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University of  
**Kent**

# Championing Boys: Exploring Masculinity, Identity, and Expression Through Creativity

2024



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# Executive Summary

## Overview

The Championing Boys – Express Myself initiative, led by the University of Kent’s Outreach and Widening Participation department, builds on the success of its Year 7 programme by introducing a Year 8 module combining creative writing and artificial intelligence (AI). Designed to help students explore masculinity, identity, and lived experiences through interdisciplinary approaches, the programme aimed to provide boys with a platform for self-expression while challenging traditional gender stereotypes.

## Programme Aims

The module featured three in-school workshops and an exhibition where students showcased their creative work. Through poetry and AI-generated artwork, students engaged in discussions about masculinity and identity. The key objectives were to:

- Encourage students to challenge gender stereotypes in education and careers.
- Provide opportunities for critical reflection on masculinity.
- Amplify boys voices and perspectives

## Key Findings

A qualitative case study approach was used to evaluate the programme, focusing on student experiences through observations, focus groups, and thematic analysis of their work.

**Enjoyment:** 22 out of 24 participants reported enjoying the programme, and 18 expressed an interest in exploring their new skills further.

**Impact on masculinity discussions:** While survey responses indicated minimal perceived changes in students’ views on masculinity, focus groups suggested deeper engagement and evolving perspectives. Some students expressed initial discomfort, but anonymous contributions and facilitator adaptations encouraged participation.

**Challenges with poetry:** Many students were reluctant to engage with poetry, seeing it as inaccessible, however further probing showed a lack of confidence as an underlying influence for this perception. Yet, student work demonstrated deep reflection and creativity, highlighting the need for more encouragement and confidence-building in future sessions.

**Youth work approaches & facilitator rapport:** The informal, engaging teaching style resonated with students, fostering participation and comfort. However, a lack of prior connection with guest facilitators led to disengagement, emphasizing the importance of relationship-building in educational interventions.

**Student feedback on programme structure:** Students recommended a longer module duration and more varied activities. They also strongly valued the university campus visit, suggesting it should remain a key feature.

## Recommendations

- 1. Maintain youth work approach:** Continue using informal, participatory approaches that encourage playfulness and rapport-building.
- 2. Improve facilitation of masculinity discussions:** Introduce gradual engagement strategies (e.g., anonymous contributions, structured discussions) to make conversations more comfortable and meaningful.
- 3. Enhance poetry engagement:** Shift the focus from technical writing to personal storytelling, incorporating spoken word, rap, or music lyrics to make poetry more accessible.
- 4. Prioritise confidence & self-efficacy:** Embed encouragement techniques into sessions to help students overcome creative insecurities and recognise the value of the work they are completing.
- 5. Increase variety & duration:** Expand the programme's structure to include more activities and extend its length for deeper engagement. Also consider implementing a campus visit into the structure as this was perceived as a high priority for students.
- 6. Emphasise the value of the boys' voice:** Work more closely with schools to ensure that the boys' voice is embedded throughout the programme and within the evaluation design as a non-negotiable element of the programme.
- 7. Reconsider programme evaluation:** Consider which evaluation methods could support in measuring the programme aims, in line with university and school priorities.

## Conclusion

The Year 8 module successfully fostered self-expression and engagement among students while highlighting key areas for improvement. To maximize its impact, future iterations should build on the strengths of the current approach while refining its structure, content, and facilitation methods. By maintaining a strong focus on youth voice, relational pedagogy, and creative exploration, the programme has the potential to positively shape boys' educational experiences.

# Introduction

In the spring of 2023, the University of Kent Outreach and Widening Participation department piloted 'Championing Boys: Exploring Who You Could Be'. This intervention worked with Year 7 boys and was designed to allow students to explore a variety of different potential identities through exploration of subjects which extend past the curriculum and link into potential future careers.

Following the success of the initial project, the university embarked on designing a second iteration of the project to continue working with students in Year 8. This project was designed to provide opportunities for students to critically reflect on what it means to be male in education and used creative subjects to provide a platform for students to express their thoughts on this subject.

