Centre for Young Men's Studies
University of Ulster

In collaboration with YouthAction Northern Ireland

Taking Boys Seriously:

A Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Male
School-Life Experiences in Northern Ireland

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The Centre for Young Men's Studies aims to promote the voice, needs and interests of boys and young men through research that will inform practice, training and policy.

In 2006 we were commissioned to address concerns over:

* Boys academic underachievement

* Wider concerns about boys health and well-being and experiences of violence

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

* How school can become a more positive learning experience

* Non-formal educational approaches

* Issues associated with being male and becoming a man (masculinity)

* How experiences of violence in a post-conflict society impact upon education and learning

Mixed method Research design

Longitudinal (5 annual waves)

378 boys

9 schools – 6 in top 100 (out of 890) of NI multiple deprivation measures

Quantitative –

* Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire - (emotion and behaviour)
* Quality of Life questionnaire – (health and well being)

Qualitative

* Annual Self reporting questionnaires on boys' experiences of school, community, masculinity and violence
* Annual focus groups with six of the schools every year of the study
* Semi-structured interviews with six Year Ten Head Teachers
* A case study of an All-Boys secondary School, and
* Youth work interventions delivered in two of the nine schools 3 times per year

Questions we will address today:

* Is there an issue of underachievement?
* Is there evidence for the specific underachievement of boys?
* What does literature say?

* What do boys think?
* What do teachers think?

* What did we learn from youth work interventions?

* If boys' underachievement is an issue: So what?

Is there an issue of Underachievement

Northern Ireland is Europe's top performing education system for primary maths and primary reading. Despite this …

* One in six pupils do not meet the expected standard by the end of primary school (around 3,800 pupils)

* More than 40% of pupils leave post-primary school without basic reading and writing skills

* Two in five young people failing to make the benchmark 5 A*-C or equivalent in English and maths

* Disparity between highest and lowest achievers

* Gaps remain between the best and lowest performing schools

* School leavers in north, east, west Belfast are less likely to achieve the expected standard than the rest of Northern Ireland

Evidence of factors that impact upon educational underachievement are complex - but consistently associated with:

Social class (The causal link between poverty and low educational achievement is well established)

Ethnicity

Gender

Geographical location

Religious background

Impact of the troubles

Difficult home or family life

(**none of these are stand alone factors**)

Facts about Boys and Underachievement

* **Not all boys are underachieving**

* Since mid 1990's girls on average 10 – 13 percentage points ahead of boys in GCSE's

* From the age of five, girls outperform boys at almost every level of education

* Boys are four times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than girls

* Boys are at least four times more likely to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

* Boys are heavily overrepresented in the bottom 20% of underachievers

Presenting characteristics amongst the bottom 20% of boys:

* Most vulnerable to crime and exclusion
* This group more marginal in school and therefore more likely to be marginal generally
* Low verbal communication skills
* Over physical and boisterous
* Unable or unwilling to take instructions
* Emotional in ways that impact on others (anger, sulking and tantrums)
* Lacking social skills with other children and staff (such as sharing and responding to adults as though they are the same age)

Greek alchemy symbol for men = iron

What boys said were the main 'barriers' to learning?

* **Falling behind** and not being able to catch up

* **Subjects not connected directly to the reality of their everyday lives** outside of school.

* **Feeling bored** negatively affecting concentration levels

* Incidences of **bullying**

* The type of **teacher/pupil relationship**

Boys' perceived barriers to learning?

* Perceived poor physical environments (School)
* Boys in lower streams feeling they don't get the same opportunities (School)
* Underestimated pressures around GSCE's period (School)
* 'What's the point?' (School)

* The formal nature of teaching (Classroom)
* Having to sit still for long periods of time (Classroom)
* Disruptive behaviour (Classroom)

* A disconnect between school, family and community
* Violence and the threat of violence (Community)
* Sense of alienation from adults (Community)

Head teachers' views on 'barriers to learning' for boys:

* **Barriers had been present in primary school**

* The **lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills** in some boys was inherited from primary school

* **Boys arriving with poorer communication skills** - especially with boys in lower bands

* **Boys taking longer to settle and not well prepared** for post-primary school

* **Behaviour** more challenging (again with boys in the lower bands)

