

PiXL INSIGHTS

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS TO
raise boys' achievement

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WELCOME

Welcome to our second PiXL Insights publication on raising boys' achievement. This publication has felt a little like a homecoming. Back in July 2021, we were trying to work out how we could help our member schools close the gender achievement gap. We wanted to support their work while recognising that boys are not a homogenous group and therefore any intervention put in place would need to be highly personalised to each school's context.

So, we decided the best thing we could do would be to support schools on their individual journeys as they developed small-scale projects to meet the needs of their boys in their settings. Our commitment to those schools was to support their thinking and give a platform to their insights through our first ever Insights publication which was released in July 2022.

Putting together the second issue of this publication has been a real privilege. We've been able to reflect on how far we've come with Insights – since issue 1 of raising boys' achievement we have expanded our support into EYFS, KS1 and KS2, and have run projects on three more cohorts (learners with SEND, more able learners, and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds).

As we have worked more in this area, we have had the privilege of working with many colleagues and specialists – several of whom you will be hearing from alongside our schools in the following pages. We present research from Ulster University, bring you a call to action from Boys' Impact, and share practical tips from leading experts such as Mark Roberts and Mike Nicholson.

We are also thrilled that this publication has been **sponsored by Educake** as part of their ongoing commitment to supporting young people, their teachers, and our work here at PiXL. Educake supports tens of thousands of educators as they work to raise outcomes in schools. Within this publication you'll find examples of how Educake equips teachers with valuable insights that inform their classroom practice for raising boys' achievement. Through their popular homework and revision tool, Educake has billions of data points that enable detailed insights into progress and challenges across subject, age range and various demographic cohorts.

We want to take this opportunity to thank the schools and colleagues who have volunteered to participate in the projects that make up this magazine. Schools are busy places, and we appreciate the time that staff have found to engage with us on this project. Networking and collaboration are at the heart of how we support schools at PiXL, so our door is always open for you to share any thoughts and feedback with us. Contact us on insights@pixl.org.uk.

Happy reading!

BOYS' IMPACT

Starting a new conversation about working-class boys and young men in education

DR ALEX BLOWER
FOUNDER, BOYS' IMPACT

As educators, promoting equity of access to educational opportunity is a purpose which, for many of us, is our reason for getting out of bed in the morning. However, one of the most significant challenges in activity aligned to this aim, comes in the form of how young men who are eligible for Free Schools Meals engage with education.

And the challenge is generational. Over the last two decades, commentary on the disparity in educational outcomes has become well-trodden ground for think tanks and policy makers. From the 2006 report to the then Department for Education and Skills on Raising Boys' Achievement¹ by academics from the University of Cambridge, to the 2016 report on the underachievement of young men in education by the Higher Education Policy Institute², the issues have been articulated and rearticulated for years.

So, given that policy makers have been aware of the issue for longer than young people currently attending secondary schools have been alive, why are the gaps still so entrenched?

Why is it that, in 2025, PiXL still need to produce this publication in order to provide educators with the tools to engage with the challenge in an equitable manner?

Well, it's complicated. The issues are deeply connected to wider societal inequalities in a way which can make it difficult to know where to begin. In the classroom, these play out in a range of ways with young men. It can be seen in issues arising from masculine expectations, peer pressure, relationships, mental health and poverty. They are linked to the preconceptions held by teachers, and the messages transmitted to young men within our educational ecosystems. They amalgamate to create a set of expectations surrounding what being a young man in education 'should' mean, especially if the student happens to be from a working-class background. However, for decades this complexity has been overlooked. In its place have been persistent narratives which have created a stereotypical caricature of who these working-class boys and young men in our classrooms are.

Rather than being discussed as individuals with a broad array of likes, interests, and hopes for the future, they are presented as aggressive, anti-authoritarian and morally lacking. We have seen it in the way they are presented as aspirationally deficient³ by policy makers, and in newspaper headlines telling us that one in three teachers say boys consider being asked to read as a punishment⁴. **In short, we have done a very good job of convincing ourselves that the problem is with young men:** that they make decisions consciously, independent of the wider inequalities they may experience. And perhaps most importantly, that all of these decisions are the same. Under the collective lens we have created to view the challenge, there is no room to consider the important link between the young men and the conditions they exist in. Instead, the overwhelming focus is on how we further problematise their existence in the world.

On top of this, there is the argument about whether we should even be targeting activity specifically toward young men in the first place. In a patriarchal society which is plagued by gender inequality, sexual harassment and violence

against women and children, are the working-class boys really where we should be investing our resource? In my view, the emergence of toxic social media influencers such as Andrew Tate has gone a long way to answering that question for us. Rather than targeted engagement with young men in education being viewed as optional, the rise in misogynistic content on social media platforms such as TikTok has led to it becoming a necessity. Fitting snugly into the gap which has been made by assumptive practice with young men in education, driven by stereotypes, and narratives of deficiency, we now find education of another form. Delivered through mobile phones and three-minute videos, young men engage with lessons which inform them that their traditional role as breadwinner is under threat. That their masculinity and power is being eroded by pernicious network of educational and social actors who wish to emasculate them. With the approach taken in educational policy and practice with young men, we continue to play right into these influencer's hands.