This paper evaluates the module through a qualitative case study approach, centering student voice as a key component of the analysis. It reviews the programme's aims in relation to the qualitative data collected and offers recommendations to strengthen future iterations.

# Programme Design & Aims

## Programme Design

The Year 8 module employed an interdisciplinary approach which combined creative writing and AI. The module consisted of three in school workshops and an exhibition which showcased their work to parents and school staff.

The module encouraged students to consider topics around masculinity, identity and lived experience through the lens of poetry as a form of creative expression. In the first two workshops, students explored a variety of writing techniques to come up with their own pieces of poetry. The third session led by the University of Kent's Digital Arts department, allowed students to generate artwork using AI which provided a visual representation of their poems. The final session, students displayed their work in an exhibition, which has created a space for students to celebrate their achievements and put their creative skills on display.

## Aims

The aims for this module were as follows:

- Allow students to challenge traditional gender stereotypes within subjects and careers
- Provide opportunities for students to critically reflect on what it means to be male whilst simultaneously challenging narrow and potentially harmful gender stereotypes
- Value the voice of boys

# Evaluation Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was adopted to evaluate the pilot of the Year 8 module. The case study approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how the intervention operated, its perceived effectiveness, and the contextual factors influencing outcomes (Stake, 1995). Utilising a qualitative approach emphasises the perspectives and lived experiences of boy participants, ensuring that the voices of those directly impacted by the initiative were central to the analysis. This methodological choice provided nuanced insights into the challenges and successes of the pilot, offering valuable lessons for future development of the programme.

Data collection methods included researcher observations, focus groups and analysis of student work to for quality and thematic depth. Additionally post-programme surveys were distributed to students upon request of the school.

## Amplifying the Student Voice

Amplifying student voice in research is crucial for ensuring that educational interventions are responsive, inclusive, and reflective of the needs and experiences of those they aim to support. Research by Fielding (2004) highlights the importance of student voice in educational research, arguing that when students are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive subjects, the findings become more authentic and representative of their lived realities. Furthermore, Mannion (2007) asserts that engaging students in reflective dialogue about their experiences enhances their sense of agency and ownership over their learning journey.

However, challenges remain in ensuring that student voices are not only heard but also acted upon, reinforcing the need for continuous feedback loops and collaborative decision-making processes in educational research and intervention design. The decision to center student perspectives through focus groups, thematic analysis of student work, reflects a commitment to ensuring their feedback is acted upon.

## Rationale for Original Survey Exclusion

In the 2023 programme, surveys were conducted pre and post programme. The majority of survey questions did not show improved weighted average scores and in many instances were lower than the initial scores. However, the questions that did see positive improvements were more specifically linked to our programme aims.

It became apparent that the survey design was flawed as the questions used were too broad for what was realistically achievable in six weeks, and not aligned with the programme aims. There was also a general lack of motivation to complete the surveys from participants. It was apparent during observations that students found them boring and there was a general lack of focus during completion. It is unclear whether students just 'ticked the boxes' or whether they engaged with the survey.

Due to low engagement, concerns were raised regarding the suitability of surveys for students of this age

group and the project's timeframe. Consequently, it was initially decided not to administer surveys during this iteration of the programme. However, the school expressed concerns about the absence of quantitative data, leading to the inclusion of surveys in the evaluation design at a later stage. These surveys were significantly shorter than those used in the previous year and were specifically designed to align with the programme's objectives.

### Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse data gathered from observation notes and focus groups, allowing for the identification and interpretation of patterns within participants' discussions. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.



# Discussion

## Enjoyment & Engagement

Students generally enjoyed participating in the Championing Boys programme. In the survey data, as depicted in Table 1, 22 out of 24 participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that they enjoyed the experience. Additionally, as shown in Table 2, 18 students felt that the programme helped them explore new interests they wished to pursue further.

