

Taking Boys Seriously

Evidence from 20 years of research with adolescent boys and educators

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Introduction

Taking Boys Seriously (TBS) is a longitudinal participatory action research project with global reach grounded in the direct engagement of thousands of adolescent boys and their educators across Northern Ireland from 2006-2026. With an evidence base generated and updated over

twenty years, the research offers critical insights for policymaking focused on tackling educational disadvantage and working effectively with boys and young men in diverse educational and community settings.

Since its 2018 relaunch, TBS has produced conference reports, creative outputs, and peer-reviewed articles (2018–2026) that collectively reframe boys' underachievement as a product of *Compounded Educational Disadvantage* (CED) rather than individual deficit. The research demonstrates that boys—particularly those from disadvantaged communities—face interlocking structural, relational, and cultural barriers to learning. Key findings emphasise the importance of:

- **Relational approaches** that prioritise meaningful connections and trust between educators and boys.
- **Empowering practice**, ensuring boys co-produce knowledge and solutions to educational and social issues.
- **Critical engagement** with masculinities, supporting boys to explore and navigate societal expectations while fostering positive identity.

Central to TBS is the Boys and Young Men's Quadrant, a process-driven, four-stage engagement framework (Baseline Measure > Intentional Practice > Collaborative Inquiry > Measure Again) that measures and supports boys' development across five domains: *voice, influence, interdependence, belonging* and *identity*.

This brief translates TBS research into actionable policy recommendations, focusing on relational education, systemic reform, and targeted support for disadvantaged boys, while embedding the Boys' & Young Men's Quadrant, an ecosystem focus, and empowerment approaches into practice.

The Problem

A persistent multi-generational attainment gap among working-class boys remains a systemic challenge in the UK¹. The issue manifests in:

- Lower literacy and numeracy in primary school

- Reduced GCSE performance across core subjects
- Higher rates of exclusion and disciplinary action
- Lower participation in higher education

These trends are particularly pronounced in disadvantaged communities. Traditional remedial approaches that focus on behaviour, motivation, or individual deficit are insufficient.

The TBS Longitudinal Participatory Action Research (PAR) project has partnered with thousands of boys and educators to understand how to make the system better, rather than identifying what is wrong. Findings highlight the need for policy, pedagogy, and practice-level interventions that:

- Recognise boys' lived experiences
- Foster relational engagement
- Target multi-layered disadvantage
- Support autonomy, agency, and appreciation

Evidence Base

1. From Deficit to Compounded Educational Disadvantage (CED)

Compounded Educational Disadvantage refers to the interplay of systemic issues that impact boys. This is represented by bricks in a backpack; the more bricks the harder it is for a boy to progress through the system. These structural pressures include poverty, restrictive masculinities, and inconsistent educational practices.

Evidence: Framing underachievement as systemic challenges deficit narratives and emphasises the need for place-based, structural interventions².

Operationalisation: Screen policies to eliminate deficit language and invest in open-access youth work within communities that help to remove the bricks from the backpack.

2. Relational Education

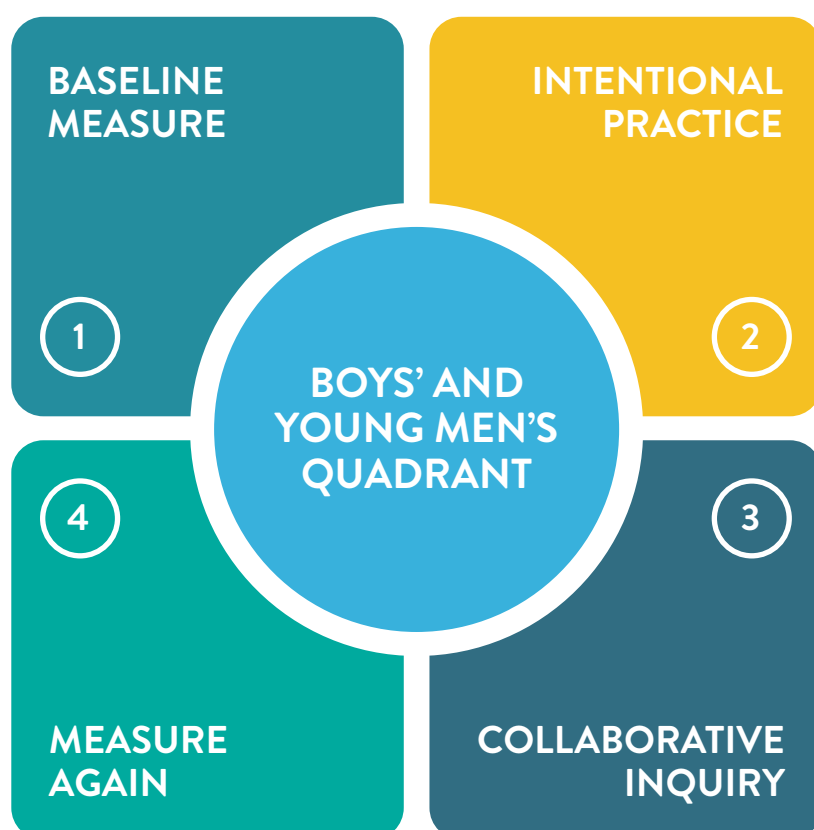
TBS developed 10 Principles of Relational Education, operationalised in classrooms, schools, alternative education centres, and youth work organisations. The principles are designed to:

- Prioritise strong, respectful relationships
- Foster dignity, respect, and voice
- Use context-based, experiential learning
- Promote positive identity formation and wellbeing
- Enable creative learning environments
- Engage boys meaningfully and affirm masculinities

Evidence: Trials in both Northern Ireland³ and England⁴ involving over 550 adolescent boys across more than 50 schools and youth organisations demonstrate that relational approaches improve engagement, attendance, wellbeing, and learning outcomes.

Operationalisation: The Boys and Young Men's Quadrant allows schools to:

1. **Baseline Measure:** Gather boys' perspectives
2. **Intentional Practice:** Adapt teaching to respond to boys' feedback
3. **Collaborative Inquiry:** Share and refine practice across staff and partners
4. **Measure Again:** Ensure boys' voices continue to shape practice



3. Participatory Action Research and Ecosystem Approach

Participatory Action Research positions boys, young men, and educators as co-producers of knowledge, and appreciative inquiry focuses on what works, rather than deficits. The concept of the ‘gift’ ensures ownership and engagement. These approaches are embedded into the Boys’ & Young Men’s Quadrant, providing a framework for educators to facilitate participatory strengths-based inquiry to inform practice rather than simply being tasked with implementing a prescriptive curriculum for boys.

Evidence: The educational ecosystem integrates schools, youth services, communities, and funders, ensuring shared responsibility. Outcomes include:

- Locally grounded interventions
- Boys shaping solutions
- Strengthened practitioner engagement
- Enhanced legitimacy and uptake⁵

Operationalisation: The ecosystem approach has been adopted by the Boys’ Impact movement with 16 regional hubs across the UK⁶ that bring together leaders across the education and community sectors to develop initiatives and actions based on the TBS principles of relational education. Policy and practice should treat boys as partners in educational change.

4. Masculinities and Educational Engagement

While there are many ways of expressing masculinity these are not always viewed as equal. Often a particular idealized type of masculinity comes to the fore shaped by broader social norms and cultural expectations which many boys measure themselves against. Boys experience contradictory pressures: expected to be strong, brave, and competent, while simultaneously feeling vulnerable, judged, or powerless. These pressures affect help-seeking, identity, and learning, often creating a “mask” of suppressed emotions.

Evidence: Gender-consciousness is increased when educators have opportunities to reflect on gender socialisation and develop intentional engagement on affirming and challenging masculinities in their work with boys. Adolescent boys need more opportunities within schools to talk with trusted adults about being a boy and becoming a man⁷.

Operationalisation: Policies must be gender-conscious, non-deficit, and strengths-based, broadening educational pathways to support positive identity formation. The lens model of gender conscious practice⁸ can support educators to engage purposefully and thoughtfully with boys and young men.

Policy Implications

Three systemic shifts are required:

1. **From individual deficits to systemic reform** – address structural inequalities and educational design.
2. **From instrumental approaches to relational and empowering practice** – embed relational competencies alongside curriculum delivery.
3. **From top-down policy to ecosystem approaches** – establish partnerships with boys, educators, and communities.

Policy Recommendations:

“Lifting the Bricks from the Backpack”

1. Embed Relational Education and TBS Principles

- Integrate TBS principles and the Boys and Young Men’s Quadrant into all schools, supported by Education Authority, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Controlled Schools’ Support Council, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, and Education and Training Inspectorate as a recognised quality indicator.

- Develop a Relational Education Charter across Initial Teacher Education, Continued Professional Development, curriculum, and inspection.
- Embed measurement tools such as the TBS Empowering Boys Questionnaire (EBQ) to capture core indicators of relational education.

2. Invest in Collaborative Training and CPD

- Deliver joint CPD and short courses for teachers, lecturers, youth workers, and classroom assistants focusing on:
 - Relational approaches
 - Empowering practice
 - Critical engagement with masculinities
- Fund collaboratively, leveraging existing education and youth work infrastructure.