Rather than an established societal consensus on issues linked to masculinity, inequality and educating boys and young men, we see polarisation. Arguments about whether we should work with young men because they are 'perpetrators of misogyny in waiting', or because the feminist movement 'has pushed them out'. If these are the only positions available to take in public discourse about working-class young men in education, we are doomed to failure. We need something new. To discard the broken lens we've been using to view the issue, and move forward with a new, deeper understanding of the issues young working-class men face. In the book *Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined*, JJ Bola writes:

"Because society is generally patriarchal, in that it favours men that occupy privileged positions, it makes it seem as though men do not have issues they also suffer from. It is a kind of double-edged sword, a poisonous panacea: that is to say, the same system that puts men at an advantage in society is essentially the same system that limits them, inhibits their growth and eventually leads to their breakdown"

In other words, two truths can, and must, be held at once. We live in a patriarchal society which causes hurt. It is a sword that cuts both ways, harming young men and young women alike. For men, the injuries relate to mental ill health and suicide, entry into the criminal justice system and homelessness. Whilst for women it rears its ugly head in gender pay gaps, sexual harassment, and violence against women and children. It is a set of societal conditions which benefit very few, and one in which it is imperative that we create space for young men to talk and connect in spaces where they feel their voice is valued and valuable. Not by focusing on perceived deficiencies, not by focusing on what they can be in the future, but by focusing on **who** they can be. By working to cultivate the conditions where a happy, healthy future isn't an abstract hope or ambition, but rather it is an expectation.

¹ Younger, M., Warrington, M., Gray, J., Rudduck, J., McLellan, R., Bearne, E., Kershner, R. and Bricheno, P. (2005) **Raising boys' achievement** [online]. [PDF]. DFES Publications. Available from: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/5400/1/RR636.pdf> [Accessed 7 Nov 24]

² Hillman, N. and Robinson, N. (2016) **Boys to Men: The underachievement of young men in higher education-and how to start tackling it** [online]. [PDF]. Higher Education Policy Institute. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/05/12/3317/> [Accessed 7 Nov 24]

³ Adams, Richard. (2018) Ofsted chief: **Families of white working-class children lack drive of migrants**. The Guardian [online]. 22 June. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jun/21/families-white-working-class-children-economic-burden-lack-drive-of-migrants> [Accessed 7 Nov 24]

⁴ Busby, E. (2023) **One in three teachers say boys consider being asked to read as a 'punishment'**. The Independent [online]. 08 March. Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/yougov-geoff-barton-scotland-wales-association-of-school-and-college-leaders-b2296177.html> [Accessed 7 Nov 24]

Boys' Impact

Back in 2023, I founded Boys' Impact. It is dedicated to addressing the gap in educational outcomes for boys and young men who receive Free School Meals. As a network of educators, researchers and practitioners, our approach is strengths-based and evidence-led. Boys' Impact exists to create ecosystems in research, policy and practice which enable boys and young men who experience socio-economic inequality to flourish. Using the Taking Boys Seriously research as our foundational knowledge-base we bring people together to meet the challenge equitably and effectively. In fact, you will be hearing from a few of our members throughout this publication. To find out more about our work visit boysimpact.com.





AN ARTICLE BY MIKE NICHOLSON OF PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITY

Promoting positive narratives of masculinity in our schools

Being an English Teacher was all I'd known for 18 years and, quite frankly, something I would have been happy doing for the rest of my professional life. But I grew increasingly concerned about the social narrative around masculinity and its impact on boys and young men: the ubiquitous term 'toxic masculinity', the seeming lack of access to positive male role models, the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of masculinity within the media, the loss of meaningful real-world connections in the lives of boys and young men. Is it any wonder that charismatic online influencers who push regressive, dominance-based models of masculinity are finding such fertile ground for their ideologies?

Imagine being a confused 13-year-old boy who feels unseen, unheard and frustrated: who very rarely sees positive representation of someone like himself. Imagine then stumbling across a TikTok of a man who is articulate, confident, athletic, surrounded with extravagant displays of wealth and he offers you the secrets and shortcuts to masculine success; all you have to do is subscribe to his socials and follow his teachings. It's a very powerful, almost cult-like, rhetoric and right now there is an entire industry of masculinity influencers, gurus, bros and 'experts' targeting our boys with these tactics (which essentially amount to radicalisation).

At Progressive Masculinity we create safe, nonjudgemental spaces to openly discuss issues like this as well as topics often considered taboo within the male world and the response from the young men who we work with has been phenomenal. *“These sessions made me realise I don't have to pretend to be someone else. Someone I don't like being anyway”* (Year 11 Pupil). Below is a series of tips which we have found to be very effective when trying to create supportive environments in educational settings.

GET CURIOUS, NOT FURIOUS

The work of Dr Kaitlyn Regehr, Director of Digital Humanities at University College, London, highlights some of the reasons why disenfranchised boys and young men are vulnerable to the more extreme ideologies promoted online. Interestingly, the frustrations of feeling unseen/unheard and the idea that nobody in society ‘has their back’ are prominent reasons. A very articulate pupil in one of our workshops once said *“It seems like every other group has someone speaking up for them: Feminism, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ. But when we look around, we don't see anybody doing that for us”*. Male pupils often report that when they voice an opinion they are met with angry responses about male privilege and patriarchy.

We have to strike a balance here. If a pupil voices an opinion purely to disrupt, shock or sabotage a discussion then that is not acceptable and the school will have policies in place for this. However, if a pupil voices a genuine opinion then shutting him down is the worst thing we can do: it won't change his opinion, he'll just learn that it isn't safe to say what he thinks in front of us. Now he will retract this opinion and store it internally where it can't be challenged or guided. Dr Emily Setty, Head of Criminology at Surrey University, believes we must see these as “teachable moments” and coined the wonderful phrase *“call him IN rather than calling him OUT”*. We can't value the voice of boys only when their voices are the same as ours. A big part of Progressive Masculinity's work is exploring how we can challenge each other as men without humiliating or escalating the situation. Are we modelling this enough in the classroom? Our classroom might be the only place in this young man's life where these ideas are challenged, and challenged respectfully. Any environment which doesn't embrace healthy challenge and debate is an environment focussed on control, not growth. Let's get curious, not furious and create spaces where boys feel seen, heard and valued.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

How we frame the language around this topic is incredibly important. The words we use often unconsciously reflect our attitudes, mindset and bias. In our ‘Exploring Masculinities’ program, three different pupils from three different schools told me last year that they very rarely hear the word masculinity without ‘toxic’ attached. Conflating these terms creates the idea that masculinity itself is inherently toxic, causing a defensive and often aggressive response. Could we instead use the term ‘dominance-based masculinity’? This term specifically highlights the issue without seeming to demonise an entire gender, thereby avoiding the defensive response. Mercifully, I very rarely hear the term ‘man up’ in education now but consider the connotations and impact of frequently used terms like “boy-heavy-class” and “boys will be boys”. What do they reveal about the way we view boys, and how might we re-frame terms like these?

CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

When speaking at a conference, event or delivering our staff training sessions, I always set myself a challenge: can I make everyone in the room smile or laugh at least once? The reason for this is twofold: firstly, I want our talks and sessions to be engaging and enjoyable. Secondly, it is extremely rare to see anyone talk about masculinity today with a smile on their face and this impacts the way we approach the topic. Our masculinity can be something we're proud of and a real force for good in the world, but this isn't the aspirational narrative boys and young men are receiving. One of the most enjoyable parts of our pupil workshop program is sharing the stories of some of the amazing men out there. Men whose masculinity is based on values like compassion, selflessness and loyalty.

“Is it any wonder that charismatic online influencers who push regressive, dominance-based models of masculinity are finding such fertile ground for their ideologies?”



Something amazing happens when we share the stories of these men: it's almost like the boys we work with didn't know there were men like that out there. That men like that existed. There's a good reason for this: the algorithms which dictate their digital content don't recommend these kinds of men. In fact, they are often programmed to recommend the kind of masculinity influencers mentioned earlier. What if we set ourselves a challenge? Once a half term, share the story of a man you really admire. A man you believe represents the best of what masculinity is capable of. Representation is important so try to include different intersections of race, sexuality, neurodiversity etc. This is a low effort, high impact way to gradually 'change the narrative' by introducing our pupils to positive role models who represent the incredible potential of masculinity.

EXPLORE, DON'T DICTATE

Everywhere our boys and young men turn someone seems to be telling them what it means to be a man: imposing and dictating their own ideas about masculinity. Masculinity is a social construct and there should be no 'one size fits all' approach. There are four billion men in the world, which means there can be 4 billion different ways of being a man. With that in mind let's ask our boys the question nobody seems to be asking them: what kind of man do you want to be? Connect them to what they believe their key values are and then support them to construct a model of masculinity around those values. In our final workshop, the most popular values selected are resilience, selflessness and loyalty ... what an incredible base upon which to build the friend, colleague, partner, father and man you wish to be!

In the last three years we have worked in every kind of institution you can imagine: state schools, private schools, rural, inner-city, football academies, Alternative Provision, Pupil Referral Units, Youth Offending Institutes etc and every time I walk away with hope because it's obvious there is a real desire in our boys to become the kind of men this world needs. Our role is to support them through this very difficult and confusing transitional period where they have left the world of children behind and are trying to figure out where they belong in the world as men.

Mike Nicholson

FOUNDER

PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITY

Spinks, S. (2023) **INCELS: an Extremist Ideology?**. SSSLearning. 16 January. Available from: https://sslearning.co.uk/safeguarding-articles/incels-extremist-ideology?srltid=AfmBOootopSbb3sscH8NY64BP4H7kpraa2_5zJ5G8Rwk1KNzJBOMhWMS [Accessed 8 November 2024].

Regehr, K. et al. (2024) **Safer Scrolling: How algorithms popularise and gamify online hate and misogyny for young people** [online]. [PDF]. University of Kent. Available from: <https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Help%20and%20advice/Inclusion/Safer-scrolling.pdf> [Accessed 8 November 2024].

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Mike has proposed a challenge for us all to change the narrative and introduce our pupils to positive male role models. What would be the most effective settings in your school for sharing stories of the men you admire, for example, with individual pupils, in groups, at assemblies, in lesson contexts?
- This article conveys the need for pupils to feel seen, heard and valued when voicing genuine opinions. If this is an area of further development for your school, could the concept of 'teachable moments' be helpful for creating a shared strategy for embracing healthy challenge and debate?
- Are there places in your school where boys feel that they can express themselves authentically without fear of reprimand or judgement? How do you **know** that? Could you make use of external speakers to help create this space? Some students may be more comfortable with someone they have not engaged with in the past.
- Helping students engage in these conversations can be challenging, and we can help by ensuring they have access to the emotional vocabulary that they may need to express their feelings and experiences. At Primary, we have an Emotional Literacy package that can help you in developing these skills. Our secondary and post 16 members, may want to make use of our Tune Up and Tune In resources as part of PiXL Unlock.

“Let’s ask our boys the question nobody seems to be asking them: ‘what kind of man do you want to be?’”



Progressive Masculinity

Progressive Masculinity was born from a genuine need to address the negative impacts of regressive masculinity models. Mike Nicholson’s extensive experience in education, combined with his passion for supporting men, led to the development of their program. Over the years, we have refined their approach through research, piloting, and feedback, ensuring their workshops and training sessions are effective and impactful.

Their journey began with a focus on educational settings, delivering pupil workshops and staff training to create cultural change within schools. Recognising the broader societal need, they have since expanded into the corporate sector, supporting inclusive DEI policies and promoting gender allyship in the workplace. Their work has been featured in national media, including The Guardian, The Times, Channel 4, and BBC Radio 4, highlighting the significant impact of our programs. Mike has also presented at a number of PiXL conferences and events.