<b>I enjoyed participating in Championing Boys this year</b>	<b>No. Students</b>
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	16
<b>Agree</b>	6
<b>Neutral</b>	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>24</b>

*Table 1: Survey responses regarding enjoyment*

<b>Participating in Championing Boys has allowed me to explore new interests that I want to carry forwards</b>	<b>No. Students</b>
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	12
<b>Agree</b>	6
<b>Neutral</b>	6
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>24</b>

*Table 2: Survey responses regarding intent to continue new interests*

In the focus groups, students described having ‘fun’ and being comfortable to laugh with student ambassadors and facilitators. In all focus groups, students asked if they would be continuing the programme in Year 9 and expressed a desire to continue.

This was also represented in the researcher observations, who noted that students were giving their attention to the front of the class freely when requested by the facilitator on most occasions. This was the case, even when engaging in activities like reading poems which, as described later in this paper, was more challenging for the students. However, there were also occasions where student engagement dropped in comparison to previous years and there were more challenges with behavioural issues than previous years. This is discussed further in the following section.

Where engagement was limited, this may have been because of a lack of clarity as to the purpose of the sessions. Within the focus groups, feedback indicated a desire for a clearer purpose and direction within the programme. While students valued the opportunity to engage in new activities, some expressed uncertainty about the overall goals and structure, suggesting that a more defined framework could enhance their experience and engagement. For example:

*“I think that last year it, kind of, had more purpose because we’re discovering jobs and careers that we can develop and go to university to study. Now, he just was talking about not related to university at*

all.”

### Significance of Youth Work Approaches

Participants were generally positive about how the workshops were structured and the way in which the workshops were delivered. The atmosphere generated seemed to resonate with the students. As depicted in the quote below:

*“For me, it’s just being able to have conversation and just have fun whilst I’m doing something. It makes people more interested in what I’m doing, when I can have a laugh whilst doing it. Because most teachers, if you’re laughing in their lesson, they’ll have a go at you.”*

The positive reception of the workshops suggests that youth work approaches, which emphasise informality, relational pedagogy, and participatory engagement were key to fostering a supportive learning environment (Ord, J. 2016).

This was also apparent in the researcher’s observations, who discusses a key element of the programme is about creating a space for playfulness and showing that learning does not have to be restrictive. They discuss how the student ambassadors are able to embrace this playfulness as a means of supporting engagement. They note:

*“Many of the boys are playful and energetic, and it needs to be channelled rather than stifled. To my mind, it looks as if holding space for, and allowing (to an extent), their playfulness has a positive, disarming affect. It validates an important part of how these boys are and how they interact with the world, and it builds a level of trust with the ambassadors, which in turn will allow those boys who are less likely to engage to get back to work. It also challenges the idea that learning is boring and restrictive, which to my mind is an crucial part of the intervention. [The facilitator] is good at this, too, but he knows how to firmly draw boundaries on the playfulness” – Researcher Observations*

Whilst it was noted throughout the programme that on occasion there were behavioural and engagement issues which occasionally disrupted sessions, for many students this originated from the feeling that the new sessions were more closely associated with a traditional classroom setting and there was less clarity on their purpose (as described above). It is essential to maintain the programme’s original ethos. As the researcher’s observations suggest, embracing playfulness, and even a degree of controlled chaos, is not just beneficial but integral to the programme’s success. By fostering an environment that validates students’ natural ways of engaging with the world, the university can create a space that encourages meaningful participation while still setting necessary boundaries.

The significance of rapport-building between facilitators and students is also evident in the focus group discussions. As one participant noted:

*“It didn’t feel like he was a teacher though, it felt like he was a close friend.”*

This aligns with relationship-based approaches in youth work, where the establishment of trust and familiarity between practitioners and young people is seen as foundational to meaningful engagement

(Ord, 2016). It also continues to support the importance of role models within the programme and the impact working alongside role models could have.

This was also prominent in the researcher observations as it was noted that the facilitator's "ability to meet them on their level and talk about seemingly mundane things in a playful but respectful manner is very important. He's treating them like peers, like people, rather than naughty boys who need to be disciplined".

Conversely, the lack of prior relationship with the final workshop lead, a guest specialist in AI, resulted in a less engaging and more awkward experience for students.

