



***Re-imagined Masculinities:***

**Unfolding the  
Meaning and Effect  
of the WiseGuyz Program**

**September 2013**

**Research Report  
Calgary Sexual Health Centre**

*With gratitude to all the boys of WiseGuyz, past and present,  
who spoke openly and courageously about the joys and  
hardships of being a boy and what it means to be a man.  
Without your honesty and voices, this research would not have  
been possible.*

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## Executive Summary

*“Because gender really is a universe  
And we need to accept  
that we are all but mere stars  
a part of one great galaxy.”*  
– Lacey Loop, “Gender is a Universe”

At the close of a discussion with a past WiseGuyz participant, a young man with a gentle and sturdy demeanor, shared a poetic quote: “*Gender is a universe and we are all stars.*” He offered these words as an emblem of what the WiseGuyz program meant to him; how it had changed his life, and what it had opened and affirmed.

This poetic moment is balanced by the panoramic perspective of a Principal who, in his first year at a school where WiseGuyz takes place, commented that he believes schools with WiseGuyz are different than those without it: “*I can tell you there’s a significant difference from my point of view as a Principal between a school that doesn’t have the program and a school that does have the program.*” These differences are articulated through this research.

### **What is WiseGuyz?**

It is impossible to synopsise WiseGuyz without describing a catalogue of its essential features. Its very multidimensional nature is its essence. WiseGuyz creates catalytic experiences with teen boys by critically examining the dominant forms of traditional masculinity. In understanding this, a myriad of consciousness is developed that enables the boys to understand themselves and others in ways that were previously inaccessible to them. WiseGuyz recognizes and believes that teen boys are pivotal catalysts in facilitating positive social change for boys and girls by being able to positively influence attitudes and behaviours related to gender identity.

WiseGuyz is a participatory school based program that is offered by Calgary Sexual Health Centre. The program began in 2010 and was offered in two junior high schools in Calgary. Since then, participation has steadily grown as well as demand for the program. WiseGuyz targets grade nine junior high boys aged 14 - 15 years of age. The foundation of the program is an integrated curriculum that is comprised of four core modules that are facilitated over fourteen sessions. A session is one and half hours in length and takes place during school hours. The program is offered once per week, however with calendar holidays and school events, it takes approximately eight months to facilitate the fourteen sessions. WiseGuyz is implemented over the length of the school year. The sequence of the modules is critical as each module builds into the next: *Module 1: Human Rights*; *Module 2: Sexual Health*; *Module 3: Gender*; and *Module 4: Healthy Relationships*.

### **Significance of Research and its Objectives**

The research emerged from an inquiry of wanting to better understand what changes the boys in WiseGuyz are experiencing, and secondly, what conditions and practices make these changes possible. By engaging in qualitative inquiry and using grounded theory analysis, a set of interrelated concepts are generated to articulate *what*, *why* and *how* WiseGuyz creates positive changes for the boys who participate, and further, what influence these changes might have on external spheres of the boys lives such as classrooms, school culture and families. Implications are derived that can inform programmatic, and eventually systemic responses in the areas of violence prevention and gender equity. This research will also inform the development of summative evaluation for the program.

### **WiseGuyz and Masculinity**

Understanding the meaning and implications of masculinity in the context of the WiseGuyz program is critical to this research. By talking with the boys at the onset of WiseGuyz, the significance and socio-cultural influence of masculinities revealed how boys consciously and unconsciously reproduce pressures of gendered behaviour and perpetuate dominant and traditional forms of

masculinity. Further, if there is a desire for stronger gender equity as an approach to violence prevention, then it is essential to address, reimagine and reconstitute masculinities. The boys in WiseGuyz demonstrate an awareness of the cultural constructions of masculinity and thereby develop the consciousness required to critically examine the constructions. WiseGuyz facilitates this by establishing a safe space for the boys to be free to examine and challenge their own beliefs. Undoing and interrupting the pressure to be extreme forms of masculinity is a significant part of the work of WiseGuyz. WiseGuyz begins to unravel the heteronormative values and behaviours of the boys that are required to maintain their masculinity. Thus, the boys collectively create new and meaningful narratives of masculinity that include connectivity, emotional literacy, empathy, and critical attunement to healthy behaviours and relationships.

### **The Significance of WiseGuyz**

To explicate WiseGuyz is to unearth the inner workings of the program and the interrelated concepts that constitute it. The findings are offered in two spheres: programmatic concepts that illuminate central practices of the program, and secondly, the changes that occur for the boys who participate in the program.

#### *Programmatic and Structural Concepts*

The following concepts demonstrate key aspects and practices of the program that are fundamental to its effectiveness:

- The Necessity of a Gender Specific Program (Boys Only)
- Voluntary Participation in WiseGuyz
- Participatory Group Process
- Community-Based Male Facilitators
- Supportive and Committed Schools

#### *Concepts of Participant Changes*

The operational and practice aspects of the program are integrally linked to the meaningful changes that occur for the boys. By looking to the changes in the boys, we can begin to imagine the systemic and larger socio-cultural influences

that create the need for the WiseGuyz program. The core areas of change that the boys experience are safety, social capital and cultivation of empathy:

- *Feeling Safe*
  - Setting Aside the “Masculine Figure”
  - Finding Voice: Being Curious and Asking Questions
  
- *Social Capital*
  - “I Belong and I Have Somebody”
  - Sense of Community
  - “One thing I definitely went wow about:” Understanding Healthy Relationships
  
- *Experiencing Empathy and Acceptance*
  - Learning about Each Other
  - Learning About Others
  - “That’s so Gay”: Deconstructing Language and Unraveling Stereotypes

## **Implications of the Research**

### *WiseGuyz as a Promising Practice*

Positioning WiseGuyz as a promising practice establishes the program within an important context of rigour, implications for expansion and evaluation. The following core elements of practice are necessary in fostering a robust program for boys:

1. Gender Specific Programming/Program for Boys
2. Long-Term Formal Partnership with Schools
3. Program Coincides with Length of School Year
4. Program Occurs During School Hours
5. External Community-Based Male Facilitators
6. Group Based Participatory Process
7. Comprehensive Integrated and Experiential Based Curriculum

### *WiseGuyz as Violence Prevention*

Secondary research points to a strong link between traditional constructs of masculinity and violence against women. More specifically, traditional masculinity was noted as one of the most significant predictors of perpetrating violence against women. Issues related to male privilege and control were identified within the top three major factors in predicting the perpetration of

violence against women.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the primary objectives of WiseGuyz: to cultivate consciousness within the boys to understand *how* male privilege and stereotypical notions are created and the effects of them. In particular, this means learning to be attuned to language and how it perpetuates stereotypes, both of which were present in the learnings across all WiseGuyz programs.

### **Future Considerations for WiseGuyz**

There are program elements that could further strengthen and enhance WiseGuyz in the future:

- to increase awareness and understanding of WiseGuyz among teachers in the schools. This may help to create links between the work within WiseGuyz and classroom work;
- to engage the boys in WiseGuyz to share their learnings with the entire school population;
- to engage parents and families of WiseGuyz;
- to work with and engage past participants of WiseGuyz;
- to establish a summative evaluation system for WiseGuyz.

Although the research provided substantial insight into the program, there are yet more questions to guide the continued work of WiseGuyz. In moving forward, WiseGuyz is well positioned to grow steadily and thoughtfully. The answer to 'what does it mean for WiseGuyz to expand' is one that is yet to be determined and invites more questions: *Should WiseGuyz increase programs in more schools or offer more programs in one school? How would the program structure and outcomes be influenced if implemented in a highly racialized school? If WiseGuyz does expand, how will it maintain fidelity and integrity? As WiseGuyz evolves, these are pivotal questions for its continued meaningful growth.*

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<sup>1</sup> Crooks, C., Goodall, G., Hughes, R., Jaffe, P., Baler, L. (2007). Engaging Men and Boys in Preventing Violence Against Women. Applying a Cognitive–Behavioral Model. *Violence Against Women*, 13(3), 217-239.

## **In Conclusion**

By engaging in the process of WiseGuyz, boys experience the very tenets of a healthy relationship. By understanding and experiencing safety; trust; belonging; a reliable social network; non-judgmental inquiry and open dialogue, the boys are then able to be compassionate, emotive, empathetic, and critical thinkers with themselves and others in their relationships. Further, they are able to discern in their lives when they or someone they know is in an unhealthy relationship, or they are able to recognize aggressive or violent behaviours among their peers. In essence, they become the involved by-stander who is not complicit within damaging cultural and social norms. In doing this, they are beginning to establish reimagined masculinities for boys.

### History of WiseGuyz

All good innovative social programs begin with a noticing. In 2009, the rates of sexually transmitted infections (STI) were on the rise for adolescent and teen boys in Calgary. In spite of growing evidence of declining pregnancy rates, the rates of STI were rising fast. *What might be the reasons for this?* There are many hypotheses to explain this phenomenon. One was the re-examination of a system of sexual health programs that has focused primarily on girls and female reproduction. This means that the programming has become what World Health Organization (WHO) describes as “irrelevant” to and for boys.

This re-examination led to questions of “what about the boys?” In what ways are they not included in sexual health education and what might be the implications of this? These implications could be imagined in multiple ways: perhaps it is because boys feel they do not have a chance to ask questions; or they feel imposed upon by conventional and traditional notions of masculinity; or they feel fear to express their confusions about gender, sexuality and sexual health. An innovative program is about noticing, yet is also about facilitating a response. What is significant is that these questions began an important journey: One that yielded the development of the WiseGuyz program.

### What is WiseGuyz

WiseGuyz is a participatory school based program for junior high school boys in grade nine. It is guided by an integrated curriculum that is comprised of four core modules facilitated over fourteen sessions. A session is 1.5 hours long and takes places once per week. The program occurs over the length of the school year. The sequence of the modules is critical as each module builds into the next: *Module 1: Human Rights; Module 2: Sexual Health; Module 3: Gender; Module 4: Healthy Relationships.*

The WiseGuyz program was piloted in September 2010, and since then, approximately 150 participants in total have engaged in the school-based program. Since 2010, the program has been implemented in five public junior high schools in Calgary, three of which are currently committed to a long-term relationship with WiseGuyz. The program participants join WiseGuyz voluntarily or are gently encouraged by school administration, a teacher or a parent to join WiseGuyz. Male sexual health educators of Calgary Sexual Health Centre facilitate the program.

WiseGuyz strategically targets grade nine junior high boys who are between the ages of 13 – 15. These boys are on the cusp of major transitions in their lives, one primarily defined by attending high school the following year. They are at a pivotal and influential development period of progressing in their maturity and curiosity about sexual health and relationships. Boys in junior high school are forming and in the process of solidifying their ideas about sexuality, sexual health, gender and relationships.

### **Significance of Research**

This research study holds both practical and theoretical objectives. The research was primarily conducted in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the WiseGuyz Program. A second objective was to articulate *why* and *how* WiseGuyz creates positive changes for the boys who participate. With this new understanding, implications from the research were developed to inform promising practices, particularly for healthy relationship and gender equity programs. This research will also inform the development of future summative evaluation.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

#### **Social Influence Theory**

WiseGuyz is situated within a theory of social influence. Theory of social influence is a “defined change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviour

that results from interaction with another individual or a group."<sup>2</sup> Social influence theory takes into account the power of the context of the learner. The boys in WiseGuyz come to know and understand sex and sexuality through a variety of sources, both from information and watching people. Youth are infused by disparate and powerful influences of parents, peers, schools, faith institutions and media.<sup>3</sup>

The desire for sense of belonging and social inclusion is especially heightened for male youth. One's position about sex and sexuality, or engaging in relationships becomes a way for some male youth to feel included. "Young people who are not socially well-integrated or who have negative peer influences report that they are less satisfied with their lives, less happy with home lives, less likely to enjoy school and to feel that they belong at school and more likely to feel lonely and left out."<sup>4</sup> Often, common misperceptions are created and perpetuated about sex through social influence, and boys not wanting to challenge the current construction of sexuality, masculinity, gender and relationships and tend to "go with the flow" and thereby place themselves and others at risk for harm. Also, for youth who are not situated in the mainstream constructs of sex and sexuality, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirited and transgendered, they either find ways to suppress their identity and self efficacy to belong in the mainstream society, or they situate themselves in a culture that may not support who they are, thereby becoming excluded from friendships, foundational social relationships and the larger systems of society. Sexuality, sexual health and gender are predominantly created and perpetuated by personal attitudes, beliefs, and values. Often, attitudes about sex are highly stigmatized in Western culture. Sex can be seen as dirty, shameful, and something to be secretive about, particularly for certain populations, such as youth, people with disabilities, ethnic communities, and seniors.

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<sup>2</sup> Rashotte, L. (2011). Social Influence in *Encyclopedia of Sociology Online*. Blackwell Publishing Inc. [www.sociologyencyclopedia.com/public/](http://www.sociologyencyclopedia.com/public/)

<sup>3</sup> Kirby, D. (2007). *Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

<sup>4</sup> FCSS. (2009). *Funding Framework and Priorities: Theory of Change*. Calgary, Family and Community Support Services.

### Information, Motivation, Behaviour Theory

The most effective and predominate theoretical model in the field of sexual health education is the information, motivation, and behaviour model (IMB). The IMB model emerged in 1992 out of the need to understand HIV risk behaviour and to develop a theoretical and empirical based intervention to change behaviour.<sup>5</sup> There is a significant amount of research and evidence that supports this model and its effectiveness, in particular with young adult men, low-income women and minority youth in high school settings. <sup>6</sup>

Motivation becomes more explicit by inviting people to reflect on what their own personal motivation may or may not be in regards to sexual health. This often means talking about and exploring the influences of how sexuality, gender, and relationships are constructed. We need to unpack the question: "how do we know what we know" in order to address motivation. Finally, behavior changes can be anticipated from the combination of information and motivation. This means in the practice of relationships with others and with one's self, that an individual has the confidence, efficacy, and knowledge to negotiate healthy relationship and sexual practices, such as using a condom, placing limits on sexual engagement, or stopping aggressive or homophobic behaviors.

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<sup>5</sup> DiClemente, R. (Ed). (2009). *Emerging Theories in Health Promotion, Practice and Research*. Jossey Bass, San Francisco: CA.

<sup>6</sup> Minister of Health. (2008). *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education*. Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada.

## Research Methodology

This research is situated in a paradigm of qualitative inquiry. The topic emerged from a questioning of wanting to better understand what changes the boys in WiseGuyz may be experiencing, and secondly, if changes are occurring, what might be the conditions and factors that are supporting these changes. Further, implications are conceptualized based on these changes and how they inform programmatic responses in the areas of healthy relationship, violence prevention and gender equity.

An independent Research Consultant for Calgary Sexual Health Centre conducted this study. The researcher has an on-going relationship with Calgary Sexual Health Centre through previous evaluation work with the organization.