Find out more at www.progressivemasculinity.co.uk



PROGRESSIVE
MASCULINITY



Are we taking boys seriously?

LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH FROM **ULSTER UNIVERSITY**

WHAT IS TAKING BOYS SERIOUSLY?

The attainment gap for boys and young men at all levels of education is long-term, persistent and systemic. However, there is nothing inherently wrong with boys, it is our systems and pedagogical approaches that need to adapt. Taking Boys Seriously (TBS) is a longitudinal participatory action research project housed within Ulster University in Northern Ireland. Unique in its longevity (over 18 years), the research is committed to elevating the voices of boys and their educators, with the aim to influence and embed change in educational policy, pedagogy, and practice. TBS is a response to what we have termed 'compounded educational disadvantage' – an intersection of socio-cultural and political factors which, in the Northern Ireland context, include poverty, selective education systems, normative masculinities, and cultures of violence. For each challenge a boy faces, it is an additional brick in his backpack, weighing him down. These 'bricks' can work to seriously impede some boys' experience of, and ability to progress through, the education system and to achieve good outcomes.

PLATFORMING BOYS' VOICES

TBS situates the unfiltered voices and experiences of boys at the centre of the research, constantly learning from them, valuing their voices and perspectives, and building an understanding of their lives. Since 2006, we have engaged with over a thousand adolescent boys and hundreds of educators across diverse formal and informal educational settings including mainstream schools, alternative education provision, and youth work organisations. Dedicated to transforming experiences and outcomes for boys and young men, we seek to illuminate effective practices that break generational cycles of educational inequality. Appreciative inquiry informs our approach, which simply means we focus on strengths and cases of success rather than deficits and inadequacies.

We ask boys 'What is great about being a boy?' We ask educators 'What do you like about working with boys?' and 'What works best to re-engage boys in their education and learning?' Appreciative inquiry is successful in that it becomes a strong and collaborative motivator for boys, teachers, youth workers, school leaders, and policymakers. It enables a focus on what is in our control, our gift to change things for the better. There is no negative judgment, only reflection, reinforcement and building on affirming actions.

THE TBS PRINCIPLES

The pinnacle of our research is the 10 TBS principles of relational education that are rooted in evidence collected over almost two decades of TBS research in both formal (school-based) and informal (community youth work) educational settings. From 2020-2021 the TBS principles were curated and tested regionally with 442 adolescent boys and 120 educators across 37 sites in Northern Ireland. These 10 principles capture what boys consistently express as being crucial to their experience of education, what they seek from their educators and central to increasing attendance, participation, progression and holistic outcomes for those boys who are disengaging from formal education.

- #1** **RECOGNISE THE PRIMACY OF RELATIONSHIP**
- #2** **DEMONSTRATE DIGNITY AND RESPECT**
- #3** **UTILISE A 'STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH' TO LEARNING**
- #4** **CHALLENGE AND AFFIRM MASCULINE IDENTITIES**
- #5** **PROMOTE POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH**

- #6** **IDENTIFY BLOCKS TO BOYS' LEARNING**
- #7** **CONNECT BOYS' LEARNING TO CONTEXT**
- #8** **ENGAGE MEANINGFULLY WITH BOYS**
- #9** **ENABLE CREATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**
- #10** **VALUE THE VOICE OF BOYS**

GUIDING PRACTICE

Primarily, the TBS principles are intended as a reflective framework to guide practice. They are purposely not designed to be another intervention cascaded down to educators but rather as a long-term collective vision for enriching educational cultures in which the most disadvantaged learners feel seen, known and heard. Educators make the principles visible in their learning spaces to reflect their commitment to boy-focused education. They are then utilised as prompts for conversations and actions with colleagues and young people. The principles support critical reflective practice through the informal and more formalised networks of educators and boys identifying strengths and opportunities for development. No 'toolkit' or 'how to' guide exists to prescribe the implementation of the TBS principles. This is intentional. Educators, co-working with learners, are the experts and the skills, creativity, and autonomy they bring are both encouraged and affirmed. Some educational settings have taken one principle per week and invited staff and boys to add their reflections and comments on where they see this principle at play and ideas for developing it. Other settings have taken one principle as the focus for the year, seeking to embed it in multiple ways as a cross-cutting theme. The TBS principles interconnect. For those who prioritise co-learning relationships underpinned by dignity and respect, powerful and affirming relational approaches to education continue to evolve.

EMBEDDING THE TBS PRINCIPLES

The TBS principles are most impactful when embedded across localised educational ecosystems. With boys firmly at the centre, these ecosystems are made up of varied organisations and institutions that play a role in boys' education and learning including schools, youth organisations, families, sports, education authorities, policymakers, local businesses, and so on. Educational ecosystems that enable boys to thrive harness collective capacities. Collaboration between schools, youth organisations, and universities is evidenced as particularly successful in our research, where use of the TBS principles has fostered a shared language and vision for work with boys and young men. Transformation is not limited to the education system either. The ecosystem reaches out beyond education to other social spheres. Novel examples of this have included partnering with a local pizza franchise Four Star Pizza, who displayed the TBS principles in their stores and gave 20% off to boys who showed their TBS pin badge they received for participating in the research, reflecting affirming messages to boys about themselves in their wider communities.

While the scale of issues associated with a long-term systemic problem and the many layers of compounded educational disadvantage can seem overwhelming, using the ecosystem approach, alongside the TBS principles, can foster positive change. We can choose to give voice to boys and young men, to really listen to what they have to say, to engage them in the process, to direct our finite resources appropriately and to work in meaningful collaborative ways that can ultimately transform the experiences and outcomes of boys in education. To take part: utilise the TBS principles, engage in appreciative inquiry, identify the gifts that you and your organisation bring, and invite others along, enabling us all to become part of a systemic solution.