*"And very awkward, because she hadn't met us before. But [poetry facilitator] wasn't awkward and he loved doing it."*

The mixed reactions to different facilitators highlight the need for continuity in interventions aimed at young people. Future programmes should consider ensuring consistency in facilitation teams or integrating relationship-building strategies for guest speakers.

### Fostering Conversations on Masculinity

Further consideration is needed regarding how to foster meaningful, reflective, and transformative conversations on masculinity, identity, and self-expression, ensuring that they are delivered in a way that empowers boys to embrace their unique experiences while critically engaging with societal norms. Reflections from the researcher observing the programme revealed that initiating conversations on masculinity was particularly challenging, even in small group environments designed to encourage openness. Many students exhibited initial hesitancy, which suggests that discussing masculinity, especially in a way that challenges dominant norms can provoke discomfort.

Due to this, the facilitator had to adapt facilitation strategies to encourage participation. Techniques such as anonymous contributions via post-it notes helped to create a sense of safety, enabling students to engage without fear of judgment. These reflections indicate that, while discussions on masculinity are necessary, they require carefully designed facilitation methods to ensure that students feel comfortable and encouraged to express themselves.

In the survey results, responses were mixed to the question "I felt comfortable discussing my thoughts on gender/masculinity as a group" with a proportion of students stating they neither agree nor disagree as stating they agreed. The neutrality in responses suggests that some students may not have felt entirely comfortable engaging in open discussions but also did not explicitly reject the opportunity. This is consistent with the reflections from focus groups, where students expressed both initial reluctance and eventual willingness to engage in the topic. One participant reflected on their experience, stating:

*"At first, I was a bit reluctant but then, once we started talking and getting through the lesson, I felt more comfortable to talk about all of it."*

According to the survey results, the students were conclusive that the programme had not led them to

think differently about the concept of masculinity. With most students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement “Championing Boys has made me think differently about gender/masculinity”. This is depicted in Table 3.

Championing Boys has made me think differently about gender/masculinity	No. Students
Strongly Disagree	6
Disagree	10
Neutral	7
Agree	1
Grand Total	24

Table 3: Perception of masculinity

This finding appears contradictory when compared with focus group discussions, where students actively acknowledged that the programme had enabled them to consider different perspectives on masculinity. When asked in the focus groups “did the project therefore make you think differently about what it is to be a boy or your masculinity?” the responses were quite different. Many students agreed that it did, for example one group discussed how it allowed them to think from different perspectives.

*“It gave you a different perspective. Putting yourself in other people’s shoes.”*

*“Yeah because you could communicate with fellow boys and see their perspective of masculinity and about being a boy.”*

This discrepancy between survey and focus group findings suggests that while students may not perceive their views on masculinity as having fundamentally changed, they are engaging in new ways of thinking about it, even if subconsciously. This aligns with research by Kimmel (2018), who argues that masculinity is deeply internalised, and shifts in perception often occur gradually rather than through immediate recognition. Students may not consciously register these changes, but their engagement in peer-led discussions indicates an evolving awareness.

Not all students, however, shared this enthusiasm for discussing masculinity. Some were resistant to the idea that masculinity should even be explored as a topic, with one student stating:

*“I don’t really see the need to talk about it because it’s obvious. So, yes. I was comfortable. I wasn’t talking out because I don’t think there is a need to talk about it.”*

This response reflects a deeply entrenched belief in masculinity as a fixed, unquestionable concept (Bola, 2021). This resistance underscores the importance of framing masculinity as a dynamic and evolving construct, rather than an inherent trait that does not require discussion.

Additionally, there was confusion as to what a module on masculinity represented. For example, one student noted:

*Participant: I thought we were going to do something a bit more sporty, a bit more- I don't know why, something more physical.*

*Facilitator: Okay. What, in the poems or just generally?*

*Participant: Generally. Because it was masculinity, I thought we were going to.*

This quote highlights an important and recurring theme in discussions on masculinity: the expectation that it is inherently linked to physicality, strength, and action-oriented activities. The participant's assumption that a programme on masculinity would involve sport or physical engagement reflects deeply ingrained societal associations between masculinity and physical activity. It also reinforces the rationale behind developing a programme which addresses these concepts and creating a space for boys to challenge traditional stereotypes and encourage boys to see value in alternative forms of masculinity beyond physical dominance.

