

BOYS WHO CARE

Inequality and the educational identities of young male carers

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BOYS'
IMPACT

I come from

By Mikey

I come from council estates and trips to the local library for fun.

I come from bus-hopping with my gran and half price pick 'n' mix.

I come from charity shop grabs and souvenirs from holidays to distant lands.

I come from a love of science and the mathematical world.

I come from the pool of possibility, yet I am here.

Despite all that, I love where I come from.

Despite the pain from the thoughts of others, I am happy where I come from.

Where I come from makes me, me.

I come from it all.

I come from

By Kian

I come from a small part of a bigger place.

I come from the ocean breeze and the delicacy of knobbly bobblys.

I come from the couch where my mind chose to indulge in whimsical media.

My brain was a mush of ideas, influences and people.

I come from a place of constant confusion and not being human.

It wasn't until it just clicked, then I knew who I was and where I rose.

I come from under the pub table from where my Dad had too many.

I come from an eccentric liar who made life seem nicer than it was.

I came from a blur but now know how to appreciate it.

I come from

By Evan

I come from distance, where 12 hour drives never helped you escape, miles of desert and flat land.

I come from danger, where throwing pebbles on the shores of the water became throwing pellets on the shores of blood.

I come from rice, beans and breadcrumbs. Shared between too many members of too many flags.

I come from battle, mother and father wear battle armour to fight civil wars.

I come from flying planes to live on unknown territory without choice.

I come from; I don't know where I come from.

I come from Houston.

I come from Bournemouth.

I come from places to put me where I am today.

But is there really a place I come from?

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Executive Summary

Since the early 2000's, the educational inequalities experienced by young people who hold caring responsibilities have gained a significant profile in public discourse. Indeed, 2020 saw the establishment of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Young Carers and Young Adult Carers, receiving support from the Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel De Souza.

However, whilst the challenges experienced by young carers are arguably more visible than ever before, to date there has been very little activity in research, policy or practice which has focused on the experience of male young carers. The Boys who Care project sought to address this. Working with a group of ten male young carers who were also eligible for Free School Meals, the initiative took an innovative, creative approach to the exploration of their experiences. It demonstrates the value of creative practice as a vehicle for self-expression, providing deep insight into how the young carers involved navigated their caring responsibilities alongside school.

Through their voices, the report explores the valuable social and cultural resources the young men accrued through their caring responsibilities, and how they struggled to mobilise these within their day-to-day educational contexts. It illustrates how, for many of the young men, a disjuncture between their caring identities and those which constituted the normative masculine expectations present within their peer groups led to feelings of anxiety, marginalisation and alienation.

The Boys who Care project sheds crucial light on the overlooked experiences of male young carers, addressing gaps in research, policy and practice that have persisted for far too long. Through the voices of these young men, the report not only highlights the unique challenges they face in balancing caring responsibilities with identities and educational demands but also emphasises the untapped potential in their social and cultural capital.

I fully support the calls for immediate action as outlined in this report, including investment in further research, a national campaign to raise awareness, and the development of tailored support systems for male young carers within schools and the community.

By addressing these areas, we can ensure that male young carers receive the recognition and support they need, helping them navigate both their educational and caregiving journeys with dignity, respect, and strength.

Professor Saul Becker (Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Faculty of Health and Education Manchester Metropolitan University)

As such, the report ends by making the following recommendations:

Investment in further research

The exploration of masculinity and caring responsibility for participants involved in the Boys who Care project was the first of its kind. A notion which, given the growing body of activity in research, policy and practice surrounding young carers, is stark and surprising in equal measure. It is recommended that there is significant investment in further research which explores the unique experiences of young men who hold caring responsibility, alongside the impact of associated activities on their wellbeing, educational attainment and progression.

A public campaign recognising the contribution of male young carers

The findings highlight that the experiences of young men who hold caring responsibility are often hidden. There is little recognition of carers who are young men within discourse and activity taking place at a local or national level. As such, it is recommended that local and national organisations with responsibility for supporting young carers partner on national campaigns which raises awareness of the experiences of male young carers, celebrating the unique strengths and attributes developed through their caring roles.

Training and CPD for professionals

Based on the interview data and existing literature, it is evident that stereotypes, surrounding who can be a young carer and what caring looks like, persist. As a result, young male carers often experience feelings of illegitimacy in relation to their caregiving identity and how to reconcile that with their masculine identity. To create supportive environments where young male carers can openly share their experiences and access appropriate support, it is recommended that schools and other relevant settings provide training for teachers and practitioners on the unique challenges faced by these young male carers.

Mechanisms to better identify young male carers in schools

Whilst this recommendation has been cited in numerous policy-facing reports and research publications, there has been little headway in the standardisation of a mechanism to identify young carers in schools. As highlighted by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Carers and Young Adult Carers, this has led to numbers of young people in schools with caring responsibilities being under reported, and significant gaps in the provision of support. To develop a more robust, targeted approach to the support of male young carers, it is essential that this is addressed at a systemic level across the education sector.

Boys, Young Carers and Education

Over the last decade, disparities in the educational attainment and progression of boys have featured with increasing regularity in discourse by Government and bodies engaged in educational policy. However stark disparities in their outcomes remain. For boys who are eligible for Free School Meals in the Dorset region of England where this project is situated, attainment at GCSE presents a significant challenge.

In 2023/24 only 21% of boys eligible for Free School Meals¹ obtained a grade 9-5 in GCSE English and Maths, constituting a gap of 19% when compared with those who were not.