### Grounded Theory

This study is guided by grounded theory analysis, which is an effective approach when seeking to describe or explain behaviour and behaviour changes.<sup>7</sup> Grounded theory allowed for an inductive inquiry in order to generate theories about the significance of WiseGuyz. Data was analyzed as it was gathered and coded reflexively to generate core concepts. This involved initial open coding and then further conceptualizing of inter-relationships among the concepts and then ultimately defining the core concepts of WiseGuyz.<sup>8</sup> Based on the substantial data, theories are established of why WiseGuyz creates change for the boys and implications of this for healthy relationship behaviour, violence prevention and promising practices.

### Data Collection

Data was collected through purposive sampling of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. 7 focus groups in total were held with boys (students) who participated in WiseGuyz. In total, 40 boys overall participated in focus groups. 5

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<sup>7</sup> Glaser, Barney G & Strauss, Anselm L., 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company.

<sup>8</sup> Glaser, B. 2004. Remodeling grounded theory. *Forum Qualitative Social Research*. Vol. 5, No, 2.

School Administrators (Principals and Vice Principals) participated in individual interviews. Interviews were held with school administration that had a WiseGuyz program in their school and are familiar with the program. For the purpose of data analysis and to maintain anonymity of the schools in which the research was conducted, the schools are referred to as School A, B and C when referencing school-based research participants.

Focused discussions were held with current (2012-2013 cohort) and past WiseGuyz participants (2011-2012 cohort). The corresponding WiseGuyz program at each school is referred to as Program A, B, and C. This is used to distinguish the programs from each other. The research criterion for past participants is that they had been out of the WiseGuyz program a minimum of six months.

### School A and Program A

School A is located in Southeast Calgary. This is the third year that WiseGuyz has been offered at this school.

2010	2011	2012
20 Participants	17 Participants	18 Participants

The 2012-2013 cohort of WiseGuyz at School A consists of a total of 18 boys: 8 in the morning session and 9 in the afternoon session.

### Demographics of Program A

- All of the boys are in grade 9
- Most (67%) of the boys in the cohort are 14 years of age
- There is a smaller (33%) portion of boys that are 13 and 15
- Most (93%) of the boys are Caucasian
- All identify as heterosexual

### Family Composition of Program A

- Most (79%) of the boys live with their mom and dads
- Half (53%) indicate they are raised primarily by mom and dad
- 21% live with their moms
- Almost half (40%) are raised solely by their mother

### Dating and Extracurricular of Program A

- More than half (53%) of the boys are not involved in extracurricular activities

- Most (86%) of the boys have begun dating, but currently do not have a girlfriend
- 27% indicate that less than 6 months is the longest relationship they have had
- 27% have been in a relationship that lasted between 6 months and a year
- 46% have been in a relationship longer than one year
- Most common things they boys indicate they like to do for fun is to 1) play video games, 2) followed by sports (street hockey and basketball)

### School B and Program B

School B is a French Immersion school located in Northeast Calgary. This is the third year that WiseGuyz has been offered at this school. This school implemented the first WiseGuyz program in 2010 and has maintained a strong interest and participation since its inception.

2010	2011	2012
46 Participants	30 Participants	29 Participants

The 2012-2013 cohort of WiseGuyz at School B consists of a total of 29 boys:

- 14 boys are in the morning session and 15 are in the afternoon session.
- The English-speaking track and the French/Bilingual track alternate mornings and afternoons so the core classes they miss are evenly distributed.

### Demographics of Program B

- All of the boys are in grade 9
- Most (79%) of the boys are 14 years of age
- There is a smaller portion (22%) of boys that are 13 and 15
- Most (91%) of the boys are *Caucasian*, a small portion identify as East Indian (9%)
- All identify as *heterosexual*

### Family Composition

- Almost all (86%) of the boys live with their mom and dads
- A small number of boys live primarily with their mother (14%)
- 17% were raised by only their mother, while 83% were raised by mother and father

### Dating and Extracurricular

- Most the boys (76%) are involved in extracurricular activities (primarily sports), while 24% are not
- Slightly more than half of the boys (64%) *have begun dating*, but do not have a serious girlfriend
- 93% of the boys currently do not have a girlfriend

- Most of the boys *have had* serious relationships: 71% have been in a relationship six months or less, and 24% have been a relationship longer than a year.
- Most common things they boys indicate they like to do for fun are sports, music, video games and hanging out with friends.

### School C and Program C

This school is located in Southwest Calgary. This is the first year WiseGuyz has been at the school. Establishing WiseGuyz at this school had taken longer than anticipated. Promotion of WiseGuyz began in October 2012 and some boys joined WiseGuyz and left. We consider the 'formal' beginning (when curriculum was implemented) of WiseGuyz then as February 2013.

<b>2012</b>
* First year of program
7 Participants

### Demographics of Program C

- All of the boys are in Grade 9
- Most of the boys are 14 years old (80%)
- Some are 13 (20%) years of age and some are 15 years of age (9%)
- 100% are Caucasian
- All identify as heterosexual

### Family Composition of Program C

- Most of the boys (80%) live with mom and dad
- 20% live with a guardian
- Most of the boys (75%) are raised primarily by mother
- A small portion (25%) are raised primarily by mom and dad

### Dating and Extracurricular of Program C

- 100% are *not* involved with extracurricular activities
- 60% have begun dating
- 100% do not have a girlfriend
- 100% indicate that the longest relationship is less than 6 months
- Most common things the boys like to do for fun are play video games and hang out with friends

### Ethics Review

This research study is a facilitated within a community-university partnership. Ethics approval was obtained through our partnership with a large school board in Western Canada and the University of Calgary, Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. The Ethics approval was obtained within a partnership with the Brenda Strafford Chair of Domestic Violence (Shift), Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, and the Calgary Sexual Health Centre.

### Limitations of Research

Engaging in community-based research is a very robust endeavor, yet can also have practical limitations specific to timelines and funding. Community-based research often requires a more expedited process because of reporting accountability to community-based public funders. This research was conducted over eight months.

## Masculinity in the Context of WiseGuyz

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When I was born, they looked at me and said  
what a good boy, what a *smart* boy, what a *strong* boy.  
And when you were born, they looked at you and said,  
what a good girl, what a *smart* girl, what a *pretty* girl.

We've got these chains that hang around our necks,  
people want to strangle us with them before we take our first breath.  
*"What a Good Boy", Bare Naked Ladies*

"Good" and "smart", these are shared constructs for boys and girls as sang by the Canadian rock band, Bare Naked Ladies. The third construct is the girl will be "pretty" and the boy will be "strong" decided before they take their first breaths. We live in a Westernized culture, in particular, where this research occurs is in Calgary, Alberta; a culture marked and sometimes amplified by the differences between boys and girls. We also live in Canada, where in 2013, at a meta-discourse level, the leader of the political Liberal party was teased and flanked in media outlets across Canada, positioned by the opposing Conservative party as not being masculine enough to be a leader.<sup>9</sup> This is but one example of a plethora of meta-discourses that are shaping our girls and boys—discourses that they read, hear, see and eventually internalize.

Social media and network sites were flooded early in 2012 with the published pieces of adolescents who were committing suicide after persistent harassment and objectification by boys in their lives. This created a flurry of questions; mostly people asking, "*What is wrong with our boys?*" Unfortunately, this is a rather limiting question for a complicated social phenomenon of highly publicized, sexualized and aggressive adolescent and teen relationships. It is a question far too simple for the deeply intersecting complexity of gender, youth, relationships, sex, and social culture. Thus, taking the time to understand masculinity in the context of the WiseGuyz program is critical to this research. This was undertaken

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/04/25/trudeau-attack-ads-masculinity\\_n\\_3158007.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/04/25/trudeau-attack-ads-masculinity_n_3158007.html)

by talking with the boys of WiseGuyz about what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a man.

### **Archetypes of Masculinity: “Showing that you’re dominant”**



*WiseGuyz 1: You know that photo where the guy is like standing on top of a mountain all ripped and stuff and then he's got girls on either side of his legs. That right there.*

*WiseGuyz 2: That's manly.*

*WiseGuyz 1: Manly.*

*WiseGuyz 3: Manliness*

To understand the particularity of the boys' expression of masculinity requires attention to the meta-narratives of the culture they live in; they are enveloped within intersecting socio-cultural influences. Thus, we turn to the boys themselves to understand what it means to be a 14-year-old boy and further, what does it mean to be a man?

While questioning and exploring the roles of manhood and masculinity, both groups quickly fastened to archetypes of masculinity. Both focus groups used the exact same anecdote of the role of “provider and protector” to define and summarize the role of men. They gave an example of an intruder breaking into their home:

...we're the leaders of the relationship, and if there was a robber that came into the house or something, a woman would really not be taken care of if you tell her "you go down there and take care of it...they shouldn't be the ones that take care of these kinds of problems (Current WiseGuyz Participant).

To respond to an intruder in their home differently than the way described above would be emasculating claimed the boys. There is no room for fear in this anecdote.

The notion of gender as constructed is not a new theory. The boys' ability to offer archetypes and anecdotes of traditional masculinity images demonstrate that their awareness of their existence. However, if they are positioned as what Judith Butler<sup>10</sup> considers gender 'performative', how might we interpret this conversation differently? And, if gender, to some degree, is a performance, how then can it be unmasked? How might the performances be disrupted or better understood? Disrupting this awareness and creating consciousness of their language is a significant part of the work of WiseGuyz. Although the boys do not entirely align with the radical traditionalized archetypes of masculinity, such as Conan, they still internalize its subtle expectations of maleness. Both focus groups discussed that the role of a man is to "protect and provide" for his family. Disrupting this narrative of man as protector and provider is not yet on their radar screens, nor perhaps is it within their capacity to do so. They are very conscious of the gender constructs, yet, have not been afforded the space to challenge them.

### Provider and Protector

While discussing the role of provider and protector the archetypes the boys identify as representing masculinity are for one focus group, Conan the Barbarian, and for another, a bearded lumberjack. These archetypes of men exemplify characteristics of muscularity, hyper-heterosexuality, and ruggedness. Are these true or semantic regimes of archetypes that regularize language, and therefore regularize and standardized the performative nature of masculinity?

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<sup>10</sup> Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

How do we shatter the cultural rules of heteronormativity that engender these boys? Is it even possible for them to disrupt their own mounting discourses of masculinity?

The cultural narrative that these boys are implicated within moves out into conversation and into the transcripts. Through attention to discourse and use of language, one could readily see the common archetypes and metaphors that these boys are already bound within. These cultural narratives are established through various sources of family, friends, media, political structures, institutions and then our boys grow within these—making it very difficult and sufferable to stand outside of them.

The boys are very aware of the construction of gender and masculinity. Not as something they contest or disagree with, but rather, something that just is; something that perhaps for them at this age is not contestable, not to be questioned. The assumptions of gender simply exist in a singular binary. Masculinity is not seen as something plural, but instead is unified within the traditional stereotype of masculinity. When the boys discuss relationships, and what this means to them, they unconsciously and eventually move away from gender roles to ideas of trust, connection, commitment, someone who will always be there for you, someone who you can always talk with. In the context of relationships, gender roles evaporate and they are more focused on the emotiveness and feeling of a relationship. The role of gender is fixed for the boys at this time, yet their *experiencing* of it is fluid. WiseGuyz works in the place between fixed and fluid gender, and provides them with an opportunity to make sense of the space of gender liminality.

Within the binary<sup>11</sup> a host of essentialized characteristics of what it means to be a boy bares out in their lives. Often, for boys, these are very rigid stereotypical notions of masculinity, and in particular, masculinity as toughness. Further, this

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<sup>11</sup> Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

toughness then denies a “boy his emotions and rob[s] him of the chance to develop the full range of emotional resources.”<sup>12</sup> The implications of this can be vast for boys, including being “ill-prepared” for being emotionally healthy adults<sup>13</sup> and denied a rich internal life. Further, the fear of vulnerability and the pressure to be stereotypically masculine may become channeled into aggression and possibly violence.

A predominant aspect of working with boys is to help them understand their emotional life and to “develop an emotional vocabulary.”<sup>14</sup> The reason being is that boys have been “robbed” of this vocabulary; in essence the boys have been emotionally miseducated:

Stereotypical notions of masculine toughness deny a boy his emotions and rob him of the chance to develop the full range of emotional resources. We call this process, in which a boy is steered away from his inner world, the emotional *miseducation* of boys.<sup>15</sup>

To be emotionally literate, thereby means having an understanding and discernment of their evolving feelings and how to be in relation with others' emotion. Part of learning emotional literacy, particularly for fourteen-year-old boys, begins with exploring the question of what is masculinity? Whether the boys are talking about dating, families, jobs or careers, the conversations always return to what is expected of them as “men.” WiseGuyz, as the name implies, is for boys, and to help them be ‘wise men’ in the future, not only rationally wise men, but emotionally literate as well.

There is a growing trend in research, particularly within the context of gender violence and violence prevention, to focus on the role of the construction of masculinity and how it binds and perpetuates boys' behaviors. What we learned about WiseGuyz is that it provides the *space* and the *process* to *disrupt* the

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<sup>12</sup> Kindlon, D and Thompson, M. (2000). *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. p.3. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*. p.3.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*.

thickening traditional masculinity scripts that the boys have inherited via social and cultural influences, such as schools, media, family, and peers. WiseGuyz creates a space in which the boys can begin to question the ways in which they participate in the dominant culture and the ways in which the culture also perpetuates oppression.

## Gender Under Pressure

At the onset of WiseGuyz, the boys completed intake forms in which there was a general masculinity question scale. The scale was intended to get a sense of what areas of life the boys are feeling the most pressure to be male. There were common pressures identified across the three different WiseGuyz Programs. The top responses of the ways in which they feel most pressure to be a man is:

- The need to physically fight if teased
- Being in a relationship
- Being physically strong
- Being sexually active

During the focus groups, when asked to spontaneously respond to the notion of what is a man, or what it means, the boys responded with the following terms:

- Don't be a wimp
- Aggressive
- Tough
- Physical
- You have to be ripped
- Dream man
- To do sports
- To stick up for yourself
- Stick up for others
- Being the boss. Taking charge
- A leader
- Showing dominance
- Being the alpha male
- Take a punch
- Just showing off basically I think. Showing that you're dominant to everyone so that they know not to mess with you. If they do they get messed up.

- You know that like, photo where the guy is like standing on top of a mountain all like ripped and stuff and then he's got girls on either side of his legs.

