TAKING BOYS SERIOUSLY

A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF ADOLESCENT MALE SCHOOL-LIFE EXPERIENCES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

KEY FINDINGS

- Teachers believed that barriers to learning were usually evident by, and within Year 8, and had been present in primary school.

- There is an absence of gender specific approaches, possibly due to lack of evidence of their effectiveness.

- The study found a higher number of boys reporting abnormal levels of conduct, hyperactivity, peer and social problems than UK averages.

- Boys expressed concerns about a lack of preparedness for key transitional stages during adolescence such as transitions from primary to post-primary school, Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4, school to college/university/work, boy to man.

- The ways in which adolescent males construct their understanding of masculinity and being a man in early to mid-adolescence is complex, negotiated and renegotiated according to age, location and a range of wider social factors. This process has important implications for understanding adolescent male behaviour and attitudes towards education and learning.
The nature of the teacher/pupil relationship is a primary factor in boys’ motivation and attitudes towards learning. While this relationship is important for all young people, it was the primary factor in determining the extent to which these boys engaged with lessons and it influenced their expectations as to how well they would do in subjects.

Boys in this study felt that most subjects did not connect directly to the reality of their everyday lives outside of school.

The very formal nature of the classroom left a significant number of boys feeling bored, frustrated and impacted negatively on their concentration, particularly by having to remain sitting still and taking copious notes for large parts of the day.

School physical environment was strongly associated with levels of misbehaviour and negative attitudes towards learning.

Youth work methodologies were effective in engaging boys in the classroom. The approach was relationship driven and developed as the boys matured across the five years. Teachers acknowledged the benefits of youth work methodologies in the classroom such as group work, story-telling, discussion, personal reflection, and connecting with boys’ everyday life experiences.

Disciplinary procedures were considered to be focused only on punishing behaviour and not focused on having supportive resolution of issues.

The majority of boys reported that they feel school is a safe place, and that bullying is a relatively minor issue, perpetrated by a small number of boys on a small number of boys. However for those involved in bullying, it had a profound impact on their lives and learning.

The majority of those who experienced being a victim of violent acts did not talk to anyone about the incident.

Boys reported increasingly feeling alienated from adults and their communities as they got older.

Overall, boys had a complex understanding and attitude towards different manifestations of violence and felt disconnected from the peace process.
INTRODUCTION

1. The Centre for Young Men’s Studies (CYMS) is located within the subject of Community Youth Work which resides within the School of Sociology and Applied Social Studies at the University of Ulster. The Centre aims to promote the voice, needs and interests of boys and young men through research that will inform practice, training and policy.

2. This report presents the findings of a five year research study conducted by the CYMS, and funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Justice (formerly the Northern Ireland Office). The study followed a cohort of 378 male pupils from nine post-primary schools, capturing their thoughts and experiences on an annual basis between School Years 8 and 12. The fieldwork commenced in the academic year 2006/7 and concluded in the academic year 2010/11.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

3. The study was initiated in response to concerns about boys’ educational underachievement and wider concerns about their health and well-being. The specific objectives of the research were to increase our understanding of:

   • Factors that may contribute to male academic underachievement and finding practical ways to address this
   
   • The value of education and how school can become a more positive learning experience
   
   • Non-formal educational approaches
   
   • Male transitions through post primary school; beyond post-primary school to higher education/work and factors that impact upon future employment aspirations; and transitions from boy to man
   
   • How experiences of violence in a post-conflict society impact upon education and learning

4. These objectives were investigated through identifying and exploring factors that impacted upon the social, physical, psychological and emotional well-being of boys during their five year experience of post-primary education.
5. The following grid presents a selection of key observations from the findings of this study and recommendations which may be of value to schools, principals, teachers, policy makers, practitioners and adolescent boys. More detailed evidence and practical suggestions for the implementation of these recommendations are offered in Section Nine of the full report.