However, a group of young men who arguably receive far less attention in public and political discourse are young men with caring responsibilities. Whilst research from MYTIME Young Carers cite that approximately 44%² of the group are also likely to be eligible for Free School Meals, they are also likely to face an array of additional challenges. Indeed, a recent report from an enquiry launched by the All

Party Parliamentary Group on Young Carers and Young Adult Carers³ explored how some of those specific challenges faced by young carers played out in education. Whilst the report detailed numerous barriers that a young or young-adult carer may face within their educational journey, there was very little insight provided with specific regard to the experiences of boys and young men with caring responsibilities. Although mentioned briefly in a 2008 report on the experiences of young adult carers², there has been very little activity to explore how being a young carer plays out in the educational experiences of young men.

Research⁴ suggests that partially, this could be due to difficulties that young men may have in expressing themselves openly when engaging in conversation about thoughts or feelings which may be uncomfortable. However, there also appears to have been little motivation in research, policy or practice to make young men with caring responsibilities a primary focus.

Boys who Care

The Boys who Care project sought to address this, mobilising creativity as a vehicle to construct a safe, engaging space where reflections by male young carers on their lives and experiences could be undertaken openly. Drawing on the creative course portfolio at Arts University Bournemouth, the project utilised Creative Writing as an exploratory mechanism by which young men could engage in reflection on the role that care and masculinity played within their own lives and experiences.

¹<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/key-stage-4-performance/2023-24?subjectId=8172cf82-f414-4db6-6737-08dd0ae4d1de>

² MYTIME Young Carers. (2024). *Unseen Sacrifices Faced by Young Carers*. Retrieved from <https://www.mytimeyoungcarers.org/res/MYTIME%20Report%20-%20Unseen%20Sacrifices%20Faced%20by%20Young%20Carers.pdf>

³<https://carers.org/all-party-parliamentary-group-appg-for-young-carers-and-young-adult-carers/appg-on-young-carers-and-young-adult-carers-inquiry-into-life-opportunities>

⁴ Robb, M., 2022. 'Men, we just deal with it differently': researching sensitive issues with young men. In *Unpacking Sensitive Research* (pp. 102-110). Routledge.

As a joint initiative between MYTIME Young Carers and Arts University Bournemouth, the Boys who Care project was the first of its kind. Interweaving creative participatory research into a series of activities and workshops, Boys Who Care learnt about the lives and experiences of male young carers through their own words. It celebrated their unique strengths, whilst foregrounding their voice as the real experts in the subject matter; the lived experience of being a young carer, and a young man.

In the summer of 2024, the project invited ten young male carers to take part in a creative writing workshop. Targeted toward young male carers in secondary education, participants were aged 11-17 and were eligible for Free School Meals. Facilitated by novelist, poet and lecturer in Creative Writing, Dr Ashley Hickson-Lovence, the workshop involved the exploration of poems, novel extracts and creative writing pieces written by men from various backgrounds, about their life experiences. Over the course of the day participants were gently guided to write their own creative writing pieces and given the opportunity to share them with the group. Each participant created several creative pieces, which were collected as artefacts to be used as a reflective tool later in the research process.

Following the workshop, the same group of young male carers were invited to a Making Memories Day – a programme aimed at providing young carers with the opportunity to make special memories through fun and enriching activities, giving them a much-needed break from their caring responsibilities. Participants took part in a day of mini golf with staff, followed by lunch where they were given the opportunity to reflect on their experience at the Empower workshop. The day provided the research team with the opportunity to get to know and build rapport with the young men.

The research sought to explore and highlight the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of the lived experiences of the young male carers taking part. It utilised informal focus groups over lunch at the Making Memories Day to provide a space for the young men to reflect on their experiences of the creative writing workshop. In addition to the focus groups, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants individually to gain rich insights into their experiences, opinions, values, attitudes, and feelings⁵. The interviews took place over the July and August of 2024, with six out of the ten young male carers taking part. The addition of the creative writing pieces as reflective tools to focus later conversations arguably allowed young men to further explore their experiences through the “visual and object mediums of communication that youth are most familiar with”⁶.

By utilising both qualitative and creative approaches the project aimed to gain a deep understanding of the everyday experiences of young male carers, and the negotiation of those experiences with notions of masculinity. As mentioned in the introduction, research⁷ suggests that young men struggle to open up when talking about sensitive issues. As such, the project used creative mechanisms, coupled with multiple points of contact, to build trust and rapport amongst participants,

⁵ May, T. (2001). *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*. Open University Press.

⁶ Dumangane (n 4) pg. 4

⁷ Robb, Martin (2021). ‘Men, we just deal with it differently’: researching sensitive issues with young men. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24(5) pp. 617–625

and with the Boys who Care project team.

The audio of the focus groups and interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The Boys who Care research team analysed the data using thematic analysis⁸, devising codes and themes to better understand what it means to be a young male carer.

Research Questions

The research questions detailed below provided a clear direction for the project. They guided the study's scope and shape, affording the opportunity to focus on the methodological approach as a means to cultivate trust and rapport, alongside conducting a rich exploration of the role that their identities as young carers played in their day-to-day educational experiences.

1

How did the creation of a safe, supportive, creative space allow the young men to explore and share their experiences as a boy, and as a young carer with their peers?

2

How did participant's negotiation of masculinity and caring responsibilities in the home influence the social and emotional resources available to them?

3

How did social and emotional resources available to the young men influence their day-to-day experience in spaces of formal education?