Dr Andy Hamilton and Susan Morgan

SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL AND POLICY SCIENCE
ULSTER UNIVERSITY

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Keep these principles in mind as you read and reflect on the articles, projects, and case studies in this publication. Do certain principles have more resonance with you, or strike you as being particularly well-embedded in your setting? Which principles might be a powerful lever for turning the tide of boys' achievement in your setting?
- Consider your own ecosystem: beyond the gates of your own school or college, what other institutions make up your boys' ecosystem? How do you work with these organisations? Consider whether there is value sharing the TBS principles with local sports groups, youth clubs, or libraries – anywhere you know your boys spend significant time when not in school.
- The article from Ferndown Upper School on page 78 is a brilliant example of the impact that can be seen when the principles are embedded thoughtfully and carefully.



FERNDOWN UPPER SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Bringing the Taking Boys Seriously principles to life

INTENT

Nationally, there is a need for schools to develop and refine processes that support boys in education. This is due to an ever-increasing gender gap within results, issues with attendance for boys, higher levels of exclusion from education and an increase in mental health issues for young men, in particular suicide rates.

These issues are present within our school context, with the South Coast of England having some of the highest suicide rates for young men in the country. Ferndown Upper School is located within East Dorset, where there is economic diversity meaning our school context has a range of different needs to be accommodated within centralised programmes such as our Taking Boys Seriously programme.

Our school improvement journey to Taking Boys Seriously began five years ago when, fuelled by emerging research about the lack of progress made in this area of education, we decided to set about addressing the problem within our own context. Collaborating with the University of Ulster and Arts University Bournemouth, we wanted to apply the Taking Boys Seriously Principles¹ and establish a programme that was tailored to the needs of the boys within our school, addressing the key barriers to boys being successful within an educational environment. Working with the Arts University Bournemouth and Dr Alex Blower, we were able to provide our boys with an arts experience that helped them explore their masculinity in ways that were not available to them in the classroom.

We were keen to provide boys in our school with educational support, opportunities to improve their wellbeing and establish safe spaces to communicate about their own masculinity and navigate its development.

¹ Read more about the Taking Boys Seriously principles, developed by **Ulster University**, on page 16 of this publication. The 10 principles are: #1 recognise the primacy of relationship #2 demonstrate dignity and respect #3 utilise a 'strengths-based approach' to learning #4 challenge and affirm masculine identities #5 promote positive mental health #6 identify blocks to boys learning #7 connect boys learning to context #8 engage meaningfully with boys #9 enable creative learning environments #10 value the voice of boys.

FIRST STEPS

Within our context, we were able to adapt the Taking Boys Seriously Principles into six key strands that were tailored to the boys within our school community. Our timeline of implementation saw us training staff, identifying key focus points for the principles across parts of the school, and implementing a mentoring scheme to assign to a cohort of our boys who we felt were most likely to engage well with and benefit from the boys' programme.

STAFF TRAINING

Our journey began with engaging with the research and using it to inform our programme. We explored how the research could be applied to our context, for both staff and students.

We chose some key pieces of research and used these as the bedrock for our practice. These were:

- Emotional bank account – Stephen R. Covey (1989)
- Non comfort-based approach – Rattan et al. (2012)
- Myth of low aspirations – Harrison and Waller (2018)
- Botheredness – Hywel Roberts (2012)
- Differential between how boys and girls are sanctioned – Pinkett & Roberts (2019)

We shared this with the whole staff and introduced the principles whilst asking them to reflect on their practice, especially with key students. We set up a CPD programme that was delivered across the year which focused on classroom strategies, communication approaches and aspirations. Staff were asked to reflect on the way they approached behaviour between boys and girls and how they practised questioning.

AUDIT

The Taking Boys Seriously principles formed the basis of a whole-school audit. We asked each area of the school to rate their efficacy against the principles. This created a heat map of provision through the lens of the principles. This provided an immediate improvement plan. We could see which principles needed embedding. In our case we saw that identifying barriers to boys' learning needed to be addressed across the school as well as valuing the voice of boys as a cohort. The audit encouraged all stakeholders to reflect on where their departments supported boys more fully and this led to rich conversations at SLT level and at faculty level. Areas of the school shared their experiences and provided best practice to others. The results of the audit became an excellent way to engage staff members as the principles provided a tangible tool for improvement. Staff could see where the improvement needed to be and could develop a strategy around the principle. The principles are non-prescriptive and this allowed for staff members to have autonomy.

DEVELOPMENT OF BOYS' PROGRAMME

MENTORING

An important part of our programme was to provide our boys with mentors who could act as a coach and a support for them across their subjects. Our mentors met with the boys once a fortnight to touch base and ask them questions about how they were feeling within their learning journey. Our mentor programme focused on 22 boys with individually selected mentors from across our school community, including support staff. We designed a range of questionnaires based on questions given by the University of Ulster that mentors could work through across their sessions. They were then able to record information on a form to share with us.

One of our most influential sessions was focused on a memorable learning experience. This was an opportunity for our boys to reflect on when they remember learning something (this did not have to be something within a school context). This gave the boys an opportunity to articulate why it was a memorable experience, what they learnt and why it was important to them.

The data that was obtained from the mentoring programme enabled us to create a spreadsheet with key information for the boys in our cohort, which we shared with class teachers in order to support them within their classrooms. In particular, boys were able to share their interests which enabled teachers to apply learning to contexts and give hooks to the boys within some of their subject areas. The mentoring programme was a vital part of our broader boys' programme, and the mentors were able to support emotionally, academically, and even secured work placements for our boys. All the mentors who took part in the programme last year have agreed to continue with it this year and we have been able to broaden the programme to support a greater number of mentors as well as boys being mentored.