These pressures to express their maleness are strongly recognized and felt by the boys. When asked what it means to be a guy who does not live up to these standards, their immediate and collective response was “you're gay.” This invites the question: Are these boys homophobic? Their continuous and casual use of gay rhetoric through both focus groups denotes that “the intersection of heterosexuality and masculinity is so intense that Pronger (1990) argues that the term heteromascularity is required to more accurately capture its imbrications.”<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, in research and practice, the “multi-dimensional interaction of sexuality and gender” is overlooked and not taken into consideration when explicating boys' behaviours.<sup>17</sup>

The gendered and sexual behaviours, to some degree, are enacted and regulated through their social interactions. If WiseGuyz is a context for social interaction, what types of gendered and sexual behavior might WiseGuyz cultivate? Research has documented that there is a “limited range of gendered behaviours available to boys in schools, showing that, to obtain a culturally validated form of masculinity, boys must socially distance themselves from gay students.”<sup>18</sup> Further, what we see occurring in the conversation with the WiseGuyz participants at the onset of the program is the use of gay-terms in language directed towards other boys as a way of effeminizing their behaviour, thereby demeaning others as a way to maintain masculinity and heteronormativity. This discourse also perpetuates and furthers the gender binary of feminine and masculine, simply by the boys constructing their masculinity by positioning it in direct opposition to femininity. The use of gay rhetoric is also a “heterosexual boundary maintenance technique” because to effeminate other

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<sup>16</sup> McCormack, M and Anderson, E. (2010). “It's just not acceptable any more”: The erosion of homophobia and the softening of masculinity at an English sixth form in *Sociology*, Vol. 44, No5. Pp. 843 – 858.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 844

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.845

boys is a way to maintain their masculinity.<sup>19</sup> A common theme in the focus groups is the importance of *showing* that you have a girlfriend and one of the ways to do this is dating what they term as a “really hot girl” because as the boys claim, “you get more respect.”

The boys have an awareness that the traditional masculine scripts exist, however, it does not appear they have moved into a space or consciousness yet to critically examine the scripts. Being in a safe space to reflect and examine this is a process that WiseGuyz facilitates. WiseGuyz facilitates the opening for boys to re-imagine masculinity. Undoing and interrupting the pressures to be male, as the boys have identified, is a significant part of the work of WiseGuyz.

## Gender Performance

Gender is only recognizable as gender if it is within what Butler coined as the “intelligible genders.”<sup>20</sup> Those, which there is a maintenance of relationship of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practices and desires.” In other words, the expression of being “manly” is only thinkable, perceivable and intelligible within the existing norms of what maleness is generally recognized and constructed as. This then infers that there is a constant image of a coherent gender norm. Further then, heterosexuality is reliant on this norm, and reliant on the norms of gender as expressions of what is male and what is female. This means, sexuality and sexual behaviour is then an expression or completely derived from coherent gender norms. In this way, we limit our boys; we offer them unimaginable ways of seeing and perceiving gender, and therefore constrained notions of sexuality. We need to ask them what is *impossible* in order to render an image of what may be *possible*; something that they are not typically able to envision. For example, one of the boys offers the example of how boys would talk about a sports game versus how a girl would talk about it:

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p.845

<sup>20</sup> Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge. p.23

- WiseGuyz 1 *Girls play sports but...*  
WiseGuyz 2 *They don't talk about it.*  
WiseGuyz 1 *We talk about it differently.... like I scored a goal in lacrosse the other day. Well if we talked to one of our friends we'd be like "I kicked the crap out of this kid". That's what guys talk about. Girls are like "I scored a goal" "congrats". Guys are hard-core*

In the analysis of the focus groups, the boys do not necessarily agree with the gender constructions, but rather are engendered to them; they feel inevitably bound within them and prescribed to them. Their repeated narratives of "showing" their masculinity through body, language and sexuality points to the performativity of gender. Also, when explaining the notion of 'manly' they use an image, again pointing to the undercurrent of male as performance. They notice how they take up an event or experience is different than girls, however how they make sense of the difference is something they are able to confront and wrestle with in WiseGuyz.

## The Affect and Effect Of WiseGuyz

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By explicating WiseGuyz we are able to unfold its significance by unearthing the inner workings of the program, thereby defining theories for its value as a program of social change. This primary research approaches WiseGuyz as a phenomenon to be understood, thus not only seeking to understand changes that occur for the boys, but what conditions and practices make these changes possible.

This chapter outlines key concepts that emerged from the research. This research does not suggest that all boys experience the same changes and to the same degrees. Most, if not all boys experience changes on some level by participating in WiseGuyz. Some boys' changes are deeper than others. However, these concepts have been developed to offer the theory of *why and how* WiseGuyz is an effective program for boys.

### For Boys Only: The Necessity of a Gender Specific Program

*It's important [that] they're just about to go to high school; they're uncertain about a lot of things. I think sometimes we don't acknowledge the stressors that boys have in their lives. The uncertainty that they feel and the anxiety they feel going to high school and they don't know who they are, as much as a 14 year old girl doesn't know who she is. They have the same struggles and sometimes we place that as a female issue as, you know that sort of emotional female gender sort of issue, and it's not (School Administrator, School A).*

*"If girls were in here, I think we'd just lie"* one of the boys remarked. All of the boys concurred with this. Across all three programs, boys spoke fervently of the importance of the program being exclusively for boys. This excerpt also points to how gender can become performative and how the boys act in ways other than themselves to project an image of gender, often one of traditional masculinity, because they believe that is what is expected of them. The boys shared that often their greatest pressures come from girls, and that "they expect you to be a man with no feelings, ripped and loving them but no feelings at the

same time" (WiseGuyz, Program B). Being a single gender program created a foundational context of *safety* and *trust* for the boys.

All of the research participants emphasized the importance of WiseGuyz being a program for only boys. It is critical to them feeling safe and feeling that they have a voice. Many of the boys expressed that they would change what they say, or talk differently or less if girls were present. Also, they indicated that being all boys was foundational to their development of trust and sense of community. Throughout all the interviews with school administration, they noted they were either initially seeking out a program for boys, or when they heard about WiseGuyz, a program for boys, they immediately and intuitively believed it was a good idea, and was something that was needed for the boys.

Although social construction of gender is highly recognized and understood by the school administration, they also called for a deeper understanding of the differences of gender and how boys learn differently from girls. Many of the school administrators commented on boys not maturing as quickly as girls and how there is movement now to look more deeply into academic processes to ensure that they are developmentally gender appropriate. This points to what was described by research participants as "a larger social and systemic issue, and it begins right at the beginning with boys in school" (School Administrator, School C). This means understanding how boys and girls do learn differently and what are the ideal conditions for the different genders to learn within.

The school administrators all recognize that the boys they see regularly are dealing and struggling with the same issues as girls. They may take them up in different ways, however they noted that boys have emotional and relationship struggles just as much as girls do. All of the three schools were relieved to have a program for boys and all validated that "they see the need for something for the boys. Because I see a lot of emotional issues and stuff, so I've been saying for awhile that we need something for the boys" (Teacher, School C).

A school administrator in School B discussed the gender differences she notices between boys and girls and that boys do not talk about issues or relationships. She noted the importance of creating a space in which boys feel they *can* talk, having an “outlet” that the boys can discuss issues that are affecting them. She noted that

around sexuality or dating or relationships or breaking up, they [boys] keep it more to themselves. So I thought it [WiseGuyz] was a good program that at least there is an outlet for them. Someone for them to talk to someone they feel comfortable with and they can discuss it with each other. So I do find that there is gender difference there where the girls are coming in, you know, a break up happens and they’re crying and they’re upset and they want to talk. And you don’t see that with the boys so I thought that was a good way of balancing it out (School Administrator, School B).

This excerpt signifies the importance of understanding gender differences and more importantly, the different processes to support this. It also signifies the silenced emotional life of boys; there is a lack of spaces for boys to feel they can be emotional, vulnerable and open to talk about their lives, and secondly, this is not their primary socialization, rather they are bound by the traditional scripts of masculinity that shape the boys to believe that being emotionally expressive are not the traits of masculinity. Gender also becomes essentialized at this point, as girls are perceived as expressive and boys are not. We see the polarization of gender and how it is heavily constructed at this stage of their lives. This is a predominant theme throughout the research that underscores why the boys need their own space to talk and to share their experiences. In some ways, gender has also inhibited boys; although positioned as the dominant group in culture, they too feel silenced or afraid to share their thoughts and opinions.

The boys expressed that including girls in the program would certainly create a different space that would not be as communal, safe and open for them. All of the boys agreed that if girls were present, “it would be a lot different” (WiseGuyz Past Participant). Because “guys can be reserved around girls or more out there around girls. There would be a definite kind of an imbalance per se.” Another

boy added to this noting that “you would have the guys who would like to try and impress the girls...[and then there are] the guys who wouldn't wanna say things cuz there's girls there. Just lots of little things like that” (WiseGuyz Past Participant). Also one of the boys suggested that sense of community might also be affected if girls were involved, and that because it is all boys, they were able to develop a strong and close sense of community. The importance of the division of the boys is also a reminder of the performative nature of gender, and how in the presence of other genders that this shifts.

This correlates with existing research and program evaluations that assert the value of all male programs. Berkowitz et al focuses on the importance of male only programs in schools, noting that “evaluations of all-male programs indicate that men are more comfortable, less defensive, and more honest when in all male groups, and are more likely to talk openly than in the presence of women.”<sup>21</sup> Further, “single gender groups reveal a diversity of opinions among men, which may not be expressed if women are present.”<sup>22</sup>

### Voluntary Participation: Why The Boys are Motivated to Join WiseGuyz

*...in the selection of the kids...you want a couple of positive leaders in there that you know will influence the rest of the student body. But you also want kids that might get in trouble from not having this kind of education (School Administrator, School B).*

“It sounded like fun.” “You get to talk about sex” “You get to miss class. “You get to play video games.” These were the common phrases boys shared as to why they joined WiseGuyz. The sexual health core of this program sparked boys' curiosity and was the main incentive. When asked why they wanted to be part of the WiseGuyz program most of the boys answered because they had heard it is fun and friends are part of the group. Two important implications of their responses is that the widespread appeal of this program means it is not seen as an add-on to school work or is a traditional didactic form of learning. The way

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<sup>21</sup> Berkowitz, A., Jaff, P., Peacock, D., Rosenbluth, B. and Sousa, C. (2003). *Young Men as Allies in Preventing Violence and Abuse: Building Effective Partnerships with Schools*. Retrieved from [http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc\\_Files\\_VAWnet/YoungMenAllies.pdf](http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/YoungMenAllies.pdf). p.10

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

the program is structured and how it is facilitated creates a fun space for the boys. Secondly, the peer and social network of WiseGuyz is *critical*. This is an incredibly important aspect of the program in terms of why boys want to be part of it, and why they remain in the program. There are strong social capital and networking components of WiseGuyz, and when the 'cool boys' or the 'social giants' are part of the group, then other boys also want to join.

Although these were the reasons the boys *joined*, the boys emphasized their surprise at the program being much more than they anticipated. Having a hook or incentive for boys to participate is critical and keeps their motivation high. A Past Participant of WiseGuyz explains the movement from "missing class" to not ever wanting to "miss WiseGuyz":

You just think you're going to class, like you're just going to WiseGuyz and it's kind of like 'Oh yeah I get to miss afternoon classes and hang out with friends' and whatnot. But then you start to reflect on it and on the days where he says "There's no WiseGuyz" you miss it cuz it's like you're missing not only the opportunity to get out of class, but you're missing that opportunity to grow. ...cuz even just looking around school you *can tell the difference between the people who went to WiseGuyz and the people who didn't*. Cuz, they're just, I feel like we're just so much more mature than them because we know how to handle ourselves better and handle others a lot better than they do (Past WiseGuyz Participant, Researcher Emphasis).

A way of ensuring WiseGuyz longevity in the schools is that boys in the younger grades (seven and eight) look forward to being part of it when they are in grade nine. Some boys who were in WiseGuyz this year, spoke about how they looked forward to joining WiseGuyz once they were in grade nine. Also, with WiseGuyz being part of the regular rhythm of school, school administration would be able to discern boys in grade eight who they thought might benefit from WiseGuyz in grade nine. One of the school administrators explained:

...for example...we had someone who was going around and grabbing girl's behinds and that sort of thing. [We thought] "maybe next year he should be in WiseGuyz" you know, and we used that as a strategy especially if it's repetitive and we've talked to a kid more than once and we feel like "Ok, they need further education", they need more information about some stuff and how to treat women and how to treat each other and how to talk about things (School Administrator, School B).

The boys voluntarily participate in the program, a feature that was emphasized through the research as critical to its value and success. A teacher who had many of the boys from the WiseGuyz Program C in her class, noted that “because they opened up WiseGuyz to everybody, I had one of my strongest boys decide to join WiseGuyz. He’s been a major influence on those other boys...so having boys come on their own is a huge benefit to the whole program (Teacher, School C). The strong motivation to join combined with peer influence led to the boys having a positive impact on each other.

Boys are also encouraged by school administration and teachers to join if they believe that the boys will benefit in some way from WiseGuyz. When asked what they look for when encouraging boys to participate, research participants shared that they look for aggressive behaviors in boys, or boys who are socially isolated, not connected with others, or appear to be lacking in self-confidence. Teachers and school administrators are not explicit in referring the boys, but rather it is a gentle nudge after noticing certain behaviours in the boys: “I didn’t have to suggest very hard for them to join,” noted a teacher from School C. She had encouraged some of the boys because they “were very quiet and isolated.” The boys did not have many social connections within and outside of school. The school administrators of School B noted that they would meet with the WiseGuyz Facilitator early in the year to discuss who might be a good fit for the program:

...we always have the chat who should be in the program with the [Facilitator] at the beginning of the year, [and say], Ok, I think those guys should be in there yeah (School Administrator, School B).

The motivation to participate is high because the boys voluntarily join, and this is also critical to why they remain in the program throughout the year.

## The Generativity of a Participatory Group Process

*"I know it's kinda cheesy, but you feel more like a family"  
(WiseGuyz, Program B).*

The metaphor of family to describe one of the WiseGuyz programs is imaginative: it evokes a positive archetype of family, of trusting relationships, connections, safety, and belonging. WiseGuyz is an adolescent boy family; they look to their peers to learn and for cues on how to behave. Family, peer and larger social contexts are the predominant shapers of identity of adolescent boys. The boys of WiseGuyz not only learn together, but they learn *from* each other. The boys spoke fervently about the social network they developed through WiseGuyz:

it's the sense of community, and it's the environment that [the facilitators] produce. You know in sex ed it's a class, [but] in WiseGuyz it wasn't so much a class as it was a group, like D says, a support group. Basically it's like an opinion driven environment from other people's perspectives and you get to base it off of other guys. Rather than one teacher at the front of the class saying, "This is what this is." Like the reflection and the connection between everybody definitely...it brings out a lot of the learning (WiseGuyz Past Participant).

One of the reasons WiseGuyz creates change in the boys is because of its participatory group process, which takes place over the length of the school year. The curriculum is a 14-session/4-module curriculum that is facilitated over the length of the school year. This provides the time and space for the boys to develop new friendships and to foster a strong and deep group dynamic.