⁸ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

FINDINGS

Creativity, social ties, and safety in exploration

A key aim of the project was the creation, through the mobilisation of a creative participatory methodology, of a space in which the young participants felt comfortable to explore issues related to masculinity, identity and their role as young carers. In order to articulate their thoughts about elements of their experiences which may be difficult or unfamiliar, cultivating a set of conditions in which the young men felt safe and supported was instrumental.

“ *him sharing the story about his mate, and it made us feel a bit more open, like we could tell him everything about us. And he actually- it wasn't like he was listening and not taking any of it in. He was listening and taking it in and then giving us a decent response, which you don't really get much whenever you go to school, like that.* ”
(Jack)

During a focus group which took place between three participants shortly after the workshop, one of the young men reflected that a safe, supportive environment was achieved in part through the openness and vulnerability displayed by the workshop's facilitator, author Ashley Hickson-Lovence. In talking about the process for writing his latest book, *Wild East*, Ashley shared his experiences of growing up as a young working-class Black man in London, his experience of losing a friend to knife crime, and how his personal journey fuelled a sense of purpose for much of his writing. However, the young men reflected that it wasn't just the fact that Ashley was willing to be so openly vulnerable in talking about his experiences, but that they were afforded the opportunity to actively engage in a dialogue with him about them.

It was the relational nature of the interactions within the workshop which lay in stark contrast to interactions which were experienced in more formal educational environments.

“ *actually quite fun doing the creative writing under Ashley because it was the ability just to relax and be me because I was able to speak from what I know and just drop into my own mind.* ”
(Mikey)

Pete: *Well, to be fair really one thing stuck out to me where one of his friends got killed on the bus.*

INT: *Yeah. Yeah.*

Pete: *Like I sort of can imagine losing someone because great granddad died two years ago.*

Pete commented that the encouragement from Ashley to draw on their lived experiences, combined with the open, discursive nature of the session, meant that they could relax and just speak about anything that dropped into their mind. For another of the young men, the fact that Ashley had been open with his experience of loss, created a sense of connection due to them recently experiencing the loss of a loved one themselves. For all participants interviewed, all though articulated in different ways, the conditions cultivated within the workshop allowed them to relax and be themselves.

Another important element of the workshop and subsequent event was the fertile ground it created for participants to develop new social ties. Whilst not linked directly to the content of the workshop, or even necessarily the activity being undertaken, it provided an opportunity to inhabit a space with other young men with caring responsibilities which reflected their own.

“ *And that’s like the main part, you work as a team, we all have the same thing going on in our lives. We have fun, yeah, we hang out, we take care of each other. It’s quite nice to feel like you’re not alone*

It is helpful to know that other people that they have the same thing as me. So we have something in common so we can make friends and talk to each other about what’s happening in their life and we can comfort each other. (Tom) ”

“ *Normally, I’d be super awkward in those situations really. There’s like a common interest of being a young carer, so that makes it easier.* ”
(Kian)

Whilst each participant’s situation was unique to their familial, social and geographic context, the quotes above from Tom and Kian illustrate the importance they placed on having common ground through their caring responsibility. For Tom, the feeling of not being alone; to provide comfort for, and be comforted by, his friends when times were tough was important. In research, expressions of care and comfort are rarely dispositions associated with adolescent young men, however Tom frames such acts as an important and welcomed element of friendship.

As discussed later in the report, for many young carers navigating social situations, especially at school, can be emotionally demanding and fraught with risk. In Kian’s description of the social situation which constituted the workshop, he demonstrates the sense of connection and community. An unspoken acknowledgement of caring responsibility as a facet of their identities which they shared, provided a powerful tonic to feelings of awkwardness, insecurity and anxiety.

Previous research has documented challenges when engaging in qualitative research with young men surrounding issues which may be sensitive⁹. Due to challenges relating to normative masculine expectations, and a lack of opportunities to regularly articulate thoughts and feelings which may be difficult, uncomfortable or complex, studies have highlighted the limitations of more 'traditional' qualitative research methods as a mechanism to unlock deep reflective conversations. Whilst a recent study documented the success of a creative participatory approach with young men which aligned closely with that mobilised by the Boys who Care project¹⁰, prior to the commencement of the project, there was little precedent for such an approach being mobilised with young men who held caring responsibility for close family members.

In the workshop, and the reflective conversations which followed, participants described how the creative medium mobilised in the workshop acted as a safety net, affording them the opportunity to create some distance between difficult thoughts and feelings which may arise when speaking about topics which they find particularly challenging.

“ *And it was just being able to put that down.
Just sort of distanced myself from who I am. Even though yes,
they know what has happened to me writing it down, and making
sort of a figurative person that, you know, that they do have
the same upbringing as I do, they are separate to myself* ”
(Mikey)

Even though they were aware that they were still talking about their own experiences, the development of a character facilitated a level of detachment. Even though they were acutely aware that this character shared their experiences, they were separate and distinct to themselves. As a result, Mikey reflected that they were uniquely able to share thoughts and feelings through their writing that they may otherwise have withheld

“ *Like the last one, he wasn't really in control, he was kind of like
manipulated, he was kind of being manipulated, he was kind of not being
himself, the other side of him took over, his brain was half and half,
he was just crazy.* ”
(Olly)

Through their writing, another of the participants talked about the behavioural challenges he experiences at home and at school, and how he struggled to maintain control. Rather than raise this in direct conversation, which may be challenging in a room full of his peers, instead he describes how he imbued these challenges into the identities of characters he created.

⁹ Robb, M., 2022. 'Men, we just deal with it differently': researching sensitive issues with young men. In *Unpacking Sensitive Research* (pp. 102-110). Routledge.