3. Strengthen the Educational Ecosystem

Support Boys Impact and the localised Boys Impact Hubs as a regional and national network embodying the ecosystem approach.

Provide multi-year funding (minimum five years) for coordination roles and collaboration structures.

Incentivise partnerships between schools and youth services, recognising their complementary yet distinctive roles in addressing poverty and building social and cultural capital.

4. Implement Place-Based Strategies for tackling Compounded Educational Disadvantage

- Invest in youth services that empower boys and cultivate agency, autonomy, and appreciation.
- Align education policy with poverty reduction, wellbeing, and youth services.

- Ensure continuity of support across educational transitions and across formal and informal education.

5. Reframe Masculinities and Broaden Educational Pathways

- Establish a regional Empowering Boys Programme integrating formal and informal learning and cross-sector provision (the 'SistersIN' initiative offers a good example of this in work with girls and young women).
- Shift discourse from deficit to strengths-based framing.
- Expand access to vocational, hybrid, and experiential pathways, promoting identity exploration, critical engagement with masculinities, and creative learning.

6. Measurement and Reward Systems

- Emphasise metrics that value agency, autonomy, and appreciation, rather than solely academic attainment or retention.
- Recognise and reward boys' development in relational, social, and cultural capital.
- Embed the Boys' & Young Men's Quadrant as a quality assurance and continuous improvement tool.

7. Long-Term, Cross-Departmental Strategy

- Develop a sustained policy framework linking TBS evidence with wider research on men's health, wellbeing, and social outcomes.
- Ensure recommendations outlive political cycles, with long-term investment and alignment across relevant government departments and community partners.

Conclusion

TBS research demonstrates that boys' educational underachievement is relational, systemic, and contextually embedded. Policy must move beyond individualised remediation to system-level, ecosystem-informed reform, consolidating relational education, empowerment, and participatory practice.

The Boys' & Young Men's Quadrant, TBS principles, and ecosystem approach provide a coherent, evidence-based framework for sustainable impact. Implementation at scale, supported by long-term investment, cross-sector collaboration, and strengths-based measurement, is now the priority.

Appreciative Inquiry

In preparation for the policy roundtable event, having read the TBS policy brief, please consider

the following prompts of our 4D appreciative enquiry process.

1 DISCOVER

What is currently working well in policy, pedagogy, and practice for boys and young men facing compounded educational disadvantage?

2 DREAM

Envisage what could maximise positive impact for these boys and young men in the following areas:

- Policy / Strategy
- Pedagogy / Practice

3 DESIGN

What steps need to be taken to embed the TBS research with increased impact policy, pedagogy, and practice?

4 DELIVER

What actions can be taken to turn the dreams into reality?

Notes

References:

- ¹ **Hillman, N., & Brooks, M. (2025)** *Boys will be boys: The educational underachievement of boys and young men*. Oxford: HEPI. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Boys-will-be-boys-The-educational-underachievement-of-boys-and-young-men.pdf>
- ² **Cownie, E., Morgan, S., Murphy, B., & Stanton, E. (2023).** *In the corner of working-class boys: Relational approaches and the re-orientating of habitus*. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 122, Article 102238. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102238>.
- ³ **A. Hamilton, S. Morgan, B. Murphy & K. Harland (2024)** *Taking Boys Seriously: a participatory action research initiative demonstrating the transformative potential of relational education*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 45(2), 284-310, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2315121>
- ⁴ **Blower, A., Boreham, C. and D' Cunha, S. (2025)** *Boys' Impact Collaboration with United Learning: Addressing the gap with Disadvantaged Boys, Pilot Project*. Peterborough: United Learning, <https://unitedlearning.org.uk/Portals/0/unitedthinking/boys-impact-report-2024-25.pdf>
- ⁵ **Hamilton, A., Morgan, S., Murphy, B., & Harland, K. (2025).** *Taking boys seriously: Utilising participatory action research to tackle compounded educational disadvantage*. *Action Research*, 23(1), 26-47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14767503241226894>
- ⁶ <https://www.boysimpact.com/regional-hubs>
- ⁷ **Hamilton, A., Morgan, S., Harland, K., & Murphy, B. (2024)** *Embedding masculinities within a gender conscious relational pedagogy to transform education with boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage*, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2024.2301726>
- ⁸ **Morgan S., Harland K. (2009).** *The 'lens model': A practical tool for developing and understanding gender conscious practice*. *Youth and Policy*, 101(Spring), 67–81, <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/publications/the-lens-model-a-practical-tool-for-developing-and-understanding--3/>

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