* Work presentation by **girls seen as consistently higher**

* Boys expecting to be *'mammied'*

Boys' perceptions of 'the ideal' teacher

* *Has a good relationship with you* **(relational)**
* *Relationship develops each year*
* *Knows your name and who you are*
* *Is interested in you*
* *Believes in you*
* *Gives you praise and encouragement*
* *Treats you with respect*
* *Doesn't have favourites*

* *Makes subjects interesting and connected to real life issues* **(contextual)**
* *Asks about your life outside of school*

* *Asks you about the future and your aspirations* **(developmental)**
* *Helps you to develop your skills and talents*
* *Acknowledges that people develop at different stages*

* *Makes things easy to understand* **(pedagogical)**
* *Can control a class*
* *Enjoys having fun*

Quantitative findings: Boys' Developmental Issues

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

* **Physical well being was also lower** than UK averages

* a **lack of preparedness about transition stages** during adolescence

* **Complexity of masculinity and being a man**

* **Age and gender specific issues** associated with adolescent mental, emotional, physical, psychological and cognitive development which are **crucial to understanding adolescent male development and behaviour**

Boys' developmental Issues: Year 10

* Year 10 was a key period in boys making decisions about the future

* Some boys believed they had made the wrong choice about GCSE's and there was no turning back

* Psychological well being of the whole sample dipped in Year 10

* *Dawning of a Reality'*

Comparison of the strengths and difficulties scores across years – with emphasis on Year 10: Page 43

		Percentage of current sample					UK Norm Percentage
		Year 8	Year 9	**Year 10**	Year 11	Year 12	
Emotional	Normal	92.5	90.7	90.8	94.3	93.4	91.0
	Borderline	3.8	4.8	4.0	4.1	3.9	5.7
	Abnormal	3.7	4.5	2.1	1.6	2.7	3.2
Conduct	Normal	60.7	58.4	60.4	71.5	76.5	74.6
	Borderline	12.2	16.2	14.8	11.1	9.3	11.9
	Abnormal	27.1	25.4	**23.2**	17.4	14.2	**13.5**
Hyperactivity	Normal	70.5	65.6	63.9	67.7	68.2	77.0
	Borderline	14.9	14.8	13.7	13.5	13.0	10.3
	Abnormal	14.6	22.7	**20.3**	18.8	18.8	**12.6**
Peer Relations	Normal	85.8	82.0	85.2	87.0	84.4	89.2
	Borderline	10.5	12.6	9.0	9.2	11.7	9.3
	Abnormal	3.7	5.4	2.9	3.8	3.9	1.5
Pro-social	Normal	78.0	67.9	60.9	64.7	70.4	86.1
	Borderline	12.5	17.3	20.8	19.1	16.5	11.0
	Abnormal	9.5	14.9	16.2	16.2	13.2	2.8

Key findings: Educational Issues

* **The majority of boys successfully negotiated the transition from primary school** and by the end of Year 8 - **80% felt OK or better** about this process

* **A significant majority of boys (77%) felt either OK or Happy in post-primary school**
    * A significant minority (16%) felt angry, afraid or sad

* **The majority of boys reported getting on well with teachers**
    * Relationships with teachers improved in Years 11 – 12, however,
    * Boys confiding in a teacher reduced from 5.4% in Year 8 to 1.3% in Year 12

Key findings: Behavioural Issues

* There was **a significant reduction in self-reported misbehaviour** from 71% in Year 8 to 42% in Year 12

* As adolescent **boys mature they are less likely to misbehave**

* Boys from **grammar schools reported 10% lower levels of misbehaviour**

* Boys reporting **high levels of misbehaviour had the lowest levels of psychological well being**

* High levels of misbehaviour in our study associated with:
  * Lower liking for teachers
  * Lower levels of psychological well being
  * Lower levels of concentration and cognitive capacity

Key Findings: violence

Prevalence of self-reported violent incidents committed against boys across the time points

	(Year 8)	(Year 9)	(Year 10)	(Year 11)	(Year 12)
Violent acts committed against them	74.6%	84.4%	**80.9%**	74.9%	72.3%
Did not talk about violent incident	48.8%	46.9%	44.1%	**68.9%**	**66.8%**

Types of violence -
- Verbal / demeaning behaviour - (high and consistent)
- Physical / aggressive – (moderate and consistent)

Levels of reported violence
> **higher in all male environments**
> **higher in non grammar schools**