ENGAGING WITH EXTERNAL SPEAKERS

As our programme grew, we felt it was important for boys to hear from the lived experience of others. We saw the need to bring in external speakers who could connect to the boys in a range of different opportunities and ways.

We have been able to bring in external speakers such as Nick Elston, who spoke to our boys about mental health, OCD and depression as part of our Men's Health Awareness Month in November. We were also able to bring in Shaun Flores, an ex-Vogue Model, who spoke to our boys about addiction to pornography as well as body image. Both sessions were delivered to every boy in the school in year group sessions throughout the day. As engagement with the external speakers increased, so did the boys' willingness to talk about sensitive and potentially controversial issues in a supportive forum. This led to the development of an open and honest culture surrounding key issues affecting boys, their wellbeing and their development of their own masculinity.

What we were able to identify, early on, was the importance that these opportunities gave our boys in finding their voice. As a consequence of Nick's session at the start of the year, the boys trusted in the external speakers that we brought in and, by the time Shaun arrived, our boys were sharing their own lived experiences of body image in front of all of their peers – who supported and embraced each other's experience of being a boy.

Our programme provides an opportunity for our boys to suggest aspects that they feel would support them alongside the principles. We send out a survey after each of our external speakers visit to gather feedback from the boys which has resulted in engaging with local institutions such as a gym, where our boys were able to learn about the importance of physical health as well as speaking to a life coach about how to communicate as a man.

LITERACY PROGRAMME

Our literacy programme was created using the TBS principles, the EEF guidelines and the national curriculum. We enlisted the help of former professional rugby player, author and now TikTok influencer, Ben Mercer, to create a programme of high aspiration around both modern and classic literature. They chose to read Hemingway and shared their love of non-fiction from Aurelius to autobiographies.

We recognised the links between the EEF guidance and the Taking Boys Seriously principles but also PiXL strategy. We therefore created a programme which supported the boys to read more widely and use the texts that they were reading with Ben to discuss masculinity, societal norms and problems faced by teenage boys in today's world.

This was then coupled with PiXL strategies such as Diagnosis, Therapy and Testing, personalised learning checklists and exam wrappers. The strategy was clear, the boys knew that reading for pleasure created opportunities. Ben spoke to them on a level that was personal, they were able to share their thoughts and feelings in a safe space and be heard. Our programme incorporated the principles but also linked the boys to their educational context.

TAKING THE PROGRAMME FURTHER

The culture that we have been able to foster through this programme has opened doors to new opportunities for our boys but has also identified new elements that we need to develop.

We have identified the need to include parents and carers as more active participants within the programme, giving them information about the support on offer as well as providing them with knowledge and understanding of the topics discussed to continue to support conversations at home.

We also felt that it is important for the girls within our school to have some engagement with the talks to give them an understanding of what boys go through to also provide a network of support around them.

On an extra-curricular level, we are looking to embed more opportunities for our boys to develop leadership skills and acquire new skills. In particular, we are excited for our boys to be able to engage with a fishing programme, boxing academy and a rowing club. These opportunities create a low-stakes but high-impact experience that encourages our students to find their own intrinsic motivation. This converts into longitudinal marginal gains and sees improvements in attendance and effort in class. We are also expanding our literacy programme with specific pathways for each of our year group cohorts and increasing the range of external speakers we have coming to speak to our boys. The boys are proud of their programme – they are grateful for the opportunities they are given to have conversations in safe spaces and engage with their masculinity in different ways.

WHAT WAS OUR IMPACT?

As we are now several years into our boys' programme, we have been able to see impact in the attendance of our boys to school, with this cohort attending school more than any other cohort. We have seen a reduction in behaviour incidents for the students taking part in the programme, resulting in more time spent within the classroom. We have also seen improvements in outcomes for our boys, including a reduction in the gender gap in key subject areas such as English and across the school as a whole. There has also been a significant increase in uptake for boys at A Level English, with boys opting for both Literature and Language at a higher level. Within the boys' cohort we have also seen that disadvantaged boys have outperformed non-disadvantaged boys in English alongside a reduced FSM gap. And on a broader school level, our boys with special educational needs had a positive progress 8 across all subject areas.

We have also been inspired by the changes within the way our boys value their voice, participating in external providers' sessions, openly discussing their own issues with masculinity and body image. There has been an increase in boys taking up leadership positions in the school and volunteering for future events that we embed within the programme. Male students are more willing to share feedback and offer suggestions for future events that they feel would benefit both their own and their peers' journey inside and outside of education and beyond.

The impact that has been identified has helped to build a culture of trust and pride within our boys. We are seeing an increase in participation across all year groups where boys know that they are a part of something special and are thankful for the opportunities that they are presented with. We have now seen a desire within the female students at the school to participate in some aspects of the programme, so that they are able to understand the barriers that boys face and the struggles to articulate their masculinity both inside and outside of school.

Deneen Kenchington
DEPUTY HEADTEACHER
FERNDOWN UPPER SCHOOL

Oli McVeigh
ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER
FERNDOWN UPPER SCHOOL

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Deneen and Oli began their work with an audit of the Taking Boys Seriously principles to produce a 'heat map' of provision across their school. Why not do the same with colleagues, especially those in different curriculum areas or year groups? You can use this to identify areas of strength to build on, and areas to focus development.
- Engaging with external speakers in a focused and meaningful way has had a lot of impact at Ferndown. How can you build on the impact that external speakers have in your setting? Do you have ongoing relationships with key speakers, to help students build up relationships with them?
- Reflect on how student voice is gathered in your setting. In what ways does it contribute to an ongoing and transparent conversation about student experiences? Do students get to talk about what they want to talk about? Do you actually find out what you wanted to know? How could these processes be refined?
- Look out for an opportunity to visit Ferndown when they host a PiXL Open Day later on this year (check our Specialist & Networking Platform for more information).