¹⁰ Blower, A. and Rainford, J., 2023. Internalizing the Present in the Articulation of the Future: Masculinity, Inequality, and Trying On New Possible Selves. *Boyhood Studies*, 16(2), pp.109-132.

However, there is no escaping that, due to the numerous challenges experienced by the young men relating to their caring responsibilities, some of their experiences were deeply sensitive and difficult to navigate. In the quote below, Mikey talks about the emotional risk he would be taking in reflecting on experiences that were hurtful in his writing. That even though he understood that it was a safe space, the risk he felt he was taking in articulating the emotional impact of his experiences, outweighed the potential benefit.

“ *It is more a thing of, if I started writing about something that has happened to me and was hurtful to me, I was just worried how that could emotionally affect me. Even though I knew I was safe I still didn't want to take the risk of writing about like the effects of me*

I could have spoken about multiple things that have happened in my life, but I decided not to purely because I don't know if I could have held myself before I can write it. From reliving the times that it has happened.

(Mikey)

The experiences of the participants described both in the artefacts they produced, and their reflections on the experience of creating them, demonstrate the power of creative practice as a mechanism for self-expression. A means by which, given the right conditions, a safe space can be cultivated where young men feel empowered with freedom to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences which may be difficult or challenging. In the workshop, the use of creating writing as a tool to facilitate such reflection enabled the young men to maintain a 'safe distance' through characterisation within their writing and imbuing fictional characters with elements of their own lived experience. However, whilst the young men's accounts illustrate the power and potential of such a device, they articulate the importance of such activity being conducted with an appropriate level of caution, care and sensitivity.

As a group, due to the responsibilities placed upon their shoulders, young carers often navigate situations which may be traumatic. As highlighted by a participant in the interviews, even within a safe space which is populated by other young men who share similar experiences, the disclosure of certain thoughts, feelings and experiences may constitute a risk due to the potential of undesirable emotional consequences. As such, within any activity designed to create such space for reflection, the responsibility of professionals to safeguard against undesirable psychological and emotional consequences, and ensure appropriate mechanisms of support are available, should be of primary concern.



FINDINGS

Masculine Caring Identities and the Development of Emotional Resources

Caring Identities

Another key aim of the study was to better understand the way in which masculine and caring identities of young male carers intersect, and how they transform their caring experiences into valuable resources for navigating their social world. How we perceive and respond to our social world depends on our experiences¹¹, our position in the world, as well as the shared histories which define our familial identity. Research into the lives of young carers frames caring experiences as a part of the process of identity formation, which suggests that caring activities and their associated behaviours become embedded into young caring identities¹². Additionally, research highlights the unique challenges young men face navigating their everyday social world, in particular, sites of education.

Young carers frequently assume practical and emotional responsibilities that are typically expected of adults. The specific tasks they perform can differ based on the type of illness or disability, the extent and frequency of care required, and the overall structure of the family.¹³ Some of the participants in this study were supporting and/or caring for family members with physical disabilities and ill health such a chronic arthritis, cancer or stroke. Other participants were supporting family members diagnosed with mental health issues such as bipolar disorder and multiple personality disorder.

“ Oh, no, they know that my dad had a stroke.”
(Pete)

“ For me, because my mum has arthritis.”
(Mikey)

“ My mum, she has bipolar and other sorts of mental illness but bipolar is the main one.”
(Evan)

“ My dad because he had a really hard time with his like... He had like these people in his head he had like other like stages of himself.”
(Tom)

The variety of care needs supported by the young male carers of this study demonstrates that there is not one homogenous experience of being a young male

¹¹ Thomas Grant, “The Complexity of Aspiration: The Role of Hope and Habitus in Shaping Working-Class Young People’s Aspirations to Higher Education,” *Children’s Geographies*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1221057>.

¹² Helena D Rose and Keren Cohen, “The Experiences of Young Carers: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Findings” 6261 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261003801739>.

¹³ Year Old and Katrina Lloyd, “Happiness and Well-Being of Young Carers : Extent , Nature and Correlates of Caring,” 2013, 67–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-011-9316-0>.

carer. Indeed, previous research calls attention to the prevalence of unhelpful stereotypes of what it is to be a young carer. This includes notions of what 'caring' involves; who can be a young carer; and what it means to 'care'. The young men in this study referred to some of the challenges that they faced when seeking validity in their caring identities, when their caring responsibilities did not match up to the beliefs held by others.

“ Probably that we just work with people that have just lost all dignity whatsoever. Like they can't walk, whatever. They can't talk. Practically you're just caring for a vegetable. That's kind of what the stereotype is. ”
(Jack)

“ So that causes me to feel, even though I know I'm legit as a young carer, it sometimes feels like that I'm just taking the credit for something that every teen would do. ”
(Mikey)

What Mikey and Jack are referring to is a stereotype of young carers who take on responsibilities outside the normal household chores – for example, having to undertake personal care or navigating the often emotionally challenging terrain of supporting those suffering from acute or severe mental illnesses or physical disabilities. These young carers are conflicted about the label they have been given and the connotations attached to it. They compare themselves with non-care giving young men and their responsibilities in the home, as well as contrasting responsibility levels between one another. In Jack and Mikey's words we see the impact of this comparison in efforts to articulate legitimacy in their identity as a young carer¹⁴.

All the participants reported helping with common household activities like cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, and doing the washing up, activities which lots of young people take on as part of their routine family life. However, rather than simply being asked to contribute to the running of the home, participants highlighted the weight or necessity of their responsibilities¹⁵ contributing to them often left feeling like the caring activities they do is simultaneously both imperative and unremarkable.