Having the program from October 2012 – June 2013 supports the boys to generate new friendships and deepen existing ones. The period of time combined with the curriculum led to the development of trust among the boys which was demonstrated through them sharing personal experiences in WiseGuyz. Many of the boys spoke of how important this was, and by integrating their personal experiences, their learnings were then practical, relevant and

meaningful. Some of the boys likened the process and formation of WiseGuyz to a support-group:

it's like a *support group*...you're with a bunch of guys that you know...So it's stuff that they already know kind of, and you have that extra ear [to help out] if you have issues. Then the information, it goes through a wide spectrum of information so it touches everybody in some way. *Everybody can relate to it*. It just really helps you think about yourself as a person. Even like what A said with the relationship, like it helps you think about, not even just boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, just like relationships with your friends, like with your friend's friends. It helps you realize this is good, this is bad kind of. *It shows you the difference*. It really opened my eyes quite a bit just to see it's more than just like holding hands kind of in a relationship, right? Like, it's how you feel about a person (WiseGuyz Past Participant, Researcher Emphasis).

Within the participatory process the boys formed a strong group. To do this, trust was developed through the boys feeling they were “free to talk” and share. This context was introduced by the Facilitator who established early the importance of respect, maintaining confidentiality and being non-judgmental. The boys in program B reflected at the end of WiseGuyz on the evolution of their group:

We all got like *really close together* and so we all understood and we *weren't afraid to speak*. Because we all understood that we *could all speak in freedom* so no matter what we said it would... it would mean something in here and we'd learn stuff (WiseGuyz, Program B, Researcher Emphasis).

The notions of sharing and freedom to speak are integrally linked in this program. They deepened the trust among the boys, generating rich friendships and a stable social support network for the boys. When reflecting on the WiseGuyz program, the boys' conversation bounced among each other, noting how they were not close before WiseGuyz, and in some cases did not know each other, and how their “comfort level is really, really amazing now. Cuz' the things we talk about, we are so comfortable saying around each other. The boy and girl thing, it makes a big difference because it's only guys in this class” (WiseGuyz, Program B). Again, the reference to the program being all boys is also instrumental to them feeling that they can share their feelings without being judged. In this way,

honouring gender difference is important. For programs to have a lasting impact, they must address “the concerns and experiences of the participants.”<sup>23</sup> When the boys are in a place in which they feel they can speak in freedom they can be open then about their “uncertainty about how to act in intimate relationships, misperceptions and myths about peer sexual activity, and fears about what other boys will think of them.”<sup>24</sup>

At each school, administration noted that there are the “social giants” and a social hierarchal ordering among boys in the schools. Clustering of social groups is not new to social cultures within schools, however, it is an important factor in how it affects the participation and inclusion of boys in WiseGuyz:

We always hope that there's a bit of a social giant in the sense that there's somebody who in the group is positive, perhaps you know, hard working at their schoolwork, whatever their grades look like. But they have some social buy-in from their peers to a point where that might draw a couple of boys in or it might just show some of the other boys that this is fine. This is ok, socially acceptable, academically manageable, kind of that all-round grouping. So sometimes it's nice to have that kind of lynch pin in there (School Administrator, School A).

If the social giants join WiseGuyz there tends to be a large following of others who want to join. The school administration all noted that they hoped to have one of the natural leaders in the school join WiseGuyz as it sets a positive precedent for other boys.

### Community-Based Male Facilitators

*“Boys are desperate for role models as they head into this uncertain age, and in most cases the dominant image of masculinity is one that requires strength and stoicism.”<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Berkowitz, A., Jaff, P., Peacock, D., Rosenbluth, B. and Sousa, C. (2003). *Young Men as Allies in Preventing Violence and Abuse: Building Effective Partnerships with Schools*. Retrieved from [http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc\\_Files\\_VAWnet/YoungMenAllies.pdf](http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/YoungMenAllies.pdf). p. xvi.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p.10

<sup>25</sup> Kindlon, D and Thompson, M. (2000). *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. p. 73. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

There is a growing body of literature within masculinity and gender equity research that underscores the importance of male facilitators for healthy relationship and violence prevention programs. This was particularly true in WiseGuyz. Not only is the male facilitator important to WiseGuyz, but also that they are from outside of the school and are community-based. Having an external community-based facilitator increases the boys' comfort because the facilitator begins as unknown to the boys but then develops relationships with them:

It does matter a lot, because if we had just like a health teacher from our school, say like, like my math teacher or my homeroom teacher – it would be the teacher that I was with every day and I guess you wouldn't feel as close to open up because you see him every day. It kind of puts a different light on your eyes. Like when [the facilitator] came in it was kind of like a clean slate. We opened up to [the facilitator], we learned, well we didn't learn, what am I saying – we kind of just felt open around [the facilitator]. For one, he is our WiseGuyz teacher, you know, he's experienced with this and you only see him in WiseGuyz. Also the fact that he was like very non-judgmental and completely open made it a really, really safe environment (WiseGuyz Past Participant).

The boys noted throughout the research that they are not comfortable talking with their teachers about sexual health, sexuality or relationships:

It would just be awkward too, a teacher, it gets weird talking to your teachers around certain things like that....like say it's a girl teacher that you don't know too well. The other factor is we come to school, and we know our teachers on a teacher level, at least for me it's weird knowing them a little bit more than just as teachers (WiseGuyz, School C).

The boys in Program C further discussed how the facilitator “knows exactly what he's talking about [with] relationships and everything.” This was concurred across WiseGuyz programs as the boys perceived the facilitators as experts in the field of sexual and relational health, thus increasing their comfort and confidence with them. Also, when sexual health is taught through the schools the boys did not feel comfortable asking questions, yet within WiseGuyz, the facilitators “wouldn't brush it under the rug” (WiseGuyz, Program C) and they would invite questions. The facilitators would also offer personal examples or opinions and the boys enjoyed having their learnings situated within a personal perspective.

Their natural curiosity of sexuality and sexual health is at its peek. Having WiseGuyz creates a safe communal space in which the boys feel they can “talk about anything” or ask the facilitators questions without feeling shame. Not feeling comfortable to talk about sexual health may create at-risk or damaging behaviours if boys do not feel safe accessing information, and as result, either have no information or access inaccurate information. The boys and the school administration commented on the importance of the facilitators to the WiseGuyz program. They described them as “young and hip” which helped the boys to feel a connection to them. School administrators also noted that the facilitators are progressive role models for the boys.

In Program A, there was a transition in the facilitator midway through the program as he left to take on a new role in the same organization. The change in facilitator was a challenge for the boys, illustrating how important the role of the facilitator is and how the boys develop a connection with him. The boys in Program A talked about how the transition was hard, but after awhile “they got used to it and it was pretty easy” (WiseGuyz, School A).

The male facilitators are able to reach boys who might not otherwise listen if it were a female educator. Jackson Katz proposes that it can be effective to have a man propose topics such as gender, stereotypes and masculinity because the boys “cannot write off [the facilitators] as hopelessly out of touch with the realities of boy’s lives and the pressures on them to conform to masculine norms.”<sup>26</sup> Although the boys feel a sense of connection and closeness to the facilitators, they also appreciate that they are not teachers that they see daily so it is less “awkward” and they feel no academic pressure because they are not graded in WiseGuyz:

[The Facilitator] he didn’t force you to open up. He would open up about himself even a little bit just so like, so everybody would feel you know, we’re all the same. We’re all on the same level right now, we’re all equals, just treat me like one of you guys basically. Like I said, he’s really like a kid

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<sup>26</sup> Katz, J. (2006). *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How all Men Can Help*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc.

at heart so it's really easy to talk to him. He's just one of the guys that you'd see every day at school or whatever. I think it makes it a lot easier than having a teacher, because like A said, you have to see them every day. But even like beyond that you get a mark for it, so it's that much more awkward. Whereas in WiseGuyz there's no pass/fail there's no like oh you get like 50 on this project. It's just like you know, do your best and then don't worry about it outside that (WiseGuyz Past Participant).

Having male facilitators is a critical practice for WiseGuyz, yet not only does it yield generative learnings and experiences for the boys, it also provides them with role models by being males who represent new notions of masculinity.

### Feeling Safe

*"The conversations that happen in that room are safe...they have the opportunity to say what they really want to say" (School Administrator, School A).*

It can be difficult to discern notions of safety, social inclusion and sense of community from each other. However, the blurry sinew that binds them is why there is such depth and robustness to these concepts in the WiseGuyz program. The concepts of social inclusion and safety nestle within each other. As much as school administrators noted that WiseGuyz creates a space and experience of safety for the boys, the participatory group process over the year also fostered social inclusion for the boys. The process, combined with feeling safe and the curricula content create a meaningful sense of belonging. Past participants of WiseGuyz described the program as non-judgmental, and that they could learn about topics such as sexual health that might otherwise make them feel uncomfortable. The boys, past and current participants, emphatically shared they had developed new friendships that they did not have before; they felt part of a group process in which they trusted everyone and thus would talk about personal experiences during WiseGuyz. It became the 'outlet' that school administrators described. However, WiseGuyz is far more than an outlet. It is a space in which the boys can talk and connect without judgment, thereby cultivating a full emotional life, which means sharing their fears, vulnerabilities, curiosities, desires and learnings.

A Past Participant shared his experience that because of WiseGuyz he has become comfortable with being gay. This was something that he attributed fully to the process of WiseGuyz: the comfort, confidence and safety to try and understand his own sexuality. This was not something he was conscious of while in WiseGuyz, but something that he came to understand after he completed the program:

I was in the closet a good two years before I went to WiseGuyz. I just felt so terrible about how I saw, like men and things. But then, being in WiseGuyz and seeing how it was something that was ok, it was accepted that it was ok to be that way. Like what the media says and what other people say and what's in the hallways and like the rumors and all that, they weren't true and it's ok. I felt so much better about myself...(WiseGuyz, Past Participant).

This boy's experience of coming out speaks to the lasting impact of WiseGuyz. Not only did he learn about acceptance of others through WiseGuyz, his most important and life saving learning was acceptance of himself. His process of coming to terms with being gay demonstrates the profound sense of safety he felt in WiseGuyz that enabled him to understand his feelings of sexuality more deeply.

A school administrator from School B discussed the value of the boys realizing that they are not alone and this realization is the beginning of the boys feeling safe to ask questions, and beginning to foster new connections:

I think that feeling of not being alone, like I think a lot of the time you know, they're like "Is it just me thinking this", [laughs] or "*Has it just been me that's experienced this, oh thank goodness somebody else has too*" you know, I think there's that relief of knowing that other people are going through the same things that you are. Then [having] a place to talk...my biggest hope for boys is that they find a connection: that someone they can talk to because I think it is more difficult to find an adult as well to feel comfortable with and kinda say "This is how I feel right now" (School Administrator, School B).

Not only do boys begin to establish a sense of safety and connection, it also reduces their feelings of social isolation and internalization as they begin to

realize in WiseGuyz that they are not alone in the feelings they have, or uncertainties they have about sexual health and relationships.

### Setting Aside the “Masculine Figure”

WiseGuyz became a safe space in which the boys expressed they could “set aside their masculine figure.” WiseGuyz created a permissive space for boys to voice their internal life, to be emotionally intimate. As one of the boys in Program B revealed: “in WiseGuyz, our masculinity doesn't matter...like we don't have to change how ‘man’ we are...but out there, if we were to say things [like what they talk about in WiseGuyz] It would really change our figure...our masculinity.” The division between WiseGuyz, a place of feeling safe in their inner-life, became divided from the outer world of the classrooms, hallways, school and family life. Fostering and encouraging the boys to feel confident in their expressions is the foundation of creating communities with healthy boys and relationships. This is the importance of the rich internal life of the boy: “Give boys permission to have an internal life, approached for the full range of human emotions, and help in developing an emotional vocabulary so that they may better understand themselves and communities more effectively with others”<sup>27</sup>.

The boys explained that if they were to talk and behave the way they do in WiseGuyz, they believed that others in the school or in the peer group, would “think of us like being, you know, some kind of wimp or something like that” (WiseGuyz, Program B). The social reality outside of WiseGuyz is one in which “if you put out a tear, you're screwed” (WiseGuyz, Program B). The division between the inner world of WiseGuyz and the outer traditional masculine world that the boys live in is a divide to mitigate. Finding ways to continually lessen this divide is important work of WiseGuyz, but is also the work of social, political and cultural systems and institutions that are complicit in perpetuating these heteronormative traditional and binding masculine scripts.

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<sup>27</sup> Kindlon, D and Thompson, M. (2000). *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. p. 240. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

There is pressure on boys to maintain masculinity, to uphold its performance, which was described by one of the boys as the “masculine figure.” Homophobia, heteronormativity and sexuality are closely linked in the production and maintenance of gender identities for boys in Western Culture.<sup>28</sup> The boys felt that if they were to behave outside of WiseGuyz in the ways they do within the program that this would mean “getting their masculinity down” and people would think they were “gay”: “If we change out there, they’ll think that we’re gay or something, getting our masculinity down or something.” In this way, the boys are not necessarily homophobic, but rather gay becomes a term, an enactment of feminine characteristics, and a pejorative term used to demean boys by assaulting their masculinity. This speaks to the limited range of gendered behaviours available to boys in schools, showing that to obtain a culturally validated form of masculinity boys must socially distance themselves from what would be perceived as gay or feminine behaviours.

We cannot examine gender and sexual norms without a theoretical knowledge of heteronormativity. Much of the maintenance of masculinity comes through the “heterosexual boundary maintenance”<sup>29</sup> of the boys. This was discerned through the discussion about girls, about how they would behave differently if girls were around, and how if they were to demonstrate non-masculine characteristics they would be perceived as gay. These behaviours only perpetuate the binaries of gender as male/female and that certain traits are essentialized with each gender. This also means it is more difficult for boys to find a space in-between these binaries. One of the ways the boys perform their masculinity and to uphold it is with the most common epithet used in the research of boys saying “you’re so gay.” This is not surprising then that one of the greatest learnings and disruptions of discourses then becomes the boys becoming conscious of this language, disrupting it, and engaging new language.

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<sup>28</sup>McCormack, M and Anderson, E. *'It's Just Not Acceptable Any More': The Erosion of Homophobia and the Softening of Masculinity at an English Sixth Form*. In SAGE. 44(5): 843–859.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.846

Boys can feel safe in their vulnerabilities in WiseGuyz; they can set aside their “masculine figure.” Unfortunately, some of the boys do not feel they can bring this behaviour into their social reality outside of WiseGuyz, pointing to the social, cultural and familial pressures to be “masculine men and buff.” In WiseGuyz, the boys come out of the box that “has rules that tell men what they should and shouldn't do, and who they're allowed to be.”<sup>30</sup> This box of rules is primarily defined by what Brene Brown describes as shame and the message of “don't be weak.” This “crate” she notes, is issued when the boys are born, and it is stamped with the message of do not be weak.