Bullying was perceived as a serious, but a statistically minor issue (9 -13%)
- Perpetrated by a small number of boys on a small number of boys
- For those who were being bullied, it had a profound impact on their lives and learning
- Bullying associated with school (outside different terminology)

'Blur' between perceived acts of **violence and messing around**

Perceived 'normalisation' of violence during adolescence

No boys involved in peacebuilding activities

Boys' post school choices:

* A **lowering of aspirations over** the 5 years

* **Recessional factors**

* **Youth unemployment**

* An increasing **lack of belief** that success in school would lead to a job

* **Concerns about debt** if they choose to go to university

Key findings from Youth Work interventions:

* Youth work methodologies:

  * were **effective in engaging** and motivating boys

  * enabled boys to reflect upon **controversial and sensitive subjects** such as identity, masculinity, violence and its effect on others, emotional intelligence and sharing feelings

  * Learning seen as **connected to their everyday lives** and experiences

  * helped **boys gain a combination of skills and knowledge** and rehearse newly acquired skills and knowledge

  * **increased teachers' understanding and empathy towards those boys who may be at risk** or susceptible to contextual factors outside of school

 * **surprised and impressed teachers**

Our study found that:

* Despite a suite of DE policies aimed at addressing underachievement, **a persistent core of boys still underachieve in school**

* While boys' educational underachievement has remained consistent for decades, **the research team could not find any strategies with a gender specific focus to address boys' underachievement**