“ So yeah, what most teens are asked to do sometimes, I would have to do it because, if not, it might not be done. ”
(Mikey)

“ Sometimes you've got to sacrifice your own time to make other people stay better, sometimes you've got to sacrifice your time to help other people, sometimes you've got to do loads of things. ”
(Olly)

¹⁴ Rose and Cohen, "The Experiences of Young Carers: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Findings."

¹⁵ M Gays, "Getting It Right for Young Carers in the ACT In Family Futures: Issues in Research and Policy," in 7th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference (Sydney, 2000).

Additionally, this sense of being more heavily relied upon than their non-caring peers¹⁶, was strengthened by reports of sacrifice, describing how care giving can create limitations on personal time and hobbies¹⁷. Participants described having to share their belongings with siblings, as expressed by Pete when he says, “Really my stuff is just everyone’s stuff”. This expectation to share possessions, coupled with limitations on time to cultivate individual interests and hobbies, arguably erodes a sense of ownership of their lives and reduces space for the development of their identities as separate from their caring responsibilities. Concurrently, participants often demonstrated highly developed levels of patience, and a greater understanding and prioritisation of the needs of their family members above their own. Toms account below, demonstrates the experience of taking on the role of being the mature, patient, older brother.

“ *Yes, I do help my brother out sometimes. He sometimes just nags me and comes into my room saying, ‘you want to go to the skatepark?’ Because as an older brother, I have to say yes, because he can’t go on his own.* ”
(Tom)

For most older brothers, refusing the requests of younger siblings to take them out or to share their belongings would not be unusual. However, for Tom and the other young men in this study, acts of care, such as accompanying siblings on an outing or readily allowing them to play games on their personal devices, is perceived as a necessity. Caring for others is intrinsic to their identity. The description by the participants of care as their familial duty, demonstrates the degree to which a role as carer, and the associated dispositions, have become imprinted onto their identity as young men in a manner which may be particular to those who share their unique experiences

¹⁶ Saul Becker, “Global Perspectives on Children’s Unpaid Caregiving in the Family,” *Global Social Policy* 7, no. 1 (2011): 23–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018107073892>.

¹⁷ Rose and Cohen, “The Experiences of Young Carers : A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Findings.”



'Masculinities' of Care

For young male carers, there is often tension between the development of their caring identity alongside their perceived masculine identity. Previous research suggests that young male carers may perceive their masculinity as under threat if they share their caring status in the wrong social situations¹⁸. Concurrently, research also suggests that stereotypical caring behaviours, such as those demonstrated by the young men in this study - household work, greater levels of patience, activities related to looking after small children - are often associated with female sensibilities. This is described in the literature as the 'hierarchy of care'¹⁹. As Mikey notes, "when someone thinks of a young carer they think of girls." This view that it is women or girls who 'care', has been woven into the fabric of gendered societies over millennia and shapes preconceived ideas about who can be a young carer²⁰.

Opportunities at the Empower workshop for the young men to reflect upon what it means to be a young man today were taken a step further in the interviews, situating masculinity within their roles as young carers. The young men identified stereotypical masculine traits such as strength or physical toughness, as well as not showing their emotions.

“the stereotypical man just pumping iron every day”
(Mikey)

“the, yeah, don't show emotion one. I would say that's kind of just like- It's natural, but it's seen by the public and everyone else that you need to hide it as a guy.”
(Jack)

These masculine stereotypes were talked about with negative connotations. The young men actively highlighted the importance of either 'going against' these stereotypes or gave examples of how masculinity was more than simply limited to these traits. Words like "trustworthy" and "loving" as well as "gentle" were used when discussing which attributes they felt were important for a young man to have in today's society. It was striking how readily the young men were able to recognise the depth and complexity of what it can mean to be a man and someone who cares. Perfectly demonstrating the duality of identifying with the often-contradictory qualities held by someone who both cares and someone who is 'masculine'. Simultaneously being able to be both strong and gentle; physical and emotional. Interestingly, emphasis was placed on the ability to 'flex' between different masculine identities, depending on the social situation²¹. The ability to be gentle and caring, as well as the ability to "defend", to lean into physical strength, aggression, when needed.

¹⁸ Helen Bolas, Anna V A N Wersch, and Darren Flynn, "The Well-Being of Young People Who Care for a Dependent Relative: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis no. October 2007 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14768320601020154>.

¹⁹ Susan Eley, "If They Don't Recognize It, You've Got to Deal with It Yourself": Gender, Young Caring and Educational Support" 16 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0954025032000170345>.

²⁰ Rose and Cohen, "The Experiences of Young Carers : A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Findings."

²¹ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003116479>

Aggression, that well known masculine trait. Tom spoke about needing to protect his brother, in this case, from the difficulty coming to terms with the personality changes as a consequence of their father's mental ill health.

“ I still need to protect him... [he] is having like a really hard time like thinking about when is our dad, dad going to come back because Joey is his other personality. ”
(Tom)

The development of protection as a form of masculine care was articulated perfectly by Mikey during a discussion in interview about what, if any, differences there are between male and female young carer experiences.