Conversely, some students indicated that they wanted to engage with more complex and in-depth discussions on masculinity. One participant expressed frustration that certain key topics were not explored in enough detail:

*"Maybe the way we get stereotyped for being masculine."*

When prompted by the facilitator to elaborate, the student explained:

*"We covered some of it, but we moved onto different stuff because, as we were covering why we get stereotyped, then we just started writing down different ideas. We didn't really start on why we get stereotypes."*

This feedback suggests that while the programme introduced critical themes, students expected a more sustained and focused discussion on issues such as gender stereotyping. Future iterations of the programme may benefit from incorporating longer, deeper engagements with specific topics. Whilst simultaneously recognising that the impact of these conversations may be gradual and therefore not seen throughout the course of one module, however, repeated discussions over the course of the Championing Boys module may see a shift in perception.

### Poetry as a Form of Creative Expression

Poetry was an intentional choice for this intervention. This was because poetry does not necessarily fit the traditional masculine stereotypes, and it was felt would push students outside of their comfort zone. It was also felt that poetry was an accessible form of self-expression because there are so many ways to structure poems.

Despite this, poetry was not positively received by the students and initially encouraging students that poetry could be accessible to them was challenging. Many students decided that poetry wasn't from them before even starting. This was discussed in the student focus groups, as noted below:

*Facilitator: When we told you “We’re going to talk about poetry for two weeks”? What was your gut response?*

*Participant: I don't know if I'm going to like it.*

*It should also be considered as to whether students are given the appropriate time to think in depth about the concepts and how they can be conceptualised in their work.*

*Participant 1: And also you only have about 10 minutes to write a whole page or something, it's really irritating.*

*Participant 2: Yeah, that really annoys me.*

Students seemed worried about the quality of the work they were producing.

*“Also to think about... If you’re trying to write, you have to think about what rhymes with the word and if it fits with the theme of the whole poem.”*

What the above two extracts suggest is that students are concerned and care about the quality of the work they are producing. This may suggest that students have a lack of self-efficacy and belief in their own abilities. This was further highlighted by a student who stated:

*“I’m just not that good at writing. I can think of stuff, but I can’t get it down on the page.”*

This may suggest highlights the importance of creating a space which does not focus on perfection but rather encouraging students that their thoughts and words have value. Despite being a creative writing focused activity, this programme should avoid focusing on structure, form, spelling, grammar, but instead encourage students that their lived experiences are valuable, and that people want to hear their stories. In the case of the student above ‘you can’t edit words that don’t exist to begin with’.

The researcher’s observations noted the frequency of positive reinforcement from university staff regarding their work as an integral element. However, further consideration should be had as to how positive reinforcement and encouragement can be embedded into the creative writing process, to allow students to develop confidence and self-efficacy.

This was also the case for reading their work aloud which students were encouraged to do at different intervals. The researcher’s observations note that there was a lot of hesitancy in doing so. This further insinuates that the programme should focus on developing students' self-efficacy as part of this module. Reading aloud, speaking and sharing their work should remain a pivotal element of the programme which can support this.

## Quality of Work

Despite, student’s own perceptions of their work, the quality of some of the poetry produced by the students is astounding. Students have been able to effectively articulate elements of their own lived experience or that of masculinity with great depth. Two of the best examples have been provided below:

Example 1:

*I may not be a champion  
hundred meter sprinter  
but I've got a gold medal in being moaned at*

*I may not be a  
world cup winner  
but my bed is a trophy with the number one sleeper in it*

*There will never be a boy who's better  
at bribing my mum to go get MacDonalds  
or screaming at Lucas on the pc headset*

*I may not be a  
friend who likes to go out  
going outside is overrated  
but I will stay inside  
and headshot you on Fortnite  
like a pro e-athlete*

*I may not be the  
tallest  
smartest  
strongest  
fastest  
most confident*

*but  
I am the champion  
at being  
Harrison*

This poem articulates a pressure to live up to certain expectations of being a boy and identifies elements of identity which counter-act those expectations. It is eloquently structured and captures his personality why simultaneously challenging societal expectations on being a boy.