The feeling that the boys could not share who they were in WiseGuyz outside of the program also explains why the group process for these boys is so intense and profound. They created a safe nucleus in which they could be fully themselves without judgment and could share experiences and stories about their lives. The boys ruminated about how great it would be if all boys could experience WiseGuyz, thereby reducing the divide between the way you can be in WiseGuyz and the way you feel pressure to be outside of WiseGuyz:

I think that if everybody understood each other it would be really different cuz nobody would judge each other cuz you know their background. So if everybody was involved in it, I think our school would be a bit better. Then guys would have way more respect for girls and so you wouldn't see all this rape and sexual assault and stuff like that out there. It would change a lot I think (WiseGuyz, School B).

The notion of *affect* is significant for WiseGuyz as the boys influence one another in the program, and then begin to influence other people outside of the program. It is difficult to understand how extensive this is, but would be important to consider in future understandings of the impact of WiseGuyz. Some of the boys were beginning to hypothesize or imagine that each of them could influence another boy just how widespread this would be. The boys in Program B believed “you could change high school” by doing this. Because they are all from different social groups they could have widespread influence: “We all have

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<sup>30</sup> Brown, B. (2012). *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable*. New York, NY: Gotham Books. p. 92.

different cliques in school like hockey, and football...if we spread out we could probably make guys think a lot differently.”

Not only is there the emphasis on not being vulnerable, there are implications for those who are part of the lives of boys. Brene Brown explores how most people “recoil with fear” when boys or men are actually vulnerable because we do not know what to do with it. This sends the message to boys and men to enact a double layer of performance, which means to then *pretend not* to be vulnerable. The boys learn at a very young age that they are not allowed to be afraid, not allowed to show fear and not allowed to be vulnerable.<sup>31</sup> Boys are “miseducated to fear excessive feeling and vulnerability.”<sup>32</sup> For the boys in WiseGuyz, it becomes a process of interacting with the other boys and participating in the different activities of WiseGuyz until they reach a place of being “comfortable enough to be vulnerable” as noted by the School Administrator, School C. He emphasized the importance of getting to the space of *being comfortable with being vulnerable* for the boys. He emphasizes that this is essential before change can happen: “You have to have a certain level of vulnerability with the group and have comfort in order to experience change and growth and get some support in a healthy way with the group” (School Administrator, School C).

### Finding Voice: Being Curious and Asking Questions

*The reason that I value the program is that it's an outlet and information for them [boys] in a way that they may never receive it. Health class is health class. But to have such open conversation about sexual health, gender identity, social context, social power, media, all of those things, in a such a small group way, is so unique to the program and I think that's probably the most important thing for them, is that they're not getting that anywhere else. Not a positive supportive message, not an opportunity to just say stuff and let it be out there and there's safety in that group. In health class of course there's content knowledge right? They might learn some things but not necessarily have the same platform to discuss it. Or the same comfort level to say "I have a question and it's weird, can I ask*

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 97

<sup>32</sup> Kindlon, D and Thompson, M. (2000). *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. p. 247. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

*a question?" I doubt they'd ever ask that question in class. But in that context, in the safety they're getting more out of it I think."  
(School Administrator, School A. Researcher Emphasis)*

"Outlet" is a word that was heard often through the research as used by school administrators. Traced back to the 1500's this word literally means the "action of venting" it is an "opening."<sup>33</sup> One of the boys in Program B, simply stated that WiseGuyz, because of the trust and safety, it is easier for them to talk, "Well, I really like this girl but she's being really mean to me and I need to vent my feelings to you." This is WiseGuyz: A safe place and space to vent feeling and emotion; a place outside of what has been constructed for them that is often absent of emotion.

Although difficult to articulate an essence to WiseGuyz, it is this: it provides an opening for boys, a space in which the boys can vent, talk, cry, question, play; all within a context of safety and inclusion and within friendships of trust. There are multiple reasons why WiseGuyz is of value as described by the school administrator, School A: the boys have access to information and content that they may not otherwise receive; the safety of the group setting; the interactive and experiential process of WiseGuyz that lifts it from purely being about content but about lived information that the boys can relate to their own lives. For example, one of the boys noted reading about a condom is very different than being able to touch one, blow it up and have fun with it. WiseGuyz is about safety and comfort to ask questions, to be curious and to learn about the fundamental elements of their lives:

It's important and they're just about to go to high school, they're uncertain about a lot of things. I think sometimes we don't acknowledge the stressors that boys have in their lives. The uncertainty that they feel and the anxiety they feel going to high school and they don't know who they are. As much as a 14-year-old girl doesn't know who she is. They have the same struggles and sometimes we place that as a female issue

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<sup>33</sup> Online etymology dictionary.  
[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=Outlet&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=Outlet&searchmode=none)

as a, you know, that sort of emotional female gender sort of issue and it's not (School Administrator, School A).

All of the school administrators at some point discussed the importance of community-based programs being involved in the school, and specifically, WiseGuyz and how it strengthens the overall school culture and supports parents. Many of the WiseGuyz past participants talked about how curiosities and questions about sexual health were something they were not comfortable discussing with their parents. Boys often request or appreciate having the chance to discuss their concerns in boy-only groups. Boys generally report a lack of spaces where they can discuss in a non-judgmental manner questions about masculinity, personal issues or health-related matters.<sup>34</sup>

Boys feel they can "speak freely" and have an emotional voice in WiseGuyz. We can speculate that the confidence these boys experience within WiseGuyz will extend outside of the program. This shows up in a variety of ways. Teachers observe that many participants talk more with their peers and are more vocal in class:

..my one student, I taught him last year, and he's the one who's been sick, so he misses a lot of school. I don't know whether it's WiseGuyz or if it's just because he's hit puberty, but I never heard him speak last year. Now he's constantly talking especially to the two other boys in WiseGuyz. I can't get them to be quiet. They talk constantly (Teacher, School C).

Attributing these dialogic changes to WiseGuyz is something that cannot be fully known. However, boys who begin WiseGuyz with a strong sense of social exclusion in the school culture do further develop confidence through connection and feeling a sense of belonging that leads to them finding and expressing their voice.

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<sup>34</sup> *What About Boys? A Literature Review on the Health and Development of Adolescent Boys.* (2000). Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development World Health Organization. p.50

Creating a safe and open space in which boys can feel comfortable asking questions and engaging in exploratory conversation is a critical aspect of WiseGuyz. This is integrally tied to the boys emphatically describing the program as “fun” and feeling like they can ask anything. WiseGuyz breaks the stigmatic silence and uncomfortability of sexual health that can be prevalent amongst adolescents. Sexual health is not meant to be a didactic topic, although many of the integrated sexual health programs are primarily information based. The current and past WiseGuyz describe the didactic way of teaching sexual health as too much “like school work” and what they find valuable about WiseGuyz is how experiential and interactive it is:

It makes it a stronger place to be, kids get more access to more things. Parents get more access to more things; I think last year we had one mom that was just so relieved that her son was in WiseGuyz because she didn't know how to have that conversation with him. She wanted to and she has 3 sons, and it was really important for her to have, to have that kind of peace of heart, so to speak, that her son was getting the information because she didn't have the words to say it to him. So she was quite happy. He was equally pleased that he didn't have to talk to his mother.” (School Administrator, School A).

There are numerous interpretations of why sexual health is an awkward topic for the boys to discuss with parents. Often, programs focus on increasing this communication about how to talk with your kids. However, WiseGuyz approach is unique in that it creates a safe space in which the boys normalize the topic of sexual health in their lives and they experience how it is connected to relationships, friendship, values and beliefs. In doing this, it can be anticipated that boys will be more likely to discuss other related topics with parents.

## **Social Capital**

### **“I Belong and I Have Somebody”**

*..one of the guys in there has got some severe medical issues. He [would spend] every lunch hour in the office because he couldn't do active things. His mom was terrified of him doing anything active. He's got a serious heart condition and has been on oxygen. Now...he's got like a shunt or something that gives him a medication that replaces the old*

*hauling around the oxygen tank. So that has given him a certain amount of freedom. But he still used to sit in the office at the beginning of the year. That was where he had his lunch. He didn't interact with kids and stuff. But now, he's in with these guys and he's really always been a kid with a really positive outlook but totally on the fringe, very isolated. [Now] he's hanging out with this group of guys [from WiseGuyz] and so I think that having a kid like that too, it's been good for [the boys]. But he's also been a really good influence on the other guys too. So you've got kids coming from quite a different social background as well. So it can play that role, I think it does play that role in terms of allowing for, to a certain extent, an outlet (School Administrator, School C).*

The participatory group process of WiseGuyz supports the development of new individual friendships, but also a strong group-based network for the boys. The group structure can provide a strong sense of inclusion<sup>35</sup> and this is something that all adolescents long for. During the time of adolescence boys desire to fit in is "supercharged."<sup>36</sup> This desire to fit in is coupled with a growing gender identity and one of the ways boys work to fit in is to "establish themselves as successful males." This 'establishing' we have also defined as masculinity performance.<sup>37</sup> Further, knowing that the boys do look heavily to peers in decision-making, having a strong group of peers developed through WiseGuyz proved a healthy social network for the boys if they experienced difficult situations. Through the research we recognize that the ideal maximum number of participants is twelve. The group process generated new friendships and networks for the boys and helped them to build the "social character" and "social confidence" that is required when they are in moments or situations where they will need help or support. As a result, they have more confidence within themselves and thus lessens the divide in their social groupings.

The combination of the curriculum topics, the external male facilitator and the small group process creates a safe grouping for the boys. Within this safety they develop relationships. This leads to conversations and questions within the WiseGuyz program that are richer because of these interconnections. At one of

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<sup>35</sup> Kindlon, D and Thompson, M. (2000). *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. p. 240. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 78

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

the schools, the school administrator took the lead in organizing which boys would be in each class. Schools A and B, which are in the third year of offering the program, each held two programs: one in the morning and one in the afternoon. One of the schools is French Immersion and the categorization of the boys played out naturally within one program being the English stream and one program being the French stream. However, as this program enters its fourth year in the Fall of 2013, the school administration are considering mixing the boys to mitigate this defined segregation that also shows up in the boys social reality within the school.

The school administrator at School A noted that she observed many of the boys developing new friendships through WiseGuyz that they would not have generated before, or because of the different school social groups, would not have interacted:

Boys that wouldn't necessarily have had a strong social footing, had a better one by the end of the year and had more confidence and had more peers and that they felt like they had a group of people to rely on (School Administrator, School A).

The development of these new friendships is critical in fostering a strong social network that the boys, as the school administrator at School A noted, feel "I belong" and "I have somebody." She noted that when the boys move on to the next new thing, that they can phone that person or text or email. School A assigned boys to each program with the hope that boys would generate new friendships. The school administrator intentionally "would not put friends together in their groups...we split them up in an effort to kind of mix and mingle them a little because sometimes that's the only time they hang out as a group" (School A).

There are different depths of social capital across the three WiseGuyz programs. Program A was a mix of boys who had little social capital mixed with what the school administrator referred to as "the social giants." Blending these boys was intentional. School B was comprised of boys who came to WiseGuyz with a

strong social standing in the school and could be considered mostly boys with strong social capital. In Program C, the boys were considered as not having much social capital in the school and this prevented what would be perceived as “the social giants” from wanting to join the program. The School Administration at School C noted that this is something to be aware of as ideally, they would like to get to the place of mixing boys with varying levels of social status. Also, depending on their level of social capital at the beginning of the program, this may expand or deepen. Again, the changes for the boys do vary based on their particular situated context.

In Program C, the school administrator and teacher commented that although there is a “much broader slice of the population” he would like to see in WiseGuyz, he also affirmed that for the boys who are in there, it is important for them:

These guys, it's great that they're in there...because I think there are issues that they struggle with...some of the kids are in group homes and they don't have necessarily the...nurturing (School Administrator, School C).

He continues on to describe the healthy sense of perspective boys acquire for themselves:

it's good for them, you know, to learn to gain a sense of perspective. A healthy sense of perspective on themselves and about being responsible. I've definitely seen some growth amongst that group. Like they stick together, I've seen a lot less of them in the office...as the program has gone on. There's one character in particular that used to [be in the office], every day after lunch wanting to go home because he's been hurt. He hurt himself every day at lunch. And, you know, not always actually [be] hurt. Rarely actually hurt. There is a lot of negative attention seeking stuff. It doesn't happen anymore (School Administrator, School C).

This was also supported by past participants of WiseGuyz who talked about the new friendships they made because of WiseGuyz, and boys that did not know each other or would not have previously socially connected, became friends through WiseGuyz: One of the boys claimed “He would never hang with G before, and because he was in my class, and he started going to WiseGuyz, I became more friendly with G” (WiseGuyz Past Participant).

## Sense of Community

*“Even the quieter students came out of their shells a lot more because they knew, this is a group of guys that I could trust” (WiseGuyz Past Participant).*

Past and current participants described WiseGuyz as creating a “sense of community.” This is developed through a variety of factors including the small group size, participatory process, curriculum topics, and being all male. For the boys, having a community they feel part of and can turn to in trying times is pivotal to their healthy development and fulsome understanding of what constitutes healthy relationships and connections:

*...like it felt like a sense of community...it kind of brought us together whereas like I was friends with people there, but there were some people that were an acquaintance but we just got closer. Like going there you felt like *accepted*, you felt like you could *speak your mind* and it was kind of like an *ease off the shoulders*. In fact it was so much [of a] community and the learning and the discussions and stuff, [by] the 3<sup>rd</sup> week we weren't even playing the video games at the end of the class (WiseGuyz, Past Participant, Researcher Emphasis).*

This excerpt highlights the critical components of having a sense of community: a reason to come together, the development of new friendships, a place to feel accepted; a space in which you had a voice and could ‘speak your mind’ and to feel reprieve from the stressors of life. It was a place where the boys enjoyed the learning so much that the original reasons for wanting to join, such as being able to play video games, fell away. Many of the past and current boys described the discussion as “deep” because of having the time over the year to have “in-depth discussions.” Some discussions opened up debates about a particular topic, thus unfolding new learnings. The boys, reflecting on the program at the end of the year noted that they felt they always had a social community in WiseGuyz to turn to: “They’ll help you because you know that they won’t put you down or judge you or like tell you to find someone else to talk to. They’ll listen to you and help you with your problem (WiseGuyz, Program B). The overall experience of simply being part of WiseGuyz had the greatest changes

for the boys. They did acquire new learning, as they said about condoms, however, the *experience* itself of WiseGuyz profoundly shaped the boys.

Trust was generated through sharing personal experiences. Some of the boys described WiseGuyz as a place where they could “let the masculinity down” or let go of their “masculine figure.” It was through sharing, and expressing themselves that trust was created. The trust is significant to the group process. The trust enabled the boys to speak without feeling bound by a traditional masculine script or fear of judgment:

We all got like really close together and so we all understood and we weren't afraid to speak. Because we all understood that we could all speak in freedom so no matter what we said it would be like, it would mean something in here and we'd learn stuff (WiseGuyz, Program B).