“ But that's the thing the only reason people see women as more caring is because women are more likely to take smaller injuries and quickly heal them. Because how men care is we try and protect against someone being injured whereas a woman, a girl might see someone get injured and try and help from there. So despite us being more proactive and trying to stop the injury in its own right we are seen as protective not caring you know that's the way we find it easier to care. ”
(Mikey)

The identification of protection as a masculine form of care by the young men in this study needs further exploration. It is arguable that to navigate the juxtaposition of identities being developed by young male carers, requires finding a way to interweave traditionally male attributes with softer character traits. However, the ability of the young men to identify these masculine forms of care in relatives and other male role models, suggests that the findings highlight the broader nature of what it means to care, bringing care out of the traditionally feminine sphere and into a shared space

Emotional Resources

Whilst the focus on identity formation has been significant, it is important that we turn our attention to the social and emotional resources which the young male carers in this study draw on in different situations. The social environments around them and the perceived societal gendered expectations they encounter shape the types of resources that the young male carers in this study gather²². Additionally, the challenges they face due to their caring roles influence how they experience and react to the world around them. Research suggests that finding positive aspects or benefits in caregiving experiences²³ allows young carers to develop positive images of caring, thus boosting self-esteem and self-concept²⁴

²² Marci D Cottingham, "Theorizing Emotional Capital," *Theory and Society*, no. September (2016): 451–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-016-9278-7>.

²³ Tamsyn Hawken, Julie Barnett, and Julie M Gamble-turner, "Through the Eyes of a Young Carer: A Photo Elicitation Study of Protective Resilience" 34 (2024): 756–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323231225167>.

²⁴ Louise Earley, Delia Cushway, and Tony Cassidy, "Children 's Perceptions and Experiences of Care Giving: A Focus Group Study," no. March 2007 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070701217830>.

Participants reported feeling that they had developed a greater confidence to “really talk to people”, with Tom specifically attributing this to taking part in activities put on by MYTIME Young Carers. However, it is Mikey who takes this idea further, talking about his ability to better communicate with adults:

“ but most of the time it’s more of I feel easier communicating with adults because the thing that we both understand or have the same level of emotional intelligence of dealing with, me through being a young carer and most adults with actual experience through time ”
(Mikey)

Mikey recognises that his experiences have given him greater emotional maturity or ‘intelligence’ and an ability to connect with adults in a way that some of his peers may not be able to do.²⁵ Research corroborates the idea that young carers develop this emotional resource through the navigation of challenging familial circumstances, such as the ones experienced by the young carers in this study²⁶.

In the section on Masculinities of Care, the young male carers identified hiding their emotions from others as a necessary or expected characteristic of men and boys. However, data in this study suggests that these young male carers have cultivated and mobilised the ability to control their emotions, rather than simply hide them. For some of the young men, the challenging experiences required to cultivate that ability, takes the shape of exposure to, and caring for, loved ones with unpredictable emotional patterns, moods or behaviours.

“ my mum, she has bipolar ... So when I go over, I could get a completely different mum. It depends. It’s big highs and big lows. It’s hard to manage but I think she’s getting a lot better recently. ”
(Evan)

“ Sometimes at one point he might blink, and he turns into a different person in his mind. ”
(Tom)

Arguably, it is these difficult, and sometimes extreme, emotionally challenging experiences which have provided the opportunity to practice emotional control and emotional management. Through supporting and managing the emotions of loved ones, and coping with stressful situations usually experienced by adults, young male carers have transformed a self-identified negative attribute into a valuable resource.

²⁵ Jill Blackmore, “Lost in Translation? Emotional Intelligence, Affective Economies, Leadership and Organizational Change,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 43, no. 3 (2011): 207–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2011.586455>.

²⁶ Becker, “Global Perspectives on Children’s Unpaid Caregiving in the Family.”

Emotional control is just one aspect of an overall greater emotional maturity demonstrated here. It has become a valuable resource for all of the young men in the study, which they are able to mobilise in their home life and in other social situations²⁷. Pete talks about how he has developed his ability to “*cope with more stress*” and “*handle chaos*” through his experience of a ‘chaotic’ home life, something that is echoed in the experiences of the other young carers in the study and in previous research²⁸.

The significance of these findings demonstrates how the interplay between caring and masculine identities both shapes, and are shaped by, each other. The caring experiences of the young men in this study, in turn, shape the attributes and resources that they choose to develop and mobilise in their everyday life. It demonstrates that, for the young men involved, their responsibilities as young carers provided a conduit for the acquisition of a range of social and emotional resources. Confidence, communication skills, emotional control, and a highly developed sense of maturity, were attributes that, due to their circumstances, they were able to develop at a pace which set them apart from other young men of a similar age.

FINDINGS

Navigating school life as a male young carer

The young men involved in the research spoke with acuity about the ways in which their role as young carers impacted day-to-day experiences in education. As discussed in the previous section, their negotiation of responsibilities in the home influenced the cultural and social resources which they could bring to bear in the classroom and school playground. To varying degrees, it influenced their sense of belonging in social settings, their attitudes toward their peers and their navigation of the mediation between life at home and school.

For a number of participants, their experience of school was characterised by feelings of social isolation, instances of bullying, and struggling to ‘fit in’.

“ *Yeah, what happens with me, I usually get along with like everyone for like the first like two weeks and then they all hate me for some reason. It’s what happened at school, my old school. Some kids at my primary school. It’s what happened at my football club. It’s happening in Scouts. Yeah, pretty much everyone.* ”
(Pete)

Whilst bullying was mentioned briefly by some of the young men, a much more common discourse within their reflections surrounded struggling to make friends. In many of the conversations, the young men positioned themselves as on the social peripheries, articulating the difficulty they had in forming meaningful connections with other young men at school.

²⁷ Rose and Cohen, “The Experiences of Young Carers: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Findings.”

²⁸ Ibid

Previous research highlights that feelings of social isolation are often a common thread amongst young people with caring responsibilities in the home²⁹. However, as evidenced by the work of Professor Niobe Way which considers a crisis of connection amongst young men in their development and maintenance of friendships³⁰, this may be further compounded by the intersection of masculinity with their role as a carer.