Example 2:

*I've come from days out with grandad  
I've been told that I'm a good lad but sometimes I feel sad  
I know sometimes I'm bad but I also make people glad*

*I started in a green field and ended on the pitch  
Sometimes I soar but I also miss  
I always win but inside I lose  
I feel like my heart is bruised*

*I've got far to go and I am scared  
I am unprepared  
Life is hard but I need to push through  
I hope that my dreams will come true*

*From the big green to the Wembley  
People will chant my name  
People will say  
"I'm the next Pele"*

*I'll rule the world  
I'll win the World Cup for England  
And celebrate all night  
I'll give the opponent quite a fright  
From the big green to Wembley*

*But after all these dreams,  
I will still be with grandad  
Who took me to the big green*

This poem talks about perseverance, having big aspirations whilst recognising the pressure and negative emotions that can come alongside it. These themes are described through the medium of football and shows a deep vulnerability that makes it even more poetic.

These examples show depth of creativity and understanding of the concepts which imply that students were able to understand and interact with the themes of the module in a meaningful way.



## Content Considerations

A key aim of Championing Boys is to amplify the student voice in all aspects of the programme, including evaluation (as described in the methodology section). With this in mind, it is important to note that the boys had valuable insights into improving the structure and the content of the module. Two points which reoccurred across many of the focus groups was making the programme the same length as the Year 7 programme and including more variety. For example, when asked what could be improved two students responded:

*Participant: Maybe the amount of project times we did it. Last year, we did it quite a few times, but this one, we only did it three times.*

*Participant: I would say three weeks on one and three weeks on the other, because then it gives you more... What's the word? Like you might want to do it...*

This aligns with some student's feelings that they did not have enough time within sessions to really tackle the task. When re-developing future iterations of the programme, further consideration is needed as to the time required for each task.

Students also requested more variety in the content. They expressed that they enjoyed doing different workshops each week in Year 7 and would have wanted to progress into other things. It was also felt they may have had more to show at the exhibition, as described below.

*"I feel like if we did more things and had more things to show, it would probably be a bit better."*

However, the overwhelming response from students was that it was important to them to have another visit to the university campus. The researcher observations noted that this was one of the first questions that were asked by students as part of the workshops and was the most frequent feedback from the students throughout the course of the workshop. One student in the focus groups noted that they would have preferred exploring poetry or art on the campus itself.

*"Most kids like the campus and it's interesting and you can know more about university and whether you want to go there and if you want to go there, then how is it structured"*

It is clear from participant responses and observations that the students viewed attending the campus as a reward and a vital part of the programme experience. Given that the campus visit was viewed as important to the students, further consideration is needed as to whether a campus visit can be included in the next iteration of the programme.

Additionally, as data suggests that students who attend campus visits are more likely to progress into Higher Education and that participation in campus visits is associated with higher attainment at Key Stage 4 (TASO), it would seem important to continue to expose this group to the university environment more regularly.

If Championing Boys is to truly value the voice of boys, it is important that these insights are not just listened to but actioned. Therefore, in future iterations of the programme, consideration for how to

introduce more variety and amend the structure should be considered.

## Educational Ecosystem

Although turnout for the exhibition was low, the quality of the student's work was positively received by parents and guardians who attended the event. For those students who this applied to, this seemed to enforce a sense of pride and accomplishment in their work. One student noted that their poem was well-received, with their parents expressing surprise at the effort put into it. This validation was further strengthened by receiving an award:

*Participant: They liked my poem. They thought I actually put a lot of effort into it.*

*Facilitator: Yes. So, did you feel proud? Did you like that feeling?*

*Participant: I got an award after.*

*Facilitator: Did you actually?*

*Participant: Yes, I got sweets.*

Another student mentioned that their parents took a photo of their work, indicating a sense of value and significance placed on their achievement.