#### “One thing I definitely went wow about:” *Understanding Healthy Relationships*

Through participating in WiseGuyz the boys developed healthy relationships *in* the program, while simultaneously learning *about* them. Both past and current WiseGuyz, across the three different schools, unanimously agreed that learning about relationships was the most valuable part of WiseGuyz. To some degree this was a surprise. Although they did learn about sexual health, which is a major impetus for why they wanted to join, what they left WiseGuyz with are new and in-depth learnings about healthy relationships. The boys in WiseGuyz, Program A noted “they just didn't learn about types, they were able to go into more detail about it.” When asked what this meant for them, they responded that there was a common thread of knowing now what behaviors are healthy and unhealthy in relationships, whether it is friendship, family or romantic. They also learned being with a diverse group of boys, to develop understanding and empathy about and for those people in their lives who are different from them. This is a critical learning for healthy relationship development. They are evolving from a desire for commonality and inclusion to understanding that people are different and that stereotypes or assumptions about who they are only forecloses this difference:

One thing I definitely went wow about was definitely learning relationships and like how to handle different people. How different people are and the things that arise in relationships. We even had the game where we had the categories of different actions and then we put them under abusive, passive aggressive, aggressive, all that kind of stuff. Then being able to go into the real world and see them with like definitions behind them (WiseGuyz, Program B).

The boys also spoke about the multiple stressors they feel in their lives and expectations to be “good in everything” and that WiseGuyz was a “stress relief.” Because they felt they could speak freely, there was established trust, one of the boys shared “you can just relax and not have to worry about anything cuz’ you don’t have any homework in WiseGuyz. The world is on pause when you’re in here” (WiseGuyz, Program B).

Past participants of WiseGuyz spoke of how ripe and meaningful the learnings of WiseGuyz become *after* they left the program and after they had more personal experiences to draw upon the WiseGuyz learnings. One of the Past Participants explained he did not know what he learned until he was in a romantic relationship and when particular situations would arise, he reflected “Hey, I remember this, this is how I should act” (WiseGuyz, Past Participant).

Many of the boys spoke about the depth of what they were able to talk about. The boys in Program C offered the recommendation to spend less time talking about sexual health so they could have more time to talk about the other topics of WiseGuyz, in particular, healthy relationships. They noted that this is something that is more an “immediate factor” in their lives that they are in and surrounded by relationships. A WiseGuyz Past Participant spoke about the difference between the *big things* and the *deep things*:

[there is] the difference about the big things and the deep things. Obviously like, how to use a condom, safe sex, all that stuff is the big things. But the deep things are like, it’s how you apply it to your life. Like just the relationships and just how to carry yourself through the hallways. How to be more confident (WiseGuyz Past Participant).

Through these 'deep' things boys' offered examples of how they learned to recognize aggressive behavior in themselves and others, and how to resolve it in positive ways. Many of the boys shared that they were or had been in unhealthy relationships, but didn't realize it until WiseGuyz and the program helped them to discern this.

## Experiencing Empathy and Acceptance

*I always kind of knew when I'd see like the loser or the stoner or something, I'd know that they have a heart, they're human... I've been taught to accept them but I only really kind of understood it once I was in WiseGuyz. I could see like "Yeah you're just me in a different skin, we're all guys. We all think the same; we all see things the same" (WiseGuyz Past Participant).*

## Learning about Each Other

Empathy was experienced among the boys by learning to challenge assumptions about other people, and learning that "that all people have a story" (WiseGuyz, Program B). Firstly, learning more about each other in the program mitigated any assumptions or judgments the boys had of each other. The walls started to come down among some of the boys in WiseGuyz who did not know each other. Secondly, the boys realized they have more in common with the boys they created assumptions about, and this also strengthened their feelings of belonging by not being so different from the other boys. Through the recognition of difference, they created a sense of trust, connection, and thus helped them to not feel so alone in their own feelings:

*We've all had different experiences we all shared our experiences. They're all different in some way and since we all know that, we've all gone through something similar (WiseGuyz, Program B).*

The acceptance that the boys are all different, yet have striking similarities is a significant learning for the boys. They began to be able to hold the tension of difference and similarity as something good and generative, rather than needing to polarize and categorize other boys or people, as either different or

similar. A WiseGuyz Past Participant noted that in some ways, this comes down to not ever having a chance to hear each other's thoughts and opinions:

we just haven't heard each other's opinions directly but then, once you hear them directly, you're like, 'I can totally relate to this guy, and I know nothing about him. Cuz' you never talk to him in the hallway. It's just you stay in your comfort zone a bit until that extra push to come out of your comfort zone and then you're glad you did it (WiseGuyz Past Participant).

As the boys begin to understand each other more, empathy is not only yielded, but also the boys' sense of belonging and connection grows because they are dropping their assumptions about each other. A teacher at School C noticed the difference in the boys in her class that participated in WiseGuyz. In particular, she noticed how they moved from not wanting to connect or work with each other to developing meaningful friendships. She spoke of the transition of one of the boys who was new to the school:

...the other young man just came to us this year. So he didn't know anybody. He was one that was always "I'll work on my own, I'll do everything by myself". He's the one that I placed in the group and he said "I don't wanna work with these guys" then a week later it's "They're actually really cool" and they do everything together now they're a threesome...they've gotten to know each other as people rather than classmates through WiseGuyz. They have a lot of the same interests, which they would have never shared before (Teacher, School C).

Through discovering that they have something in common with each other, "they don't feel alone anymore" (Teacher, School C). Not feeling alone and having a sense of belonging is critical to feeling a sense of empathy for others. She noted changes in boys in her classroom that participated in WiseGuyz, that they are "more outgoing, and more accepting of others...you see them now saying [referring to other boys], they're actually pretty cool, I'm going to give them a chance to get to know them" (Teachers, School C). Given that empathy for others is an elemental part of having healthy relationships, the boys begin with reflecting and challenging their own assumptions of how they see other people in this world. Mitigating assumptions and negative stereotypes cultivates empathy as the boys experience a sense of belonging, realizing they are not so

different from others. Because WiseGuyz is comprised of boys often from different socio-economic and social groups in the school, they begin to learn about each other. WiseGuyz is a space that creates common ground for these boys, and a reprieve from the pressure to maintain socially constructed aspects of their lives:

...when you're in the classroom, you're part of your own [social] groups. Then when you go to WiseGuyz, you take people from all the different groups and throw them together. Then when you're in this one class learning one specific subject and sharing ideas around one specific thing you start to realize that once you strip down all the classes and the labels, we're all really just people. We all have things in common (WiseGuyz Past Participant).

WiseGuyz not only disrupts the traditional scripts of masculinity, it also interrupts the hierarchal ordering of social groups and behaviours that have segregated the boys in their social lives. In WiseGuyz, there is a sense of commonality, comfort and equality established by recognizing that there are differences *and* similarities. These are important theories to learn in healthy relationships, however, even more important in the lived experience as the boys *experience* equality within the program itself.

### Learning About Others

The boys in WiseGuyz learn *how* to learn about each other. From this, their learning moves outward to learning about others outside of WiseGuyz, thereby fostering empathy. A current WiseGuyz participant described this learning as one in which he came to realize that everyone has a story and how harmful it is create theories about who these people are through assumptions:

I always think if I see someone making fun of somebody and they don't know them, like a handicapped person or something, or someone who was always depressed or whatever it is, I always think like you don't know their story. If someone is just sitting by themselves on the stairs and being depressed it's not like he has no friends, you don't know what his story is....you don't know what he's been through and why he's sitting there. It doesn't mean he's sitting there because he has no friends. He might not be comfortable having friends because when he was younger he was bullied and everyone made fun of him or whatever it is (WiseGuyz, Program B).

What they learn of each other and how they have learned it, they extend to other lives outside of WiseGuyz. The boys have learned to imagine what someone else's life might be like; they have begun to look outside of themselves and begin to challenge their own assumptions of who they think someone is:

Like you realize no matter who a person is, they deserve the same amount of respect as anyone else. Like, even they are disrespectful to everyone else, they still deserve respect because they are probably being disrespectful because they were raised in a bad childhood, or whatever it is, they have, like you don't know their story. So I think everyone deserves the same amount of respect and you should just, like change because you see that no matter who it is, they still deserve the same respect and the same like... they just deserve respect no matter who it is (WiseGuyz, Program B).

The boys begin to realize and imagine what life might be like for other people. They further cultivate a sense of compassion by reflecting on how they perceive others in the world. This is a movement of empathy, but also one of fostering critical thinking and reflection. In Program A, one of the boys reflected on how he would return from high school to WiseGuyz to help the program. When probed for why, he described how the program "kind of gives you like...a responsibility to be a better person." He offered that he would tell the boys interested in WiseGuyz :

how important it is to actually know this in life because we're surrounded by all this stuff and you need to learn how to deal with it...like discrimination towards gays and the man box and everything like that. You need to [learn] to cope with that [in WiseGuyz] and in the outside world too (WiseGuyz, School A).

Their understanding that they *can affect* also demonstrates their sense of empathy. They denote that they are part of the world and have a responsibility in it. These learnings are occurring at a pivotal time in their lives, and the hope is that what they are learning now, carries them as they grow into young men.

In all of the WiseGuyz programs there were natural leaders who either came to the program as such or became leaders while in the WiseGuyz program. Either

way, a common theme throughout the research was the opportunity to integrate the boys in WiseGuyz more into the larger school community, for example, doing presentations to the school at the beginning of the school year or at the end:

...they're in WiseGuyz then it trickles down to their friends and the people that they have you know, some influence over and the more, I guess popular or the more yeah (laughs) of a leader you are as well, then the more influence you have around the school. So you do see, you see like varying spectrums of influence I guess with WiseGuyz. Um, but as soon as you walk into our school, we have a big display case and we have a big article, newspaper article about WiseGuyz and you know people read it right away. You know they see it and ah, but I'd like to see a little bit more connection and I know B was talking about the last project of the year being something where the boys do have to run sort of a PSA about something that they feel pretty passionate about. So it will be interesting to see where that goes. It will be cool to kind of kick-start the year like that rather than ending the year (School Administrator, School B).

There is an opportunity to engage boys who graduate from the WiseGuyz program to return to the junior high to talk with grade nine boys about the value of the WiseGuyz program. One of the school administrators talked about the influence the boys of WiseGuyz have on each other and potential other boys:

### *"That's so Gay": Deconstructing Language and Unraveling Stereotypes*

*"It wasn't just noticing it and changing yourself, you'd go to change other people" (WiseGuyz Past Participant).*

A striking resonance existed amongst all WiseGuyz participants, past and current when reflecting on their learnings in WiseGuyz. They employed a common example to illustrate their learnings about the damage of stereotyping and how it inhibits them from truly knowing a person and how it creates stigmatizing judgment. The boys, past and current, spoke about how their biggest learning was in noticing and attending to language, specifically the demeaning discourses of gay, or calling someone 'gay' or 'faggot.' Further, they identified that this changed them as they noted that they no longer make assumptions

about people they do not know, or project assumptions about others who people may stereotype. The boys, who admittedly used the language before WiseGuyz, did so as a way to effeminate other boys. These boys do not appear homophobic, but when feeling scared and pressured to assert their masculinity, the most effective way to do this was to feminize another boy through language and describing someone as gay, therefore attempting to de-masculinize him.

All the boys, across the three different programs illustrated the phrase “you’re so gay” because it is one they hear often in their lives and in the hallways of schools. The “you’re so gay” anecdote was the common example that all research participants across the programs used to demonstrate how they learned about the damage of stereotypes and how they are perpetuated. In particular, they learned how important it is to avoid “assuming something before it’s actually proven and voicing your thoughts on what you think you know” (WiseGuyz, Program C). This is an important behavior to learn in social life and in intimate relationships.

Consistently, the boys across all three programs spoke of how their learning about healthy relationships opened up through unraveling the concept of stereotypes. In doing this, it inspired empathy and an ability to imagine what it might be like for others in their world:

...if people are homosexual [and] people say “This is so gay” [then] anybody who would be homosexual believes it, [then] they immediately think “Ok, gay is bad so I can’t actually be myself (WiseGuyz, Program C).

The unraveling of the stereotypes also helped them “to understand how other minorities” might feel. They are beginning to disrupt their heteronormative and dominant reality by being able to imagine the reality of others, and in particular, others who are not of a dominant culture. As a research participant noted in Program C, it is the mindset that “puts you in the shoes of someone who is of a different orientation” that they found most profound. They learned that this is not only hurtful, but also that by ascribing someone with stereotypical language

means that you never really know the real person. The boys become very reflective and conscious of their language, and further, would start to disrupt and challenge other boys' use of the language; thus moving their learnings from WiseGuyz into the halls of the school, and slowly becoming advocates and bystanders:

It's...a question of acceptance. It's like the problem part is how specifically homosexuality is attributed to something lesser. Like when something's bad, you say, "Oh, that's so gay..."...and the people in WiseGuyz, somehow they just found a way around that stuff. You would hear other people saying it and then you would catch it. *You don't just catch it, but you're like "Hey, that's not right."* (WiseGuyz, Past Participant. Researcher emphasis).

The movement in thought of the boys claiming that you "don't just catch it", but you move further to recognizing that it is "not right" is an ethical movement and one in which they develop the confidence of the bystander who disrupts events. They also learned how destructive the use of the word "gay" is. This was their most profound "eye-opener" as one of the boys described it:

...if you don't like something or you think it's wrong, or um, you are trying to make fun of someone you instantly go to calling [then] gay. Then, you know, that's not what it means. It's like if someone is gay then you're not, you don't have to make fun of them because that's their decision to be gay not yours. So you can't just come up and, you don't know if someone is gay or not so you can't just come up and say "gay" because you don't know how they're gonna react to that (WiseGuyz, Program C).

The boys expressed that "we insinuated the word 'gay' as making it bad. Where gay is not bad at all. Gay is okay." This learning is quite significant as it points to the boys becoming very conscious of language and deconstructing how it is used and what it infers. Further, they realize the harm and hurt in calling someone gay. They also begin to experience, much like a participant in Program B, that each person has a story. There is a progression of learning about stereotypes to the realization that there is a person behind the stereotype. A current WiseGuyz participant noted that he changed because of WiseGuyz "because it made [him] think or look at things differently. Like gay people for instance, like they're

not just...they're still a living person. They shouldn't be treated differently than a straight person" (WiseGuyz, School A).