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<tr>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers believed that <em>barriers to learning</em> were usually evident by, and within Year 8, and had been present in primary school.</td>
<td><strong>1.</strong> Barriers to learning should be addressed as early as possible (eg primary school) and stronger links between primary and post-primary schools, parents and local communities should be developed to support transferring pupils and address issues.</td>
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<td>Some of the barriers to learning from boys’ point of view included:</td>
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<td>- Falling behind in school and course work and feeling they could not catch up</td>
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<td>- The lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills that are being carried forward from primary school and are not attended to early on in post-primary school</td>
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<td>- Getting bored easily and allowing this to show itself in disruptive behaviour in the classroom or simply turning off from the teacher</td>
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<td>- Poor teacher/pupil relationships</td>
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<td>- Boys from lower academic class streams perceiving they were not given the same opportunities to learn as those from higher academic classes</td>
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<td>- A lack of connection between subjects and boys’ everyday lives</td>
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<td>- The pressures that start to build around Year 10 and carry on through to Year 12 and their need for dedicated support at these times</td>
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<td>- A lack of belief that success in school would actually lead to a job and fears of debt if they go to university</td>
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<td>- Boys being unprepared for key transitional stages during adolescence</td>
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<td>- Boys feeling alienated within their communities and disconnected from the world of adults</td>
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<td>- Incidents of bullying</td>
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<td>- Violence (or threat of violence) being perceived as part of their everyday lives</td>
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There is an absence of gender specific approaches, possibly due to lack of evidence of their effectiveness.

2. **Further research into gender specific teaching should be carried out.**

   Pedagogy and styles of learning should have a gender specific focus which attempts to better understand the wide range of issues and complexities associated with young male development.

   This includes recognition of the broad range of boys' abilities in the classroom and their different needs, and teachers being aware of what motivates boys.

Understanding and appreciating age specific issues associated with mental, emotional, physical, psychological and cognitive development are crucial for understanding adolescent male behaviour.

The study found a higher number of boys reporting abnormal levels of conduct, hyperactivity, peer and social problems than UK averages.

3. **Teacher training should support teachers to understand, recognise and respond to the changing needs of adolescent boys and young men.**

The ways in which adolescent males construct their understanding of masculinity and being a man in early to mid-adolescence is complex, negotiated and renegotiated according to age, location and a range of wider social factors. This process has important implications for understanding adolescent male behaviour and attitudes towards education and learning.

Understanding why certain boys do not seek emotional support is crucial. This complex area of male development is integral to working effectively with boys.

4. **Boys should explore, reflect and develop a critical understanding of masculinity, and within this should be encouraged to challenge dominant and stereotypical notions of masculinity that can impact negatively upon themselves and others.**

   For those working with boys in a school environment there is a need to better understand the internal pressures experienced by adolescent males in constructing their masculine identities and the link between this and their attitudes to school and learning.

   Boys would benefit from having a specific pedagogy during their development to assist their understanding of what it means to be a man and to celebrate masculinity.
Boys expressed concerns about a lack of preparedness for key transitional stages during adolescence such as transitions from primary to post-primary school, Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4, school to college/university/work, boy to man.

Being emotionally prepared for the transition from primary to post-primary school is as important as being academically prepared.

Boys’ future aspirations are powerfully shaped by their approach to, and concern about, how well they will do in GCSE exams.

Boys consistently spoke about the pressures and confusion of moving away from childhood behaviours to becoming, and being accepted as a young man.

| 5. Each school should offer boys support during key transitional stages such as primary to post-primary school, Key Stage 3, GCSE selection and careers advice. |
|---|---|
| Relevant training in understanding adolescence, helping skills, solution focussed work and appreciation of the complexities for boys in the transition from boy to man would help with this process. |

The nature of teacher/pupil relationship is a primary factor in boys’ motivation and attitudes towards learning. While this relationship is important for all young people, it was the primary factor in determining the extent to which these boys engaged with lessons and it influenced their expectations as to how well they would do in subjects.