* **Gender awareness was not a part of teacher training**

Let's pause

A Balanced Approach

School

Young

Person

Community

Other support
workers
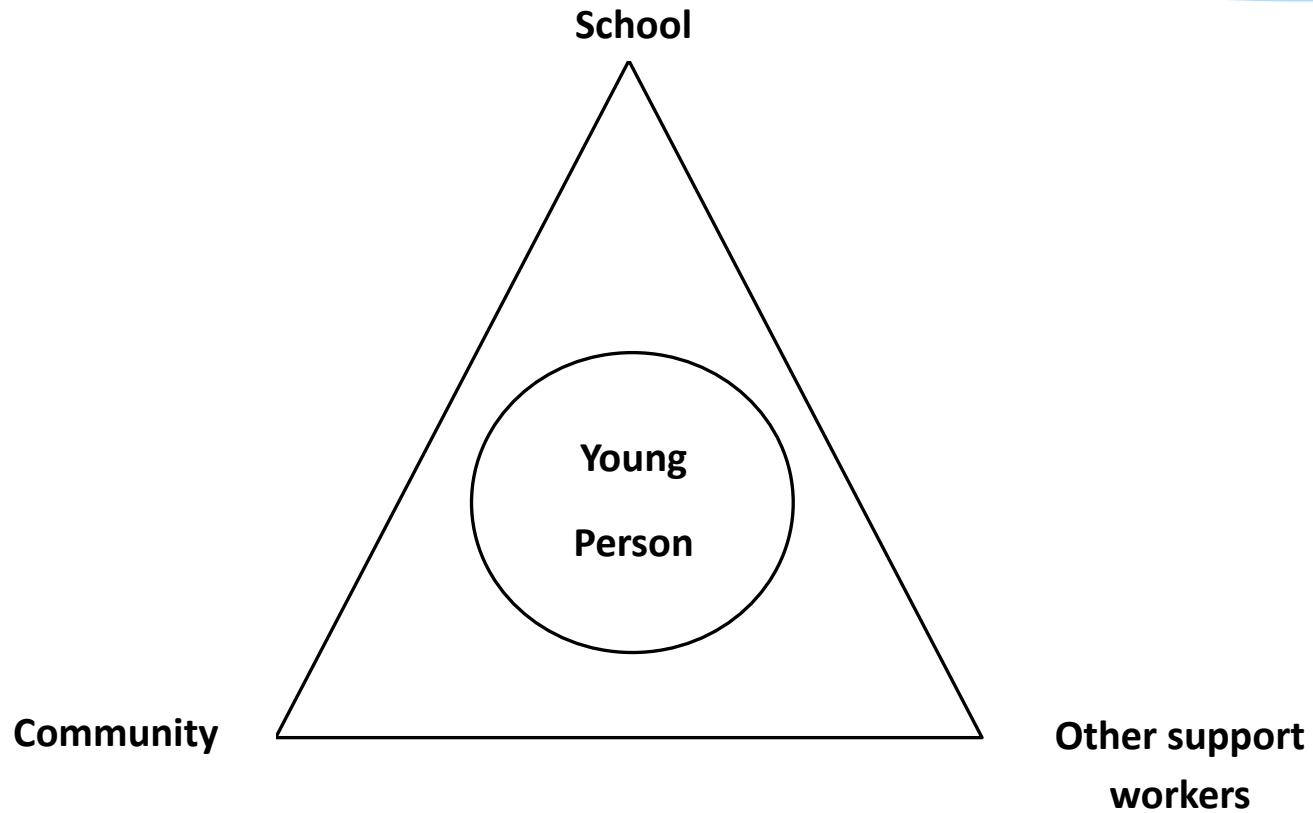
Context

* **A young person will spend only 18% of their time in school.**
  * **Over £2bn resources into school**

* **70% of learning outside of the school (Gavin Boyd 2009 conference. Dyson 2008)**

* **Social Investment Fund – indications from First Minister that this could be used to address underachievement (Hansard 14/1/13)**

* **Chief Inspector`s report (2010 – 12) emphasis on *Transforming Communities* and acknowledgment of link between DISADVANTAGE – ATTAINMENT and LIFE CHANCES**

* ***`We still tend to attribute economic and social problems to people`s learning deficits` – McGivney (2006)***

So what for Policy?

* **Identifying and addressing blocks and barriers in early years (preparing boys for learning). Importance of Prevention.**

* **Promote Cross Departmental approaches: DEd Influencing and working with other government departments** e.g. Departments of Justice & Health
  "A culture that needs broken down" P. Robinson

  Promote Inter Disciplinary working – Joint training of Teachers and Related professionals e.g. Youth Workers (initial and post qualifying) e.g. CRED.

* **Promote gender awareness within strategies tackling underachievement**

* **Address gender awareness within Teacher Training.** What makes boys tick?

* **Develop funding opportunities for programmes that help connect boys to peace process and shaping the future**

So what for the School?

- **Tell them what you are for - not just what you are against (e.g. anti bullying etc). Convey a positive ethos.**
  - (Welcome each morning at the gates)

- **Imagine the '365 day school.' The school and the community**

- **School discipline based on accountability not blame and a system that nurtures a sense of connection and fosters responsibility for self and others.**
  - **Help boys deal with consequences of their actions in a restorative way**
  - **Positive behaviour policy**

- **Linking with other professionals to make the bridge to the community**

- **Better preparation for the 'reality of life' beyond school**

- **Formal and informal structures in school through which voice of boys can be heard**

- **Important to try and keep these boys in school**

So what for the classroom?

* **Create a learning environment that engages, stimulates and excites boys that counters boredom and distraction**

* **Connect the classroom to the lives of boys (e.g. Monday morning 'welcome and rap')**

* **Use of small group work, role plays and other methodologies that assist engagement, stimulation and motivation** (particularly for those who are 'falling behind')

* **Exploring masculinity, boys' fears, aspirations, their lives, reflecting on moral issues associated with race, violence, homophobia. –** extracting knowledge and meaning from their experience and ideas.

* **Developing boys' coping skills and strategies especially around violence**

* **Developing boys` capacity to use support services (within and without school)**

* **Challenging gender stereotyping**

Youth Workers could:

* Work with boys to **develop formal and informal structures in school** in order that the voice of boys can be heard in the school

* Develop work with boys to **enable them to participate** in and influence school structures, the way a school works, the way a school uses space (e.g. playgrounds)

* **Develop boys capacity** to use support services (within and without the school)

* **Build bridges** between school, young person and community

* Create programmes that help **connect young men to their communities and peace** process

Youth Workers could:

* Engage with boys in the community who are **falling behind** in school

* Work with **adults and organisations** in communities to help them **connect to, and better develop, their understanding of boys and young men**

* **Get boys talking in a safe environment** about masculinity, their fears, aspirations and reflect upon moral issues associated with violence, race and homophobia for example

* Work with boys on their **coping skills and strategies** (in particular around violence)

* **Train** WITH and train teachers in youth work methodological approaches to learning

Taking Boys Seriously

report available at

www.cyms.ulster.ac.uk