

RESISTING LOCKER ROOM TALK:

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

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In 2016, the *Harvard Crimson* published [a story](#) that deserves wider attention.

From the opening:

In what appears to have been a yearly team tradition, a member of Harvard's 2012 men's soccer team produced a document that, in sexually explicit terms, individually assessed and evaluated freshmen recruits from the 2012 women's soccer team based on their perceived physical attractiveness and sexual appeal....

In lewd terms, the author of the report individually evaluated each female recruit, assigning them numerical scores and writing paragraph-long assessments of the women. The document also included photographs of each woman, most of which, the author wrote, were culled from Facebook or the Internet.

Significantly, this story was investigated in the midst of the 2016 Presidential election, around the time the "Access Hollywood" tape became public. In that tape Donald Trump refers to grabbing women "by the pussy." Though the

television personality talking to Trump lost his job over the conversation, Trump was able to brush it off as "locker room talk" and become President.

In response to Trump's characterization of his conversation as locker room talk, athletes reported that they've never been in any locker room where men talked like Trump. And though I've never been in a locker room where men bragged about assaulting women in the way Trump does on the "Access Hollywood" tape, I was not surprised when I learned about Harvard's team tradition of ranking and objectifying women.

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As hard as it can be to admit, locker room talk is our normal. It is normal that men rank women, it is normal that men objectify women, it is normal that men's behavior toward women—cat-calling, grabbing women and worse—is still dismissed as "boys being boys," and is often not seen as something that should derail a man's upward trajectory or negatively impact his reputation.

The normalcy is difficult to disrupt, because just as boys are taught that locker room culture is normal, they are also pressured to be good boys,

where being a good boy means being compliant. One of the most interesting things I read about the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation hearing came from philosopher Robert Paul Wolff's blog. Here is [the conclusion to the post](#):

Brett Kavanaugh is a Good Boy. He has done everything that was demanded of him as a boy, and has been spectacularly successful. Now, the entire enormously painful psychologically demanding series of inner repressions and compromises on which his entire life has been built is being called into question by the public revelation of that repressed side, that back side, that hidden side of his psyche. His testimony yesterday was a desperate, impassioned, terrified cry: **I AM A GOOD BOY**. To deny him the Supreme Court seat is to tell him that those sacrifices, repressions, and denials were for naught. Christine Blasey Ford was telling the truth. But so was Brett Kavanaugh. Not about the actual incident. He was telling the truth as he genuinely believes it. He is a Good Boy.

A boy can act in ways that are utterly terrible—to women, to other men, to his own self—and yet still be supported in the belief that he is a good boy. He does what is demanded of him: he works

hard, he plays hard, he keeps his head down and conforms. A boy like this may end up on the Harvard soccer team, and though he may hate the document that ranks the women's team, he may not know what to do in response to it.

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I mention Kavanaugh and the Harvard men's team as emblematic, not because I hope to say anything of particular interest about Kavanaugh or Harvard. The point is that men can be 'good boys' and do terrible things, and that locker room culture is abhorrent, even at elite institutions.

Locker room culture is our normal, and anyone who deviates from this culture risks punishment. Knowing this, we have to appreciate that any movement against locker room culture involves us in resistance, and good boys don't resist. As a result, educators have to go out of their way to create opportunities for boys to see that locker room culture is unjust and that being a good boy is not a simple thing in a culture where injustice is tolerated. One way we might begin doing the work of helping boys question locker room talk is by considering case studies like the Harvard soccer team and see where they lead.

Imagine bringing a group of high school boys together to discuss this case. Ask them to consider it from inside the men's soccer team. What would inspire someone to create this list? What would inspire some other players to ask for this

list? How would a first-year player respond to this list? Could they do anything about it and still be accepted by the team? What about a senior starter who doesn't approve of the list? What could he do?

After talking through these types of questions, they could change perspectives. Think about the women being ranked. Think about the parents of the women being ranked (this list was public through a shared Google site). Think about what would happen if your future employer or partner or child saw you on this list. Think about how you would feel as a woman recruited to play at Harvard if you were aware of this list. Think about what you would do if you were not on the team but were friends with men on the team or women on the list.