*"My parents took a photo of [my poem]"*

The meaningful interactions between students, the school, and parents during the exhibition highlight the importance of creating a connected and supportive learning environment. When students see their work being valued not only by teachers but also by their families, it reinforces a sense of belonging and develops confidence and motivation. However, the low attendance suggests that future exhibitions may benefit from improved promotion and engagement strategies to ensure a larger audience and greater acknowledgment of student accomplishments.

This aligns with the University of Ulster's 'Taking Boys Seriously' research, which emphasize that programmes aimed at supporting student development cannot exist in isolation but must function within a broader educational ecosystem (Hamilton et al, 2024). In their research, they argue for "a whole system approach that leads to improved holistic outcomes" for boys and emphasise the essentiality of the interconnectedness of various stakeholders in fostering effective learning environments (Hamilton et al, 2024).

In focus groups, the boys were asked if they knew what to expect from the second year module. In which boys responded that they were unaware of what the programme would entail. As detailed in the quote below:

*"No, not really, we just got told that we have to meet, and then we just got on with it."*

Such responses indicate that students were not adequately informed about the structure, purpose, or expectations of the programme. Additionally, logistical issues, such as inconsistent or unclear scheduling, further contributed to confusion. Participants reported discrepancies in the notes provided regarding session times, which led to inconsistent attendance from some participants.

*Participant 1: I didn't get a note for it.*

*Participant 2: Also, some of the notes said different periods and it was really quite annoying.*

*Participant 3: Yeah, the notes weren't that accurate.*

*Participant 1: But then you've got to think like these ones, they got us confused as well.*

These comments suggest that the effectiveness of the programme is not solely dependent on its content. Ensuring that students fully understand the programme's aims and structure is essential to fostering a sense of investment and participation.

Given that the programme is designed to tackle a deep-rooted societal challenge, it requires a strategic and coordinated effort to ensure its success. Such challenges cannot be addressed in isolation, and therefore, a project of this scale necessitates active collaboration from multiple stakeholders, particularly with school staff and parents. This is not just the school staff involved in the project but staff at all levels of the school including senior leadership. This engagement is essential not only for logistical support but also for fostering a shared sense of responsibility and commitment to the programme's objectives.

This approach can be difficult to achieve when external expectations placed upon schools related to measuring impact rely heavily on quantitative data. This was a concern expressed by the partnering school at the end of the programme. Their concern related to quantifiable impact seen within day to day school life. These pressures provide limited space for programmes which take longitudinal approaches, where you would expect to see limited quantifiable changes over a short period of time but rather a longer-term shift in discourse. Future iterations of the programme should consider this partnership in detail. Including undertaking a collaborative approach to data collection and analysis that supports the school's needs whilst simultaneously addressing the underlying causes, which may take time to see tangible progress. Additionally, it is imperative that the need to balance competing priorities does not undermine the core principles of the programme such as 'valuing the voice of boys'. Instead, the goal of close collaboration should also include the intention to embed the voice of boys and elicit a call to action because of it. In doing so, the educational ecosystem becomes an essential element of programme design and success.

### Long Term Impact of Year 7 Programme on Student Perspectives

Finally, the findings from the focus groups suggest that the Year 7 programme had a lasting impact on students' future planning, creativity, and openness to new possibilities. Despite the focus groups taking place over a year later, students demonstrated clear recollection of key experiences and continued engagement with concepts introduced during the programme. The depth of recall and continued application of learning is evident in students' reflections. For example, one student was able to recall specific details of the Forensic Science workshops:

*"I still remember, I've got one rare fingerprint there, a double inverted loop."*

There were also discussions which suggest that the programme encouraged students to broaden their

career considerations, challenging fixed ideas about their future paths. This aligns with the programme aim of exploring potential identities, which was underpinned by Markus & Nurius (1986) possible selves' theory.

*“Yes, because last year, because I’ve always thought of doing one thing. It helps. I was like, “I could do designing if I wanted to. It seems quite fun. It explores so many things that I know I’ve never really thought of doing before.”*

*“I’m thinking about going to forensic science because of the trip that we went to, the actual university.”*

The hands-on, creative elements of the programme also had a strong effect:

*“I still make the Zines all the time, they’re pretty cool.”*

This indicates that the programme did not just introduce new ideas but fostered lasting creative habits.

