someone else talked about not being a sheep, and setting a good example.

Another said that the average man was trapped inside a box, and that “unless you are hard-out thinking, it’s hard to see outside the box.” Some saw their fathers, grandfathers, and other significant older men, such as sports coaches, as being in such boxes, mostly without knowing it. These young men were aware that if you can see the box, you can see that you don’t have to climb into it; however, there was pressure to conform and “get in the box.”

There was discussion about how to set up subsequent Year 12 men’s groups and how to select new members. The possible differences between a Year 12 men’s group and a Year 12 women’s group were explored.

Judith attended the first part of the fourth session, and she asked the boys some questions about the group. They talked about the benefits of being able to meet students from other groups in the school with whom they hadn't associated much before. The opportunity to talk about social issues such as drinking and the pressure to drink was appreciated, as was being able to "talk to guys about guy stuff." They said the group offered tension release—getting things off one's chest in a safe environment. They told Judith they preferred to talk to a male facilitator and were happy that someone outside the existing school staff was there.

Stories about sex

The Brotherhood talked of sexual peer pressure. The boys said "it's all around us;" by the age of 16, it was about "50/50" for those who had had intercourse and those who had not. They talked about whether or not there was an expectation that they would have sex by a certain age. Some believed there was, while others didn't feel expectancy while they were 16. The boys recognised the risk of getting a girl pregnant and they said they understood the responsibility. The young men perceived the double standards about guys and girls having sex: there was still a belief that a girl is a whore if she frequently has sex, while a guy is a stud, and "scoring" is something to be proud of.

As a parting gift following the conclusion of the group sessions, the boys left Judith a note, as follows:

What we like about The Brotherhood:

- We can really talk to each other
- Food
- We like that we can get away from girls and actually have a good conversation between the boys
- Also it's good to learn how others feel about things
- It's good to meet new guys from other groups across the school
- Gives us the chance to talk about things seriously
- Discuss things that affect us
- Talk about major social issues.

Action Research: Findings

Reflections on the pilot programme

These boys at Matamata College were keenly aware of the presence of alcohol in their community and lives. What surprised Judith, Roger, and Jason was their apprehension

about the possible impact of drinking on their lives. They also noted the sense of inevitability and concomitant powerlessness to politely decline the call to join the drinking culture.

Judith felt that a further investigation into how the boys had come to recognise the possible impact of this looming tsunami of alcohol might be useful in the future. A few months before, the local community had been profoundly wounded by the loss of two young people in a real (offshore) tsunami that occurred on September 29, 2009, and Judith was struck by the Year 13 group's natural choice of this metaphor to characterise the flood of damage waiting for them and their mates if they were not aware of the emergency steps to take, should an alarm (about their drinking) sound for them.

Judith and the two group facilitators were moved by the hunger these young men clearly had for the valid, trusted relationship that they allowed to develop over the time their groups ran. Old friendship groups and presumptions about boys they had previously regarded as not "mate" material were transformed into new bonds and alliances that have continued to grow.

Officially completed by the end of semester three when Jason finished his time at the school, The Brotherhood continued to meet during study time on a weekly basis to catch up with one another and to keep on talking. They met all through semester four.

Permission to talk and feel was wonderfully liberating for the boys in both groups. Role modelling from confident, mature, and generous men can be invaluable in underlining that permission and in showing younger men how to go about liberating themselves from outdated constraints. The students were sad that some of the significant older men in their lives seemed to be in "boxes" from which they could not see out and recognise the unmet needs of younger men in their community for example and for modelling.

The young men were capable of introspection and reflection about their present world and the challenges they have yet to face. They showed a willingness to listen to and consider a variety of ways to work out issues that concerned them, but they reserved the right to say "No." For example, the Year 12 boys, while appreciative of the suggestion of a "text-book approach" as put forward by the pilot Year 13 group, decided against the formality of such a structure, preferring the somewhat unpredictable but flexible group-discussion format.

Both groups developed rituals that underpinned the structure and process in their work. The "locusts" of the Year 12 Brotherhood, for example, were paying attention to that very basic counselling principle of taking care of creature comforts to facilitate

good work. Often one of the locusts would visit the venue early in order to drop off the supplies and to make sure the space was available. Planning was evident, as was their own process of getting messages out that meetings were taking place. They were taking responsibility for their own venture.

Girls were seen as needing similar support systems. The boys also affirmed their feelings that relationships with young women are often, as can be expected, accompanied by mystery, frustration, and attraction.

What next?

On the last day of attendance for senior students, The Brotherhood asked that they might use the counselling room for a final meeting. It thereby became clear that they had continued getting together after the formal end of the group. They told Judith that they had loved the opportunity to participate. Most of all, they had loved being able to “let it all out.”

They wished to support the next cohort of Year 12 boys in 2011. Further, they provided Judith with a list of names of current Year 11 boys they thought would benefit from an invitation to participate.

With this entirely unexpected gift, and with a lot of hope, the authors have concluded that this pilot has been very worthwhile. A series of “by invitation” groups, including at least one of this year’s Brotherhood members in each group to mentor and support the new young men, was planned for 2011.

Student reflections—James Norris and Mitchell Green

As we were completing this article, the two former students who are acknowledged at the start visited us and expressed a desire to contribute their comments on the long-term effects they had appreciated as a result of their participation in the group. The final words belong to them:

As two members of the original Men’s Group, we are impressed and proud of where this initiative has led. For ourselves, we have been able to gain considerable beneficial life skills and emotional tools from the group. We now recognise that we are using all of these in everyday life as we grow as individuals. We credit the creation of this first group for having a large influence on our personalities now. We believe we have changed dramatically since this time last year as a result of our experiences in the group.

We are both now tertiary students, in new locations and with new paths in life. The skills we developed in the group have certainly helped us integrate into this new stage with greater ease. We recognise the need for such a group to be regularly established as an integral part of the Year 12 programme at our old school, giving boys the opportunity to mature in a safe environment. We feel this environment allows for freedom of speech without fear of judgement by peers or outside factors. This freedom is certainly vital in teenage boys' lives when they are establishing their identity as men. As cooperative founding members of this initiative we hope that other young men can benefit from this in the future, as we have.

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