I trust that young men can have good discussions of this case, and I suggest that we bring cases like this to young men so they can begin thinking about how they might respond in these situations. My hope is that as men have these conversations, they will see that more men are bystanders than perpetrators of this culture. That is, on the Harvard soccer team, we can imagine some men who actively enjoyed the list, some who tolerated it and some who were disgusted by it and didn't know what to do.

By allowing young men the opportunity to discuss case studies of locker room culture, it may come to be seen as the abnormal and toxic thing it is. When men begin to see that far more

of their peers are bystanders who wish they had a way to change locker room culture, they may find the [courage to be an upstander](#) who disrupts and resists the normalizing force of that culture. Teachers can facilitate this growth by using cases like this to free their students to take a step away from being a good boy and toward becoming a [decent person](#).

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Exploring a case study like the one offered by the Harvard soccer team begins illustrating the harms of locker room culture. A young man will be positioned to see that locker room culture is harmful to others, but so long as he doesn't get in trouble—so long as his reputation remains untouched by his involvement in locker room culture—he may not see the ways that he is harmed by it as well.

This is why teachers must also facilitate opportunities for philosophical thinking that allows young men to reflect on the ways that they are hurt by this same culture, even if it doesn't negatively impact their reputation. I offer three ideas teachers can use to promote this type of thinking.

First, teachers can help men appreciate how a locker room culture that ranks and objectifies women also—but differently—ranks and objectifies them. Men must flatten their full self to fit [the mask of acceptable masculinity](#). Wearing the mask means playing by the rules of the game, even if this means

compromising his morals in the process. Though he may not want to pick on men who are perceived as weak or comment on the appearance of women to win the approval of other men, he fears what would happen if he didn't. He worries that if he opts out of the game, he might move to the bottom of the hierarchy. Locker room culture is, by its nature, a zero-sum game. Some win, some lose, and often a great deal of cruelty is let loose in the world in an effort to maintain one's position in this hierarchy. As teachers, we can help young men consider whether or not they want to play by the rules of this type of a game. Do they want to live in fear of finding themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, or do they want to approach community and sociality in another way?

I encourage us to think about how we can demonstrate, through the very classrooms we create, that there are other ways of being together that don't involve a zero-sum mentality. A classroom can nurture a sense of belonging, becoming a place where students are rewarded for taking risks and working hard to discover and achieve their unique potential. They can see the good of collaborating with their peers and learn to appreciate that giving and receiving support is not a sign of weakness. As teachers, we can banish locker room culture from our classrooms by being a place where every student can get the support they need to be successful.

In addition to providing students with these types of classrooms, we can provide opportunities for reflection. We can ask a boy to consider: What type of community does he want to be part of? Does he prefer a classroom where he lives in fear of being wrong or one where he gives and receives support freely? Does he really enjoy the type of person he is when he views the women in his class through the eyes of locker room culture, or does he like the person he is when he is genuinely curious about their thinking and excited to see what they can learn together? Does he prefer aspiring to [become an equal](#) with the members of his classroom or does he want to assert, or cling to, his feeling of superiority? Though his culture may tell him that he should prefer a world of ranking and objectification, he may feel otherwise if he is allowed to experience, and reflect on, the alternatives.

Second, the fact that men have mostly [responded with fear to the #MeToo movement](#) is a sad commentary on the state of masculinity. Men are so afraid of being falsely accused in the #MeToo era that they fixate on the fear of something that may never happen to them instead of being afraid for the state of their own conscience and well-being. I worry that we trump up fears of being falsely accused as an excuse for keeping the status quo of locker room culture in place. While most men will never be falsely accused during the #MeToo era, they will all—*all*—have to live with what they did and failed to do to better the state of their own conscience now

that they are made more fully aware of the harms of locker room culture.

The *New York Times* ran a powerful piece call "[Eight Stories of Men's Regret](#)" that describes how men are haunted by their past misdeeds. Teachers can help young men see that conscience eventually has its day. The memories of what men do to women will stay with them, even if no one ever finds out what they did. A literature class reading "The Tell-Tale Heart," or *Crime and Punishment* (to take two examples), or a history class studying the ways ordinary citizens were complicit with injustices in the past, can also spend time reflecting on how behavior deemed harmless by locker room culture may haunt a man for his entire life.