# Evaluation Limitations

Whilst the qualitative case study approach has allowed for thorough analysis and created opportunities to delve into thematic depth, the evaluation design needs reconsidering. One limitation of this evaluation methodology, as highlighted in TASO's guidance on standards of evidence, is the reliance on qualitative data without a structured approach to systematically capturing causal impact. Collection of quantitative data and opportunities for comparison should be considered.

Additionally, to ensure that findings are continually refined and validated, feedback loops with participants should be considered. This could enhance the credibility of qualitative insights and provide mechanisms for allowing participants to be involved at all stages of the evaluation.

# Recommendations

## 1. Maintain a youth work approach to engagement

When making amendments to the programme structure or content, practitioners should continue to prioritise informality, participatory engagement and relational pedagogy. Facilitators should be prepared to embrace controlled playfulness whilst maintaining structure and boundaries. Equally, facilitators should continue to build rapport with students in the ways that have proven effective in previous iterations.

## 2. Consider how to encourage meaningful discussions on masculinity

This paper has highlighted the importance of continuing to have meaningful discussions on masculinity. However, the programme should continue to think about how best to facilitate this. Some suggestions might include developing activities that encourage gradual engagement with masculinity discussions, such as anonymous contributions, addressing misconceptions about masculinity by including diverse representations of male identity or providing more structured and extended discussions on topics like gender stereotypes.

## 3. Improve how to approach poetry elements with the boys

Given that the boys' perceptions of poetry were for the most part negative, consideration is needed as to how poetry is delivered to the students. This report recommends that the focus shift from technical writing skills to personal expression and storytelling. Integration of different creative forms such as spoken word, rap or music lyrics, or storytelling should also be considered.

## 4. Prioritise the development of self-efficacy

Confidence and self-efficacy were highlighted as a barrier to participation particularly with regards to poetry. Therefore, development of self-efficacy should be embedded into all elements of the module. This could include the use encouragement techniques, such as peer feedback and facilitator praise, but equally other techniques that are less overt could be incorporated.

## 5. Increase programme variety and duration

To ensure that the voice of boys is embedded in all aspects of the programme, their feedback on improving the programme should be seriously considered and implemented wherever possible. In this instance, two clear methods of doing so are addressing the variety and duration of the module. Methods to do this should include; expanding the session formats to include multiple creative and discussion-based activities and extending the programme duration to match the Year 7 model and provide more time for deeper engagement.

## 6. Ensure the voice of boys remains central element of the programme

Voice is a key element within academic literature in relation to working with boys from low socio-economic backgrounds. Boys do not feel heard or listened to in many educational contexts and therefore any engagement with boys should ensure that their voice is championed. There are a number of elements which can ensure that this remains at the forefront of the programme, namely, ensuring that boys' voice remains a pivotal element of the programme design and evaluation design but also actively working in partnership with the schools to ensure their voice can be heard in all aspects of the educational ecosystem. The university should consider how they can continue to embed the voice of boys and create spaces for this.

## 7. Reconsider how to effectively evaluate the project

Whilst qualitative evidence should remain critical for understanding the context and mechanisms behind observed outcomes and continuing to embed the voice of boys, other methods of data collection should be incorporated.

# Conclusion

In summary, the pilot Year 8 module had mixed success. There were some clear strengths of the programme including the rapport built between the facilitators, the ambassadors and the participants, the quality of the work produced and the positive reception of the work by parents and guardians. Despite the successes, there were also some important areas identified as needing improvement. This includes how the concepts of gender and identity are approached, how students interact with creative elements of the programme such as poetry and increasing the variety of activities students participate in. Ultimately, the programme's success relies on two fundamental pillars: integrating youth work principles and fostering an educational ecosystem that includes multiple stakeholders while amplifying boys' voices at every level. With these improvements, the programme holds significant potential to positively impact boys' educational experiences.



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