“ Yes, I don’t really like walk by people without like knowing what their body language is. I basically just look around, I stay quiet and I look around at people who are around me. And I look at them, I dictate them and I make sure that I don’t forget what their body language is and how they are to people and who they are and what their names are. Because if I just walk around and go to a random person, and just say, hey hang out and then all of a sudden you see you get like pushed around and get called names.

(Tom)

”

Alongside this, as highlighted in the preceding section, young carers often navigate complex familial landscapes, with loved ones suffering from conditions which impact upon their mental and emotional health. For a number of young male carers involved in the study encountering such complex social situations within the home, led to them having a highly developed level of social and emotional intelligence. In the above quote from Tom, he describes how his experience caring for a dad with significant challenges related to mental health, means he has developed a hyper awareness, and vigilance, relating to the behaviours around him. He comments that doing so safeguards against potential instances of unkindness or bullying, but at the same time creates a barrier to the fast establishment of relationships with his peers³¹.

This barrier to the establishment of meaningful connections with peers was also evident in conversations surrounding the disclosure of their caring responsibilities. For each of the young men, making the decision about whether to share this information with peers was prevalent within their commentaries surrounding life at school as a young carer.

In a discussion about whether or not he tells his friends about being a young carer and what it involves, Jack highlights the risks involved. A conscious deliberation, weighing up the risks involved in a decision whether to share information which is deeply personal. He recognises that doing so places him in a position of significant vulnerability.

“ the hope that they’re going to just be there for you instead of against you I’ve been in the perspective of someone else being told that someone else is a young carer, and the first thing that came to my mind before I was a young carer was just like, “Oh, they’ve got it really hard at home. Like they’ve got a lot going on, like I should feel bad for them.” And then I became a young carer and I noticed that it wasn’t all of what I actually thought it was.

²⁹ Choudhury, D. and Williams, H. (2020) ‘Strengthening the Educational Inclusion of Young Carers with Additional Needs: An Eco-Systemic Understanding’, *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 36(3), pp. 241–256.

³⁰ Way, N. (2011) *Deep Secrets: Boys’ Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*. Harvard University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061361>.

³¹ Bolas, Wersch, and Flynn, “The Well-Being of Young People Who Care for a Dependent Relative: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.”

Like yes, it can be difficult for some people.

Some people have it a lot harder than I do.

If you were to change something and then just make it so everyone knows someone's a young carer, it's like having a badge basically saying, "I'm a young carer." If anything it would keep the stereotypes that- It's almost like having a massive like red flashing light basically saying this person is a young carer. Not everyone needs to know that.

(Jack)

Firstly, he articulates a risk that such information could be used as a mechanism to magnify the psychological and emotional consequences of bullying. In previous research, commentary from young male carers have highlighted the potential undesirable consequences for young men who undertake acts of care which have historically been positioned as effeminate³². For male young carers, the possibility that such information can be used to inflict psychological, social and physical injury by peers is a prominent feature within their deliberations surrounding disclosure.

Jack is also conscious of the implications inherent in the young carer label. At an important time for the formation of his identity in his journey toward adulthood, he voices concern over what public knowledge of his caring responsibilities might mean. He worried that it would become the defining characteristic of who he was in the eyes of other students. Given that from Jack's perspective, his responsibilities as a young carer were minimal when compared with others, he grappled the appropriacy of the label when reflected against his experience. As such, he saw being categorised as a young carer as a risk to his agency, and freedom to present himself authentically.

For Evan, his decision about whether or not to discuss his Mum's bipolar and its implications comes down to maturity. Amongst a host of other attributes highlighted in the section above, previous research³³ has demonstrated that for many young carers, heightened levels of maturity at an earlier age comes as a byproduct of caring for a relative. In his articulation of factors which contribute to his decision-making about disclosure, confidence in the maturity levels of the individual he is confiding in is important.

going back to that maturity level, I don't think- I know some of my male friends would be fine with it but I don't think all of them would. And I think there's a factor to play in all that, which would be either a responsibility or ego or stuff like that. So I just don't think that- I believe that there's a barrier with that which I don't find with many of the girls I talk to.

(Evan)

And there are these two people there I'm sort of getting along at school. Ironically, they're both girls.

(Pete)

³² Becker, F. and Becker, S., (2008). Young adult carers in the UK. Experiences, needs and services for carers aged, pp.16-24.

³³ Heyman, A. and Heyman, B. (2013) "'The sooner you can change their life course the better': the time-framing of risks in relationship to being a young carer', Health, Risk & Society, 15(6-07), pp. 561-579. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698575.2013.830080>.

The perception of many of his male friends as immature created a barrier which wasn't as present in the girls that he spoke to. For Evan, and some of the other young carers involved in the research, it meant that friendships with girls were forged and maintained with a greater level of ease.

For the project's participants, their experiences of care, combined with the social and cultural resources they had accrued along the way, articulated an experience of education characterised by uniqueness and challenge. Although maturity and emotional intelligence are often celebrated as desirable characteristics for young men to possess, the young men found that embodiment of these dispositions subverted normative masculine expectations within their peer groups. As a result, rather than supporting the development of social ties, it sometimes led to them feeling alienated and isolated.

Within the reflections of the young men on their schooling, when it came to the disclosure of their caring responsibilities, risk was an ever-present feature. Whether it be Jack's concerns over the information being used against him and being defined by the label of 'young carer', or Evan's concerns about the maturity of male friends to deal with such information sensitively and appropriately, we observe how it perpetuated feelings of worry and marginalisation. Interestingly, where these concerns appeared to be reduced, was in the formation of social ties with female students, or other male young carers who, due to their position, were capable of greater empathy and understanding.