Third, teachers can provide assurance that resisting locker room culture does not mean hating men or rejecting virtues that some see as traditionally masculine. One way to do this is to help men reflect on what they [value in other men](#). When we look to literature or history for exemplars of masculinity, do we turn to the powerful Creon or the strong Atticus Finch? Do we aspire to be feared like so many authoritarian leaders, or respected for the quiet dignity of someone like Lincoln or [James Baldwin](#)? At the end of the year, students can write essays on the topic of what it means to be a good man, drawing on history and literature, and then they can use this standpoint to talk back to the voices telling them to

view any criticism of locker room culture as an attack on men everywhere.

Here is where I find teachers uniquely positioned to do young men a great deal of good. School can be a place apart where we can think about who we are and who we hope to become. Forming men of character should not be left to cable news and Facebook. Teachers can encourage young men to consider the costs of condoning locker room culture while presenting them with exemplars who have the courage to resist injustice. These exemplars are not good boys, they are men of integrity, and this is something all young men can aspire to become. We are at a point in our history when we can see that moral education requires that we help men resist locker room culture while also helping them aspire to a more humane vision of what it means to be a man.

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These are just three examples, and I imagine teachers can think of others that will work for the subject and students they teach. What unites these examples is freeing students to resist the normalization of locker room culture and giving them the opportunity to reflect on the world they want to live in. (For more inspiration, see curriculum from organizations like [MenEngageAlliance](#) and [Promundo](#)).

It is important to recognize that any advice for practicing teachers can feel additive. Teaching is a difficult enough art; to suggest that teachers do

more, taking on the additional task of resisting locker room culture, may seem a poor way of appreciating that fact. If I believed that resisting locker room culture is only additive—an extra demand on the time of already hardworking teachers—I wouldn't be suggesting it. Rather, when I think of resources for teachers, I find that the act of resistance provides a teacher with a well of strength they can draw on.

When we give young men the gift of disentangling themselves from locker room culture, we are reminded of the transformative power of education. When we create a space of equality in our classrooms, where students are freed from zero-sum thinking and empowered to create new possibilities, we are living into a future that is affirming. When we think together about the type of people we want to become and the type of world we hope to bring into existence, we tap into the type of power that comes from having vision. That is, the work of envisioning the future we hope to live is a resource we can draw on, knowing that [resistance is an unending task](#).

Elise Boulding suggests that we live in a [200-year present](#) connecting us to the oldest person who held us as a child and the youngest child we will hold at the end of our life. From the viewpoint of the bare present, the world can appear hopeless. The beneficiaries of locker room culture remain in power and the backlash to any resistance is swift and strong. We are overwhelmed, and this saps our energy.

Boulding's 200-year present allows us to draw on the hopes for equality nurtured by our grandparents and appreciate how these have taken root in the present. More, it causes us to appreciate that our work with children today will flower into the future. Taking this long view reminds us that, without vision, possibilities perish. It is this resource, the hope nurtured by vision, that we need now as ever. As we free students from locker room culture, we get back in touch with the power to envision a better future and create conditions in our classrooms that allow us to keep hope for that future alive. This prophetic power gives us renewed strength to resist and create resources that allow our students to resist as well.

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Before closing, it is important to emphasize the significance of coaches. Young men look up to coaches and often hunger for their approval. Though it is common to claim that sports can build character, if we want this to be more than an empty platitude, we need coaches to see the power they have to shape locker room culture and its future. Coaches can create a space of belonging for young men, where they belong by virtue of their willingness to work hard, to support others in times of vulnerability, to celebrate shared victories, and aspire together to be upstanders who use their social power to create a future where locker room culture is called the toxic and harmful

thing it is and where young boys are inspired to be men of integrity.

Tremendous pressure exists to maintain the status quo. I hope we have the courage to resist and cultivate an imagination that frees us to envision better possibilities for the young men we care about, and the world that will be impacted by the [quality of their character](#).