Through the research, school administrators spoke of how the boys were displaying advocacy behaviour; they were speaking up and becoming the boys who challenge other students in the school about language and behaviour. Specifically around issues of sexuality: The boys challenged homophobic language and also showed support for GLBTQ youth. The adolescent age of the boys is still one in which gender and sexual identity is one of uncertainty in oneself or in others. This was directly observed in the boys' behaviour:

...the other piece I see is that um, the boys, last year particularly, and I see a little bit of it growing this year, but *their ability to be tolerant is growing* and so in a very maybe normal and maybe strange way, teenage boys are still very uncertain about gender identity and sexual identity and how that connects. Sometimes they're under a very small umbrella here when they're in junior high school in the one community. So their viewpoints I think are expanded (School Administrator, School A).

## The Role of Schools in WiseGuyz

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*Schools are the perfect site for comprehensive programs because they can involve teachers, parents, coaches, administrators, and student leaders who can reinforce program messages and engage students in different venues and formats. Effective programs are participatory, interactive, and sustained over time.* <sup>38</sup>

### Supportive and Committed Schools

Across the schools A, B and C there was a shared belief among school administrators of the benefits of community organizations being part of their schools. These school administrators consider their schools as a community that they invest in. These schools that are committed to WiseGuyz are also committed to having other programs for students such as Aboriginal programs, and gay straight alliances. An administrator at School B described her school as one in which they are “the type of school that we have a lot of programs that come in like Act Out and Spirit and Starburst and WiseGuyz.” This is critical to the success of WiseGuyz as a program.

Without the support of the school administration, it would be impossible for WiseGuyz to survive in a school. We saw this in 2012, when a school decided to not renew WiseGuyz and upon requests for interviews, they indicated that they were too busy to meet, or that they did not know enough about WiseGuyz to comment. These responses in themselves are significant as it speaks to how WiseGuyz was not integrated in the school, and likely did not have the full support and belief in WiseGuyz as a program.

School administrators shared a strong belief in WiseGuyz and the premise of the program. Despite WiseGuyz being an emerging program in the relatively early

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<sup>38</sup> Berkowitz, A., Jaff, P., Peacock, D., Rosenbluth, B. and Sousa, C. (2003). *Young Men as Allies in Preventing Violence and Abuse: Building Effective Partnerships with Schools*. Retrieved from [http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc\\_Files\\_VAWnet/YoungMenAllies.pdf](http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/YoungMenAllies.pdf). p.10

stages of development, schools believed in the importance of having a program specifically for boys. A common thread that emerged in conversations with school administrators is that they all see *their schools as communities*. This perception of schools as communities is significant and explains why all the schools are fervent believers in the value of the WiseGuyz program and why they also integrate other community-based programs into their school. They see WiseGuyz as a value-add to their schools.

[The school] responds better if they can see that there's a longevity in the commitment and a genuine nature to that commitment. So they just don't need a one off pop in um, give you some info and fly away type of person. They want somebody who is involved and the kids want somebody that they have some consistency with. So they can, they know he's coming on Wednesdays and you know, now I hardly have to tell them what their schedule is cuz they already know (School Administrator, School A).

There are many variables that make WiseGuyz successful, however there are a few essentials that if taken away, WiseGuyz could not exist. One is the partnership with the schools. Ensuring a long-term partnership between WiseGuyz and schools generates the possibility for greater and longer-term change for the boys. The administrator at School A noted that it can seem like some programs are "parachuted in" to the school, or the programs that offer a single presentation to the students. She noted that these may offer "information, but it has no place in the community" (School Administrator, School A). Again, this emphasizes the importance of schools that are perceived as communities, and WiseGuyz is part of this community, and secondly creates a sense of community with the boys. Thus, the long-term relationship between WiseGuyz and a school is critical to creating meaningful change for the boys, and for the school culture.

A shared theme among school administrators is the importance of having someone at the school, particularly in a leadership role, such as a Vice-Principal or Principal who believes in and supports the program. The school administrators all held a steadfast belief in the WiseGuyz program. This is instrumental when the

program is new to a school. There is a need for championing, protecting and supporting WiseGuyz:

[someone] that communicates with the staff to make sure they're aware and they're supported because the boys do miss class time. So there's some coordination of what that looks like...so to support the staff in that, to support the kids in that to make sure that everything is communicated and organized at the school level, because there's always so many things going on, I think that's a big part of my role. To make sure that that program is *championed* but also *protected* and also *supported* all together (School Administrator, School A).

### School Support for Program During School Hours

A structural reason for consistent participation by the boys is that the program is offered during school hours. This requires extra time and scheduling on behalf of school administration to coordinate the scheduling of classes. All school administrators emphasized the importance of doing this and that this is a small compromise given what they get in return. School administration noted that it is important that the program take place during school hours. They believe that if it were after school or outside of school hours, the boys would not come. Although this can create challenges with scheduling, all school administrators noted that it is worth the extra effort in scheduling. To mitigate boys missing the same class each week, Schools A and B rotated the WiseGuyz class, for example the boys who participated one week in a WiseGuyz morning session would then attend the afternoon session the following week. This helped to minimize the impact of boys missing classes. One of the school administrators noted that she encouraged her staff to not have tests on the days that WiseGuyz is at the school. This coordination with teachers has improved over the three years of having WiseGuyz at the school.

Secondly, WiseGuyz being offered during school hours is critical to it becoming part of the school culture. The teachers get to know the facilitators, and the program becomes familiar to all youth at the school, so much so that in addition to the boys who are in the program, students not in WiseGuyz drop in over lunch

hour. This is how WiseGuyz becomes threaded into the overall culture of the school. If the program were outside of school hours, it would be less familiar.

Also, students in the younger grades, particularly grades seven and eight, start to look forward to WiseGuyz as they hear more about the program. As they see the boys participating in the program, it becomes a coveted program to participate in and the younger boys see the WiseGuyz participants as role models. WiseGuyz is like a “pyramid” a past participant described it as, “It’s kinda like being at the top of the pyramid, like the information flows downwards.”

The school administrators all commented that if WiseGuyz were to take place outside of school hours that many boys would not be able to attend mostly due to extra-curricular activities. The school administrators are very supportive of WiseGuyz being during school hours and see it as an important part of the program.

### Integrating WiseGuyz at a School

For WiseGuyz to become fully part of a school community, it requires at least three years. Based on the development of WiseGuyz to date, it takes approximately one year to build WiseGuyz into the school culture through developing relationships and a presence at the school. When a WiseGuyz program starts at a school it requires an investment of time. There is a marked difference between schools that are in the third year of having the program and the schools that are in their first year:

The first year we had a very small ripple and the second year um, ah, we kind of started out in the same way the first year did. A little bit of info about the kids and that didn't really go over so well and so that's the year that I met with [the facilitator] and we started to think about ok, so how do we actually make this part of the school program. So we created a kind of a startup scenario where he came to all the classes, girls and boys, did activities with all of the Grade 9's that he wanted to be engaged with. So he came to each class and spent time with them. He committed hours that were lunch times previous to the program even starting, to get himself known in the community and um, and into the, you know into the kids kind of social awareness, by the teachers and the staff and, and so

that went over so well compared to the first year that this year we didn't do bad (School Administrator, School A).

The implementation of WiseGuyz resembles community development. The facilitators spend many hours developing relationships at the school with the students prior to the program beginning. This has been instrumental to the eventual integration of WiseGuyz into the school culture. The investment of time and relationship building at the beginning of the program increases its sustainability:

...this community responds better if they can see that there's a longevity in the commitment and a genuine nature to that commitment. So they just don't need a one off pop in,, give you some info and fly away type of person. They want somebody who is involved and the kids want somebody that they have some consistency with. So they know he's coming on Wednesdays and you know, now I hardly have to tell them what their schedule is because they already know (School Administrator, School A).

This excerpt demonstrates the level of engagement and long-term consistency that is important to being part of the school culture, but also for the boys to build trust with the facilitators. This also supports the recommendation for a minimum of a three-year commitment and partnership between the schools and the WiseGuyz program. Having WiseGuyz at a school for one year and then it not being renewed minimizes the potential long-term impact that WiseGuyz can have on the school culture. Over time, WiseGuyz is not a program but a presence and part of the school community and also becomes known by youth who are not part of WiseGuyz.

Past participants of the WiseGuyz program offered suggestions for how to improve recruitment this so that the promotion is an accurate reflection of WiseGuyz. Past participants noted that how WiseGuyz was originally presented to them was not effective, and once they had been through the program, they realized that the promotion of WiseGuyz did not reflect what it was really about. School administration and WiseGuyz past participants had recommendations for how to improve this through attending more on-site engagements at the school

such as parent nights. For the boys, they would like to see more relevant ways of learning about the program, through videos, images and past participants speaking about the program. Integrating more technology-based activities into the program could also enhance dissemination about the program.

### **Increasing Understanding of WiseGuyz Among Teachers**

All of the school administrators expressed a desire for more connection and communication between the WiseGuyz facilitators and the teachers. This desire emerges from wanting teachers to also understand the value of WiseGuyz.

Although the Vice Principals and Principals are closely connected to WiseGuyz and communicate regularly with the facilitators, the teachers do not have a strong understanding of what WiseGuyz is or the value of it. For Schools A and B, this is getting stronger because WiseGuyz has been part of the school for three years now, and via the presence of WiseGuyz, it is gaining more understanding and support. For School C, this is currently being established and developed.

All school administrators talked about the value of increasing teachers' understanding of WiseGuyz. This would also add more support for when the boys are not in class. For example, at School A, the teachers are aware of WiseGuyz and thus do not schedule any important tests or assignments for that day.

The last staff meeting [the WiseGuyz Facilitator] came in and spoke and that was the first time of the year and again... there needs to be more of that update, like come to staff meetings or PD day or ORG day or something. More of a connection with staff so that they understand what it is. Because there were some good questions from staff about you know, 'how do you run the group? And 'how do you choose who is in the group?' And, 'what do you guys talk about and what are some of the big issues in the school. So there certainly obviously was a need because a lot of questions did come out in comments and stuff (School Administrator, School B).

#### *Recommendations:*

- Have WiseGuyz facilitators attend school staff meetings.
- Share a summary of WiseGuyz curriculum with teachers who have boys in their classes participating in WiseGuyz.

- Explore possibility of projects being done in WiseGuyz that could be presented in their classes or to the school. This may also help to create a greater connection to particular class work (i.e. social studies).
- Have WiseGuyz facilitators attend a variety of parent and school orientation functions at the beginning of the year.
- Create digital/visual stories about WiseGuyz that would demonstrate the impact of WiseGuyz and could also be used as a way to recruit boys into WiseGuyz.
- Have a WiseGuyz presentation/topic during one of the Professional Development Learning Day for Teachers.

### Defining Partnerships Between Schools and WiseGuyz

The school administration is very supportive and holds a steadfast belief in WiseGuyz. However, the support could have been even stronger if they had a greater understanding of what is expected of them. Having a partnership agreement could facilitate this and ensuring that the facilitators meet in September of each year with school administrators to outline each partner's responsibilities to ensure the program is mutually beneficial and valuable.

Creating a formal partnership agreement/memorandum with schools to ensure a three-year commitment is in place could solidify the long-term integration of WiseGuyz in the school:

- In the agreement, be clear about both partner's responsibilities and the essentials to ensure a successful program:
  - Have a consistent space each week to hold WiseGuyz.
  - Have a consistent day of the week to hold WiseGuyz.
  - Create mutually agreeable way to communicate with teachers who have WiseGuyz in program throughout the year.
- In partnership with school administration, create a plan for facilitators to attend staff meetings.
- Recruitment of boys: Plan to attend parent nights, school fairs, events that occur in September that will help to create understanding and awareness of WiseGuyz program.

All of the school administrators expressed an interest in finding ways to connect more with the parents of WiseGuyz. One suggestion was to hold a parent night

for all parents of WiseGuyz about "how to talk with your teenage boy about sexual health."

## Implications and Considerations

### Programmatic Implications

*“Prevention programs aimed at young men and boys are most effective when they are comprehensive, intensive, relevant and employ positive messages.”<sup>39</sup>*

### WiseGuyz as a Promising Practice

An effective prevention program for boys employs one or more of the following four strategies: developing empathy; learning the meaning of consent; reducing bystander behaviour; and re-imagining what it means to be male.<sup>40</sup> This research study demonstrates how WiseGuyz used all of these strategies to varying degrees. The combination of these creates a vigorous program from which long-lasting impacts can be anticipated in the lives of boys.

Grounding our theory of promising practices in the data, it is proposed that the following core elements of practice would be necessary in fostering a robust and effective healthy relationship program for boys. Positioning WiseGuyz as a promising practice sets it up for new forms of evaluation, including formative and summative which would help articulate the changes that are occurring for the boys based on the promising practices of the program. These include:

1. Gender Specific Programming (Program for Boys)
2. Long-Term Formal Partnership with Schools
3. Program is the Length of School Year
4. Program Occurs During School Hours
5. External Community-Based Male Facilitators
6. Group Based Participatory Process
7. Comprehensive Integrated and Experiential Based Curriculum

These are important and interrelated practices, however, two overarching concepts persisted in our research findings, namely, the critical importance of a

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<sup>39</sup> McCormack, M and Anderson, E. 'It's Just Not Acceptable Any More': *The Erosion of Homophobia and the Softening of Masculinity at an English Sixth Form*. In SAGE. 44(5): 843–859.p.10

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

same-gender program and the long-term participatory nature of WiseGuyz. Engaging the boys over a longer period of time is critical to creating longer-term impact, because as Berkowitz claims, "too often school-based work is piecemeal, consisting of a one-time classroom presentation or occasional school assemblies...a review of violence prevention literature shows that one time approaches are unlikely to have much of a long-term impact on attitudes and behavior regarding violence."<sup>41</sup>

### WiseGuyz as Violence Prevention

*So I think that they're [boys in WiseGuyz] comfortable with who they are is one thing, but they're also knowledgeable of how other people may act and what that might look like and what does violence looks like when you see it...So I think the fact that they're more tuned in to what the possibilities could be and how they want to conduct themselves and what they might watch for people in their lifetime that they value that I think that's a big part of it (School Administrator, School A).*

Issues related to male privilege and control are identified within the top three major factors in predicting the perpetration of violence against women.<sup>42</sup> "[M]ale entitlement and stereotypical notions of gender roles" were identified in the Lancet of Factors as the most significant predictors of perpetration of violence.<sup>43</sup> This is one of the primary objectives of WiseGuyz: to cultivate consciousness within the boys of WiseGuyz to understand how male privilege and stereotypical notions are created and how these impact their relationships. In particular, this means learning to be attuned to language and how it perpetuates stereotypes, both of which were present in the learnings across all WiseGuyz programs.