Learning from Boys who Care

Through the mobilisation of creative practice alongside more traditional qualitative research methods, Boys who Care successfully created the conditions whereby a group of male young carers had the freedom, opportunity and confidence to explore how their experiences impacted on their lives as young men both inside of, and outside of school. Through the participants' reflections we see how the activities created safety in self-expression. A sense of connection both to Ashley as the facilitator of the Creative Writing workshop, and to one another through their shared experiences. It also provided fertile ground on which to carefully cultivate trust and rapport, facilitating rich conversations around the artefacts produced.

These conversations, both individually and in groups, provided space for them to articulate the impact of caring responsibilities psychologically, socially and emotionally.

However, it is also important to note its limitations. Given the length of time of the project, and its position as an activity conducted outside the bounds of the young men's day-to-day experience, the impact was limited to the constraints it worked within. However, it provided the opportunity to, for the first time, explore the intersection of masculinity and caring responsibilities for young men who were currently navigating compulsory education. Within the discourse of the young men, we saw how the complex negotiation

of forming male caring identities provided them access to a unique range of social and cultural resources. Due to the additional role they undertook at home, they were used to conversing with adults and offered deeply reflective insights into their thoughts, feelings and actions. They spoke about their caring role as a way to protect their families, highlighting the skills they had developed as a result. Through the descriptions of support that they provided, and how they dealt with unhelpful thoughts and feelings, the young men demonstrated high levels of maturity, articulacy, and emotional intelligence.

Whilst such attributes were highly valued in the home, and indeed amongst the group of young men who participated in the project, participants often had difficulty forging meaningful relationships in wider social situations. For some, supporting adults with mental health challenges had led to them approaching such environments in a state of hypervigilance, ready to guard against potential threats to their physical and emotional wellbeing.

For others, no matter how hard they tried, they just couldn't work out the

unspoken rules which dictated behaviours which held most social legitimacy in the playground.

Although empathy, maturity and emotional intelligence were often prized attributes at home, it did not translate into school. Amongst peers who did not share their lived experiences, the participants found themselves feeling isolated and marginalised. For all the young men interviewed, there was a reticence to open up about the challenges they faced as a young carer. For some it was related to the perceived maturity of the other young men in their social group, whilst for others it was a worry that the information would be used against them, providing ammunition to bullies. A common thread throughout the discourse was an implicit concern that being a young carer subverted some of the things that were expected of them by other young men. Within this context, they often found activity with MYTIME to be a safe haven; a rare amalgamation of social and environmental conditions where they were afforded the opportunity to be their authentic selves.

Recommendations

As the first study of its kind, the Boys who Care project offers important insights into the experiences of young male carers in education. Adopting a creative, participatory methodology which placed the cultivation of trust and rapport at its heart, it shines a light on how young men with caring responsibilities negotiate their identities within the social and educational spaces they inhabit.

It has also highlighted a vacuum in research, policy and practice. The need for a much deeper understanding of the relationship between care and masculinity to be developed, and a mechanism whereby practitioners and policy makers can tailor meaningful support to young men with caring responsibility. As such, the report makes the following recommendations:

1 Investment in further research

The exploration of masculinity and caring responsibility for participants involved in this study was the first of its kind. A notion which, given the growing body of activity in research, policy and practice surrounding young carers, is stark and surprising in equal measure. Through the words of the young men involved, the significant implications of caring responsibilities for their experience in school, alongside their wider social, emotional and physical wellbeing were highlighted. As such, it is recommended that there is significant investment in further research which explores the unique experiences of young men who hold caring responsibility, alongside the impact of associated activities on their wellbeing, educational attainment and progression

2 A public campaign recognising the contribution of male young carers

The research also highlighted that the experiences of young men who hold caring responsibility are often hidden. There is little recognition of carers who are young men within discourse and activity taking place at a local or national level. As such, it is recommended that local and national organisations with responsibility for supporting young carers partner on national campaigns which raises awareness of the experiences of male young carers, celebrating the unique strengths and attributes developed through their caring roles.

3 Opportunities for male young carers to foster social connections

Within the interviews and wider conversations surrounding the project, it was clear that the young men involved placed great value on the creation of space to socialise with other male young carers. Due to the shared understanding borne from their lived experience, it constituted a safe space for them to be themselves without fear of judgement or reprisal. It provided a supportive environment, from which many of the young men drew comfort. As such it is recommend that in activity to support young carers, opportunities are created for male young carers to foster social connections and build relationships with other young men who share similar experiences.

4 Training and CPD for professionals

Based on the interview data and existing literature, it is evident that stereotypes, surrounding who can be a young carer and what caring looks like, persist. As a result, young male carers often experience feelings of illegitimacy in relation to their caregiving identity and how to reconcile that with their masculine identity. To create supportive environments where young male carers can openly share their experiences and access appropriate support, it is recommended that schools and other relevant settings provide training for teachers and practitioners on the unique challenges faced by these young male carers.

5 Mechanisms to better identify young male carers in schools

Whilst this recommendation has been cited in numerous policy-facing reports and research publications, there has been little headway in the standardisation of a mechanism to identify young carers in schools. As highlighted by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Carers and Young Adult Carers, this has led to numbers of young people in schools with caring responsibilities being under reported, and significant gaps in the provision of support. To develop a more robust, targeted approach to the support of male young carers, it is essential that this is addressed at a systemic level across the education sector.



BOYS WHO CARE

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