Boys were looking for teachers who were interested in them, encouraged them, showed them respect and would help them sort out issues as quickly as possible.

| 6. The importance of teacher-pupil relationships should be at the heart of schools' ethos and approach to learning. |
|---|---|
| Teacher training should consider the potential place and value of interpersonal skills training. |
Youth Work is distinctively educational and involves constructive interventions with young people in non-formal settings. It is primarily concerned with personal and social education, and is characterised by the voluntary engagement of young people.

Equality, inclusion and rights are the cornerstones of youth work. Its central purpose is to support and encourage young people to mature and reach their potential as valued individuals and responsible citizens and participate in shaping and influencing their own lives, communities and wider society.

Youth work methodologies were effective in engaging boys in the classroom. The approach was relationship driven and developed as the boys matured across the five years.

Youth work methodologies supported boys to recognise their learning and used approaches that enabled boys to see that they were building a skills base as well as a knowledge base.

Teachers acknowledged the benefits of youth work methodologies in the classroom such as group work, story-telling, discussion, personal reflection, and connecting with boys' everyday life experiences.

The very formal nature of the classroom left a significant number of boys feeling bored, frustrated and impacted negatively on their concentration, particularly by having to remain sitting still and taking copious notes for large parts of the day.

Boys identified large classes as reasons why they did not receive the additional academic support they believed they needed. The size and layout of classes also impacted negatively on a significant minority of boys' attitudes towards learning.

School physical environment was strongly associated with levels of misbehaviour and negative attitudes towards learning.

Boys reported having lower energy levels, particularly during the afternoon, which left them feeling tired or exhausted and lacking concentration.

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<th>7. Youth work methodologies should be utilised as appropriate. While youth work is aimed at all young people, its methodologies may be particularly useful for engaging young people who are disengaged/disengaging from mainstream education or facing particular barriers to learning.</th>
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<td>Teachers acknowledged the benefits of youth work methodologies in the classroom such as group work, story-telling, discussion, personal reflection, and connecting with boys' everyday life experiences.</td>
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Shared training in certain areas for teachers and youth workers would promote closer working relationships between formal and non-formal education.

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<th>8. School buildings and teaching plans should be designed with flexibility, movement and stimulation in mind. Ideally, young people should be involved in the design of the ‘shared space’ that teachers and pupils share in the day to day running of the school.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Boys should be encouraged to play a full and active role in the life and work of the school whether through school councils or as part of a process that further increases their sense of belonging.</td>
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Boys reported having lower energy levels, particularly during the afternoon, which left them feeling tired or exhausted and lacking concentration.
Boys in this study felt that most subjects did not connect directly to the reality of their everyday lives outside of school.

Boys reported increasingly feeling alienated from adults and their communities as they got older.

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<th>9.</th>
<th>Schools should develop strong links with parents and local communities and should try to link lessons to real life experiences as much as possible.</th>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Positive behaviour policy procedures should be clear, immediate and set within a restorative context that is nurturing and relational. Where possible pupils should be involved in the revision of policies, sanction and rewards.</td>
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Disciplinary procedures were considered to be focused only on punishing behaviour and not focused on having supportive resolution of issues.

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<th>11.</th>
<th>Building on the fact that school is perceived as a relatively safe place, schools should provide opportunities for boys to discuss issues in relation to violence, effects of violence and coping strategies.</th>
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<td>This should include raising awareness of violence associated with bullying, sectarianism, race, homophobia, the legacy of the troubles, peacebuilding and the growing immigrant population.</td>
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The majority of boys reported that they feel school is a safe place, and that bullying is a relatively minor issue, perpetrated by a small number of boys on a small number of boys. However for those involved in bullying, it had a profound impact on their lives and learning.

Addressing violence and the nature of violence may help reduce acts of perceived violence in schools as boys become more aware of the effects of violence on themselves and others.