FERNDOWN UPPER SCHOOL



REGION
Dorset

1161

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Years 9-13



BOYS
50.5%



PP
22.6%



SEND
16.5%



AN ARTICLE BY DI LOBBETT

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Getting upstream on underachievement: meeting emotional needs in balance

MEET CALLUM

Since the advent of puberty, the free-range opportunities afforded him by online learning throughout the Covid-19 lockdowns, and the unearned gift of an Xbox, ("Mum bought it for me to help me 'cos I'm anxious now"), 'Callum' has morphed to become a pale, almost nocturnal 'half man, half mattress', and is now rarely in school. On a good day, Callum saunters in at around break time, flanked by his devoted parents who endeavour to pave his blame-free passage with a plethora of excuses that could be accurately summed up in two words: flaccid parenting. Callum's parents are not 'bad' parents; Callum is not a demon child. Callum is just a boy; he is what is euphemistically termed, a 'typical teenager'.

Callum's parents look at each other defeated. Today was going to be the day they made Callum get up in time for school. Today was going to be the first day of the 'fresh start', carefully and caringly crafted by an army of school staff dedicated to the Callums of this world. But instead, Callum has brazenly defied everyone...again! "Well at least he's here!" his father barks with feigned triumph.

In my work as an independent Behaviour and Emotional Health Consultant, I meet 'Callums' and their female counterparts every day.

Callum behaves the way he does because it works for him and it works for him because his bewildered, exhausted parents have no idea how he became so disaffected, angry and powerful, or how to begin to take the power back. It works for Callum because over-stretched school staff don't know how to support the parents in a way that will secure some steel in them. It works for Callum because, despite a merry-go-round of strategies, staff have been unable to hit on a magic formula (that doesn't entail Callum being in the classroom!), that will entice him back into the educational fold. Can that utopian goal be achieved? Well, at this stage, it will be tricky for sure.

GETTING UPSTREAM

In 2005 I was invited by the British Council to speak at a conference in Paris dedicated to the topic of closing the gender achievement gap. I proposed that a good deal of what ultimately deteriorates to become underachievement, disaffection, school-based anxiety, poor behaviour etc., can be ameliorated far further 'upstream'. I suggested that instead of treating boys as though they are a different species, we should pay less heed to socially constructed models designed to identify what it is to be male and instead, we should focus on what it is to be human. I proposed that all children would thrive if educators at the rock-face paid closer heed to the emotional climate of their classrooms so that within them, innate emotional needs are met, and children can thrive, learn and achieve. Nineteen years later, educators are recycling the same debates that are yet to secure the answers they seek: my views have not changed.

A full and academic treatment of this subject is significantly beyond the scope of this article. (I am aware that I have already brushed past weighty topics such as masculinity as a social construct!) My aim is simply to highlight the fact that high emotional arousal underpins most poor behaviour/absenteeism, and to provoke interest in exploring the notion that classrooms should be hot houses of low arousal, emotional equilibrium before they can truly become hot houses of high-performance learning.

Innate human needs are not unique to children. We cannot meet the emotional needs of others adequately if we are struggling in our own lives; there is no spare emotional capacity. Sometimes things unravel in classrooms, not because the children are causing difficulties but because the adult/s in the room lack the spare emotional capacity to respond adaptively and to meet the demands of the day at that time.

The Human Givens Institute and other mental health organisations state that our innate emotional needs are as follows:

- **Security** – a safe territory and an environment which allows us to develop
- **Attention** – to give and receive attention in balance
- **Autonomy and control** – volition to make responsible choices
- **Being emotionally connected to others** – to feel that we belong both within our close relationships and as part of a wider community
- **Friendship/intimacy** – to know that at least one person accepts us totally for who we are, 'warts 'n all!'
- **Privacy** – the opportunity to reflect and consolidate experience
- **Sense of status** – to feel valued for the contributions we make in our lives, be they large or small!
- **Stretch** – a sense of competence and achievement are essential (from which comes self-esteem)
- **Meaning and purpose** – which come from being stretched in what we do and think

When I provide training to schools (and indeed equally, when I provide training to GPs) there is a general understanding that, 'of course' those are our needs and, 'of course' we should strive to get those needs met. However, when I drill folk down, there exists for many a rhetoric provision gap and there are few or no concrete strategies that translate apparent understanding to action. In short, it's no good just sitting in meetings talking about it!

IN WHAT WAYS DOES EMOTION IMPACT LEARNING?

When innate needs are not met in balance, emotional arousal in the brain quickly becomes elevated. Most are familiar with the knowledge that the amygdala within the emotion centre (often referred to as the reptilian part of the brain) drives a freeze/fight/flight decision. It is the security guard of the brain. When we register high risk, arousal in the brain is elevated suddenly and we can quickly tip into emotional hijack. Systems that require high energy levels to function are shut down, including the neo-cortex; we quickly become emotional idiots!

The picture is slightly different at times of chronic pressure and stress. The higher order operations are available but can be significantly impaired, we find ourselves unable to plan, think, organise, memorise, problem solve etc. as well as we might otherwise. **We also find it difficult to learn.** It is as if the brain space taken up by the internal noise (stress) is no longer available for perception/thinking/learning tasks. The more brain we divert to trying to filter out worries, anxiety, internal noise etc., the less 'brain stuff' there is available for perception and subsequent action; performance is seriously impaired.