*"It's better to start it with WiseGuyz, than to fix it with WiseGuyz".* This excerpt from a Past WiseGuyz participant succinctly summarizes the importance of the purpose of WiseGuyz and the timing of when it is offered in the boys' life. The

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<sup>41</sup> Berkowitz, A., Jaff, P., Peacock, D., Rosenbluth, B. and Sousa, C. (2003). *Young Men as Allies in Preventing Violence and Abuse: Building Effective Partnerships with Schools*. Retrieved from [http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc\\_Files\\_VAWnet/YoungMenAllies.pdf](http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/YoungMenAllies.pdf). p.5

<sup>42</sup> Crooks, C., Goodall, G., Hughes, R., Jaffe, P. Baler.,L. (2007). Engaging Men and Boys in Preventing Violence Against Women. Applying a Cognitive-Behavioral Model. *Violence Against Women*. 13(3), 217-239.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

boys are in Grade 9 and in Calgary that means they are considered to be at the top of the pyramid of Junior High. Once they finish Grade 9, they transition to High School, which begins at Grade 10. One of the boys shared that he wished there was a WiseGuyz in high school. WiseGuyz was valuable in preparing the boys for this major transition in the lives to Grade 10, however as they endure their first year of High School they reminisced of how the support they felt in WiseGuyz would have been very beneficial to their lives in Grade 10:

By Grade 9 I'd say like a lot of the guys, like the greatest portion of the guys hadn't actually been in a lot of serious relationship. Like there were quite a few who had but like the majority of guys still had like room to learn. It's better to start off a foundation of like dating and ah, sexual relationships and stuff, *it's better to start it with WiseGuyz than to fix it with WiseGuyz.*

This research began with an explorative discussion about masculinity—uncertain of what would be found, yet also believing that something is at play with the concept of masculinity within the WiseGuyz program. Secondary research points to a robust link between traditional constructs of masculinity being implicit in violence against women. This powerful hypothesis cannot be understated. It also supported our efforts to better understand the ways that masculinity shapes and defines the boys.

When WiseGuyz was being developed it was informed by practices of male responsibility, group based programs, healthy relationship curriculums, and youth group approaches to the prevention of violence. Targeting young men during their natural age of curiosity about relationships and sexuality, while they are forming their gender identity is a critical strategy in creating healthy sexuality and relationships for male youth. Research emphasizes the engagement of young men as a key violence-reduction strategy.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Wolfe, D, Crooks, C et al. (2009). A School-Based Program to Prevent Adolescent Dating Violence. *American Medical Association*, 163(8), 692-699.

Crooks, V and Wolfe, D et al. (2008). Development, Evaluation and National Implementation of a School-Based Program to reduce violence and related risk behaviour: Lessons from the Fourth R. *IPC Review*, 2, 110-134.

In Kaufman's work, he identified the importance of involving men and boys in work towards gender equality and ending gender violence.<sup>45</sup> He notes that it is the very launching of new initiatives strategically focused on boys and men that is needed to create gender equality and violence prevention. Further, the boys are at an ideal age of forming their identities that the program can influence identity formation and open up new ideas of masculinity:

For younger boys, our initiatives might even appear more indirect. In the years where they are forming their self-identity as men, it is critical we intervene with work focused on gender identity. Here we have an opportunity to shape their attitudes, behaviors, and expectations. Our work might productively focus on themes such as respect and conflict resolution.<sup>46</sup>

The research participants agreed that in a larger and long-term context, WiseGuyz can be seen as a violence prevention program. Further, it was noted that in order for WiseGuyz to be more specifically a violence prevention program it would need to target boys who are already displaying at-risk behaviour of violence, and that a different type of program might be needed for these boys. This would also shift WiseGuyz from being a prevention program to an intervention program. Caution was offered by school administrators in terms of cause and effect and the impossibility to say confidently that this program directly prevents violence. However, the behaviors that change for the boys will likely lead to sustaining healthy relationships. A school administrator from School B, referred to WiseGuyz as planting a seed, and that when critical moments arise in the future for the boys, she hopes they will draw from their learnings in WiseGuyz.

### Formative and Summative Evaluation and Research

A key learning through the research, particularly in talking with WiseGuyz past participants was that their recognition of significant changes in learning and behaviour was accessible to them by reflecting on the program at least six

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<sup>45</sup> Kaufman, M. (2003). The Aim Framework: Addressing and Involving Men and Boys To Promote Gender Equality and End Gender Discrimination and Violence. p.13.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

months after they completed it. When collecting real-time outcome data from the boys, the data needs to be considered with some limitations of the development of fourteen-year boys and their capacities for depth of reflection in the moment of their learning. Their learning evolves over the eight-month period and their responses to surveys and involvement in focus groups may become more in-depth as they further develop through the program.

## Theoretical Implications

### Inclusive Masculinities

*I mean there's always like the pressure that the media has on you: every guys needs to be like 6 ft. tall and have nice pecs and nice abs. They need to be confident when they're around women. All those things. But then taking from WiseGuyz...we had specific classes based around how the media portrays people and how it's unrealistic and that kind of stuff. It kind of just really made me sit there and think, that's not the man I wanna be. I know what it means to be a man, to be a man is to pretty much to be myself and if the girl I want wants me to be a 6 ft. tall bodybuilder with awesome abs them, maybe I don't want that girl (WiseGuyz Past Participant).*

*"We propose that at the heart of the end goal of engaging men and boys in violence prevention is broader and more varied concepts of masculinity."<sup>47</sup>*

The boys involved in WiseGuyz are well-meaning boys; a term adapted from Crooks et al. from the term the "well meaning men"<sup>48</sup>. The well-meaning men are the ones that can have a pivotal role in "acknowledging the role male privilege and socialization plays in sexual assault as well as violence against women in general."<sup>49</sup> The process of re-imagining masculinities is contingent; to re-imagine we must be kin to the current realities of masculinity that are laden with culture, religion, values and beliefs. By looking to the field and theory of masculinity, it helps us to "understand how boys are socialized into prevailing norms about

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<sup>47</sup> Crooks, C., Goodall, G., Hughes, R., Jaffe, P. Baler., L. 2007. Engaging Men and Boys in Preventing Violence Against Women. Applying a Cognitive-Behavioral Model. *Violence Against Women*. 13(3), 217-239.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

what is socially acceptable 'masculine' behaviour and how adherence to this prevailing norm can sometimes have negative consequences for their health and development."<sup>50</sup> The existence of masculinity is dependent on the heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality<sup>51</sup> and the perpetuation of the gender binary.

Through the WiseGuyz program, the boys engage in re-imagining masculinities through how they behaved inside of the WiseGuyz program, and further how this spread to their behaviour in relationships and with themselves outside of the program. Driving questions of this research include: Why is re-imagining masculinity important specifically for youth? What role can healthy relationship programs play in this re-imagining? What role does the broader socio-cultural context play? Can we imagine new masculinities? In order for us to re-imagine or to reinvent masculinities, we also, and ironically, have a reliance on the convention of traditional masculinity. Therefore the question to ask is not *what is possible*, but what is *impossible*? If we begin to articulate what might initially be considered impossible masculinities, this then becomes the very heart of what the new masculinities can be. Invention requires the convention:

Although defining a new notion of masculinity is difficult, it is possible to identify some of the key themes of traditional masculinity as a point of comparison; for example, Hong (1998, 2000) used the key tenets articulated by David and Brannon (1976): "no sissy stuff," "be a big wheel," "be a sturdy oak," and "give 'em hell." Hong summarized: Men must avoid behaving in any manner that can be perceived as feminine; they must be the most important individual in their domain; they must be independent, controlled, and unemotional; and they must be aggressive risk-takers. <sup>52</sup>

WiseGuyz is not an intervention program, rather boys play a significant role in motivating a paradigm shift. It is about helping boys to understand that even if

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<sup>50</sup> *What about boys? A Literature Review on the Health and Development of Adolescent Boys.* (2000). World Health Organization. p.9

<sup>51</sup> Rich, A. (1986). *Blood, Bread and Poetry.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

<sup>52</sup> Crooks, C., Goodall, G., Hughes, R., Jaffe, P., Baler, L. (2007). Engaging Men and Boys in Preventing Violence Against Women. Applying a Cognitive-Behavioral Model. *Violence Against Women.* 13(3), 217-239.

they position themselves as the “good guy” they do not stand outside a cultural system that is violent--- instead, they are complicit in it:

But the systematic prevention of domestic and sexual violence means looking at how culture systems are implicated in perpetration by individuals, much in the way a racist society is implicated in the racist acts of individuals or institutions. I don't think it is credible for men to say, "I have nothing to do with (gender violence) because I'm a good guy."<sup>53</sup>

Developing a consciousness of understanding the implications of compliance within an oppressive culture is a profound, yet not, easy task. Beginning to dream of new masculinities does not necessarily begin by simply being opposed to conventional masculinity, but also by being open to something that may initially be unrecognizable. This very redefining is what Crooks proposes is the ultimate end goal of engaging men and boys in violence prevention

We propose that at the heart of the end goal of engaging men and boys in violence prevention is broader and more varied concepts of masculinity (Frank et al., 2003). As a society, we have to fundamentally extend the notion of what it means to be a man. At one level, exploring new masculinities is an intellectual, philosophical, and introspective endeavor and one that many men may never undertake.<sup>54</sup>

Reinventing masculinities does not mean to replace the definition of masculinity, but rather a deconstructing of it. One of most important parts of re-imagining masculinities and gender roles is the space to simply talk openly, to be emotionally literate. Speaking openly is a deceptively simple statement. Unpacking the construct of “to speak openly” means to look at the work that WiseGuyz undergoes and the socio-cultural realities of the boys' lives that make it possible for them to feel that they cannot speak openly. For WiseGuyz, this means that this space will be more generative if it is boys only. When given the

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<sup>53</sup> Jackson Katz, Retrieved May 2013, [http://www.jacksonkatz.com/pub\\_interview.html](http://www.jacksonkatz.com/pub_interview.html)

<sup>54</sup> Crooks, C., Goodall, G., Hughes, R., Jaffe, P. Baler., L. (2007). Engaging Men and Boys in Preventing Violence Against Women. Applying a Cognitive–Behavioral Model. *Violence Against Women*. 13(3), 217-239.

space and safety they share their thoughts about things like dating, feeling pressured to have sex and feeling objectified by their penis size. They discuss what they think a good relationship might mean when they are older, and they use words like “trust” and “equal.” They have open conversations about gay men, or how they would be supportive if a friend was gay. They discuss how you can still be gay and masculine because they have seen images of “buff gay men.” The space that is opened is one of flux, where the boys can be *with* the flux, to share their insights safely and be open to understanding differently. This is the very point: to speak openly and share each other’s thoughts. One of the best way to undo their conceptions of traditional scripts of manliness is to surface their internalized notions of this for the possibility that there may be changes, or re-imaginings.

The boys of WiseGuyz volunteer to be part of the program. They may have some gentle coaxing by a teacher or Vice-Principal who feels that may benefit, but still, the decision remains with the boy to participate. Given that they self-select this also means their motivation to participate is high. The boys of WiseGuyz come with varied experiences and characteristics of class, race, and family status. Some of the boys have a traditional family structure, some have sole support parents and some live in foster-care. We can safely say this is a heterogeneous group of boys. However, in spite of their differences their discussions about masculinity and the roles of manhood were strikingly similar across different schools and different programs:

So the cutting edge of gender violence prevention is to critically interrogate how the culture is defining manhood, and masculinity -- of course, cutting across class, race and ethnicity in complex ways. I can't overlook the complexities of this undertaking, but at its heart, this is a very long-term project that involves redefining what it means to be a man.<sup>55</sup>

As Katz reminds us, the “heart of this work” is to redefine what it means to be a man. Wanting to get at the heart of working with young men within a context of

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<sup>55</sup> Jackson Katz, Retrieved May 2013, [http://www.jacksonkatz.com/pub\\_interview.html](http://www.jacksonkatz.com/pub_interview.html)

violence prevention and sexual health is not unique. This is gender-based violence prevention work.

## Summary

*"WiseGuyz is more than just missing school and playing video games and learning about sex. You'll learn about yourself as a person"*  
(WiseGuyz Past Participant).

"It is true that it takes time to change social norms that are so deeply rooted in structures of gender and power, even so there is room for optimism."<sup>56</sup> WiseGuyz embodies this optimism. Indeed there are clear and profound changes that occur for the boys within WiseGuyz, however the larger work of the program is in partnership with allied stakeholders to shift inhibiting social norms of gender and power.

WiseGuyz is in a growing stage of implementation and continues to re-constitute itself through on-going learning. Currently, at its essence, WiseGuyz is a group based participatory process in which young teen boys are able to experience and engage in profound discussions about sexuality, sexual health, gender, relationships and masculinity. The space that is co-created over the eight months is defined by safety and trust as boys feel comfortable being vulnerable and outwardly emotive; they begin to feel freed from the traditional scripts of masculinity.

By engaging in the process of WiseGuyz, boys experience the very tenets of a healthy relationship. By understanding and experiencing safety; trust; belonging; a reliable social network; non-judgmental inquiry and discussions, the boys are then able to be compassionate, empathetic, and critical thinkers with themselves and in their relationships. Further, they are able to discern in their environments when they or someone they know is in an unhealthy relationship. They are also able to recognize aggressive or violent behaviours among their

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<sup>56</sup> Katz, J. (2006). *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How all Men Can Help*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc. p.7.

peers. They are gaining the confidence, empathy, discernment and sense of responsibility to interrupt negative and undesirable behaviors in their own lives or in others around them. In essence, they become the involved by-stander—they are the well-meaning boy becoming the well-meaning man who is not complicit. In doing this, they are enacting inclusive masculinities. By *learning* to be different than the traditional masculine norm, they are also *being* different:

Although extending notions of masculinity can seem esoteric, the concept of the cognitive-behavioral triad dictates that taking specific action will likely alter men's thoughts and attitudes. Thus, rather than targeting the notion of masculinity in a vacuum, the focus can be on encouraging men to take actions that, in turn, may raise their awareness of gender issues and challenge their beliefs.<sup>57</sup>

WiseGuyz is a deep experiential program that changes these boys. Their learning is not only cognitive, but also embodied as they begin to be in the world in ways that are different than when they began WiseGuyz. Through WiseGuyz, the boys begin to unravel the heteronormative values and behaviours that are required of them to maintain their masculinity; they are part of a safe space to challenge their own beliefs and feel supported by a network in doing this. Thus, by co-creating a space and process in which a group of boys come together over the period of the school year, the boys collectively re-imagine and re-generate meaningful narratives of masculinity for themselves. These narratives are marked with connectivity, bonding, emotional literacy, empathy, and critical attunement of healthy behaviours and relationships.

As grandiose as the idea first sounded, boys in a current WiseGuyz program spoke of how they believed they could change the world if each boy from WiseGuyz influenced another boy and then another. One of the wise-boys remarked about the program: *'I think it should be everywhere...I think it should*

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<sup>57</sup> Crooks, C., Goodall, G., Hughes, R., Jaffe, P., Baler, L. 2007. Engaging Men and Boys in Preventing Violence Against Women. Applying a Cognitive-Behavioral Model. *Violence Against Women*. 13(3), 217-239.

*be all over Canada and the States. I think it would change everything."* Then again, perhaps it is not so grandiose after all.