Overall, boys had a complex understanding and attitude towards different manifestations of violence and felt disconnected from the peace process.

Boys were unclear about differences between perceived acts of violence and ‘messing around.’

The majority of those who experienced being a victim of violent acts did not talk to anyone about the incident.

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CONCLUSION

6. This five year longitudinal study tracked 378 boys from nine post-primary schools across Northern Ireland investigating their educational experiences and factors that impacted upon their social, physical, psychological and emotional well-being. The study used a mixed and creative methodology that aimed to give a voice to boys whose views are often absent from research and academic studies.
7. As evidenced in this report, factors that impact upon boys’ educational underachievement are complex and must be considered within a wider context of socio-economic issues such as poverty, class, ethnicity, social disadvantage, a declining industrial base and less demand for traditional male jobs. With the decline of traditional industry in Northern Ireland and the shift in favour of new knowledge economies, the value of education is arguably greater than it ever has been.

8. While for several decades boy’s underachievement has regularly been raised as a problem it was extremely difficult for the research team to find specific strategies addressing boys’ underachievement. Although teachers who were interviewed as part of this study recognised the predominance of boys with lower academic achievement, they generally did not take this into account in terms of learning styles or teaching approaches. There were also few examples of studies in Northern Ireland that focus specifically on how children learn about gender. Type of school (grammar and secondary), religion and poverty have drawn the focus of attention and may be seen as being more significant in understanding boys’ underachievement. The downside to this approach may be a lack of focus on targeting and engaging particular groups such as underachieving boys.

9. While there are perhaps no simple solutions to reduce the achievement gap between boys and girls, finding practical and realistic ways to support those who have fallen behind in school is undoubtedly a fundamental component in addressing educational underachievement. While identifying underachievement is based on a teacher’s professional judgement at every phase of education, strategies for addressing underachievement must begin during early years’ education and be supported by primary and post-primary schools in partnership with parents and communities. This is essential if boys and young men are to be supported to achieve their potential and find their place in an increasingly competitive global economy.

10. The 2009 DE policy document ‘Every School a Good School’ sets out a solution for raising standards and narrowing the performance gap. However, while standards for boys and girls have risen over recent years, and despite a suite of recent DE policies and papers addressing Literacy and Numeracy highlighting boys as a specific target, it is evident that a core number of boys continue to under-perform academically and therefore need, and desire, more effective ways of engaging them in education and learning.
11. The social context of these boys’ lives had a strong bearing upon their thoughts, beliefs and attitudes towards education and learning. However because this social context was seldom addressed in the classroom, boys perceived school as being disconnected from the reality of their everyday lives and experiences.

12. Despite a changing political context of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, boys voiced ongoing concerns about their personal safety and reported various forms of violence simply ‘as the way it is.’ Boys spoke of ongoing incidences of sectarianism and being fearful of paramilitaries. They reported increased levels of racial conflict. Boys also spoke of feeling alienated from their communities and distant from the world of adults and decision making processes. This alienation was underpinned by a perception from boys that adults increasingly viewed them with suspicion and distrust, particularly as they got older - a perception that was also apparent in attitudes towards the police and young men from different communities. While it is important that adolescent boys are accepted and promoted as part of communities and family life, at present there appears to be little in place to facilitate this process.

13. It is widely acknowledged that much of what young people learn occurs outside of formal education. In this study interventions by experienced youth workers demonstrated the value and benefits of youth work methodologies in addressing everyday issues that impacted directly upon these adolescent boys’ lives. Whilst these results are promising, we acknowledge that this was a small-scale study. There is perhaps more research required to highlight the specific role that youth work can play to complement the formal education sector in order that its principles and methodologies can be better understood by policy and decision makers.