Classrooms around the country have students within them who are 'overspending' on emotional angst. They are present in body, but absent in focus; they are what I call 'psychologically truant'.

Utopia would be moulding classroom environments so that all innate needs are always met, providing an antidote to external stressors. But of course, there exists this thing called reality! In well over two decades supporting schools and intently listening to what children tell me, it has become apparent that failure to meet some needs has a greater impact than failing to meet others; it is these needs that I highlight here.

CONNECTIVITY

Social isolation is highly corrosive. It is important that teachers identify isolated youngsters and refer them to designated pastoral staff for bespoke support. Students are particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated post-exclusion or after absence through illness. Few students have the skills and emotional resilience to re-integrate themselves. Investment in making the child feel welcomed back, not just in tutor time but in each lesson, pays dividends. Support to catch up on missed learning reconnects the child to staff and to education. Long-term absentees were once short-term absentees who were allowed to become disconnected from the learning community of their school. A sense of alienation also underpins a great deal of poor behaviour in schools.

STATUS

It is essential that all children feel valued in the classroom for any positive contribution they make. (A sense of low status drives a good deal of status grabbing poor behaviour!). Years of government-imposed narrow thinking has driven some schools to over-focus on learning outcomes at the expense of the learning journey. In addition, some children's strengths lie outside the school experience. In schools where it is part of the culture for staff to take an interest in students more holistically, students have reported to me that not only do they feel more valued by staff and peers, but they also feel that they have a place; they belong. Both behaviour and attendance are better in these circumstances.

SECURITY

Feeling safe in school is every child's right. Physical safety is a given. Emotional safety is not as straightforward or easy to achieve, however. Students need to feel safe to make errors, safe to express novel thoughts and safe to be creative. Children also need to be safe from ridicule. Banter is only banter if everyone is enjoying it. Sometimes unkindness goes unchecked in some schools. Respect and kindness are entitlements and should be modelled and insisted upon by all adults. To feel safe, young people also need rational, clear, non-negotiable boundaries. Paradoxically, in their determination to secure this ideal, some schools have embraced an inflexibility and almost illogical austerity that lacks kindness and nurture and corrodes student/teacher relationships. At both primary and secondary levels, school refusal continues to increase and certainly at secondary level, many students I work with are citing what feels to them like a toxic emotional environment as the reason for their school-based anxiety/school refusal.

I argue that meeting innate emotional needs in the classroom impacts on learning, attendance and behaviour. Perhaps addressing this has become a greater imperative post-Covid-19. I invite schools to tend their own and others' emotional gardens with great care and to regularly water their seedlings. To do so yields a good harvest!

Di Lobbett

BEHAVIOUR AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH CONSULTANT, SPEAKER AND TRAINER

“Classrooms around the country have students within them who are ‘overspending’ on emotional angst. They are present in body, but absent in focus; they are what I call ‘psychologically truant’.”



ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- It is worth noting that the implementation of strategies to meet the emotional needs highlighted within the article will likely differ between primary and secondary setting. Irrespective of setting, attention could usefully be given to becoming accustomed to individual students' presentations in class. Are they quieter than usual? Are they exhibiting attention seeking behaviours perhaps?
- Of equal importance are strategies for ensuring that the needs of staff are met, so that they have the spare emotional capacity to meet the needs of students. What processes do you have in place to quality assure the ways in which students' emotional needs are met whilst in your care?
- This article highlights the impact that getting basic needs met can have on attendance, behaviour and performance. What strategies might you employ or adapt to support a student to reintegrate after an absence for whatever reason? Do you have clearly understood systems that enable staff to identify and support students who are finding it difficult to make and maintain friendships?

WHAT IS PiXL INSIGHTS?

PiXL Insights was first developed in 2020. We wanted to find a way of supporting our members with stubborn national achievement gaps. The first area we wanted to tackle was this very issue of boys' underachievement. However, we knew that there would be no silver bullets: there is no single strategy or technique that all schools could employ in order to eradicate the gender gap in their settings. Instead, we knew that context was going to be key – our students are all individuals, after all.

So we began to think: what if instead of sharing one idea, we deliberately sought out to share many?

What if we worked with individual schools across the network, for whom boys' achievement was a significant focus that year, and developed projects with them to specifically meet the needs of **their boys in their context**? And that's when Insights was born. In that first year, we worked with dozens of schools on different projects at KS3, KS4 and KS5, and we published the professional insights of the colleagues who ran those projects in our first PiXL Insights publication. **We then started to think that there were other cohorts of students that may benefit from the 'Insights treatment'**. We agreed that we would look at four key groups in rotation, and this publication that you are reading represents the start of our second cycle.



In academic year 2023/24, we published our Insights on stretch and challenge for more able learners and improving inclusion for learners with SEND. We also worked with schools on projects aimed at empowering learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and raising boys' achievement.

In academic year 2024/25, we are publishing the insights from those projects, as well as undertaking a new round of projects on more able learners and learners with SEND.

In academic year 2025/26, we will publish our insights on more able learners and learners with SEND and will once again begin projects on learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and boys.

And that's our plan for the future: to continue this cycle of investigation, innovation and support until those national gaps close.

Each project run as part of PiXL Insights is developed and designed by the participant school, however colleagues at PiXL are available to coach, mentor and support their thinking (you can meet our project mentors on pages 20 and 21 of this publication). We are also on hand throughout the process to help troubleshoot issues, overcome barriers and celebrate successes.

PiXL Insights is **not** action research, nor does it pretend to be. Projects run as part of PiXL Insights are just that: projects. The teachers share their professional insights (an underappreciated resource, in our opinion) and offer their perspectives on what worked well and what they would change next time.

If you are interested in participating in future projects with us, do get in touch with the team on insights@pixl.org.uk.