14. While some of the findings in this study may also apply to girls, the focus is firmly on boys. The report has captured boys’ thoughts, beliefs and aspirations about their school and life experiences as well as their sense of fun and energy. However the report also records their frustrations, anxieties and at times despair. This was particularly evident for Year 10 boys who perceived they had already fallen behind with their education and felt unable to catch up. Whether they perceived this was due to their lack of interest in education, or because they were not able to cope with the demands of education, the consequences of not achieving 5 or more A*- C GCSE’s or their equivalent had become very apparent for these boys. It was this
awareness that made them feel increasingly anxious about transitions beyond school and reflect more deeply about how prepared they were for the future.

15. The report makes recommendations aimed at schools, principals, policy makers and practitioners which have important pedagogical implications for teaching, engaging and working with boys. It also offers many pragmatic and cost neutral ways to support teachers in the classroom to help boys make better connections between school and their wider social, emotional and developmental needs. This is not to suggest that this will be easy. Rather it may mean all those who are concerned about boys being more committed to ‘Taking Boys Seriously’ and becoming more conscious of the need to find creative and gender specific ways to engage, support and excite boys throughout their education and development.

METHODOLOGY

16. The study used a mixed method approach of quantitative and qualitative methods. Nine schools from across Northern Ireland participated in the study. The participating schools represented a mix of secondary and grammar, controlled and maintained, urban and rural, integrated, and All-boys and co-educational. A single cohort of 378 boys contributed to quantitative data collection over the five year period. Six questionnaires with different themes were used to collect the quantitative data. This happened each year of the study during one visit to each school in May or June:

- The About Me questionnaire - background and family information
- The KIDSCREEN Quality of Life questionnaire for adolescents (Rajmil et al, 2004)
- The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) was used to assess emotional and behavioural issues
- Schools Questionnaire enquiring about school experiences, preferences, post-school aspirations.
- The Being a Man questionnaire exploring perceptions of ‘masculinity and what it means to be a man.’
● The Violence Questionnaire seeking to understand how adolescent males conceptualise their perceptions of violence and their personal experiences of violence, being in trouble and bullying.

17. This quantitative data was supplemented by a number of qualitative approaches, including focus groups held every year within six of the nine participating schools, and regular classroom interventions with a sub-sample of pupils from two of the schools. These were delivered by experienced youth workers employed by Youth Action Northern Ireland.

18. Interviews were also held with six experienced Year 10 Head Teachers. Five of the teachers were from schools that were part of the longitudinal study and the other was from a school where other work by the Centre for Young Men’s Studies staff was being delivered. An in-depth case study was also conducted in an all-boys secondary school that was not participating in the longitudinal study.

THE PROJECT

19. The project was undertaken by The Centre for Young Men’s Studies at the University of Ulster and funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Justice. The total cost of the project was £141,733.

FULL REPORT

Three years later: a follow-up survey of teachers who qualified in 1995   RB 1/2000

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A Study of Careers Education and Guidance  RB 1/2004

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An evaluation of the need and early intervention support for children (aged 2-4 years) with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Northern Ireland  RB 1/2007
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<td>RB 2/2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland</td>
<td>RB 3/2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>An investigation of youth work, as a process of informal learning,</td>
<td>RB 1/2008</td>
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<td>E-Consultation with pupils - A pilot study</td>
<td>RB 2/2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good practice in literacy and numeracy in British and Irish cities</td>
<td>RB 3/2008</td>
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<tr>
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<td>RB 1/2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Special Education Needs of Bilingual (Irish-English) Children</td>
<td>RB 2/2009</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Effective Pre School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Pre-School</td>
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<td>Experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics</td>
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<td>School governors: the guardians of our schools</td>
<td>RB 2/2010</td>
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<td>Study into how the education system can improve the attendance</td>
<td>RB 1/2011</td>
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<td>Research into the Nature and Extent of Pupil Bullying in Schools</td>
<td>RB 2/2011</td>
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<td>Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas</td>
<td>RB 2/2012</td>
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