Written evidence submitted by the University of Kent

Introduction

The University of Kent Outreach and Widening Participation department piloted 'Championing Boys: Exploring Who You Could Be' in the Spring of 2023. In recognition that the boys are faced with greater educational challenges than girls as noted in the consultation – lower GCSE performance, higher suspension rates and exclusions, and overall lower progression to Higher Education – the University was keen to pilot a programme that both aimed at supporting young boys and better understanding their lived experience and potential barriers to their education success. This intervention worked with Year 7 boys from low-socio economic background status groups in two schools within the same Multi-Academy Trust (MAT).

The Championing Boys Programme began initially with a series of five in-school workshops and a campus visit delivered on the University of Kent Canterbury campus. Prior to the project starting a launch event was held, whereby selected students and their parents, guardians or supporters were invited to find out more about the programme and the potential benefits for the students participating.

The project was developed in collaboration with the MAT and is grounded in academic research. The aim of the project was to maintain and strengthen an attachment to education and 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.

Throughout the project, the University embedded extensive evaluation to assess the impact of the programme and to gain further insights and understanding surrounding boys' engagement with school.

Given the programme's success, this report will present the projects findings and identify the need for specific and strengths based support for boys. This will include ensuring that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) consider the need for specific widening participation interventions that consider the specific needs of boys. As well as highlighting the need for institutions to consider gender as a key element of intersectional disadvantage which may include gender when combined with socio-economic status or other characteristics identified as risks in the Office for Students (OfS) Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR). There should also be consideration for adding gender as a characteristic on the EORR when it is considered with other characteristics, particularly socio-economic status.

This submission will first discuss the academic evidence and principles which underpinned the programme design. It will then discuss the projects findings which include insights into the boys educational engagement as well as the successes and challenges of the project. The themes which discuss engagement with education will include perception of bias towards girls within school and the approach to learning. All of which have been identified by the boys themselves through participation in focus groups.

Programme Design

This section will discuss the academic research which highlights a need for a specific approach to targeting boys and discuss how this research was incorporated into the programme design. There were a number of areas identified as interacting with boys' engagement with education. These were:

Celebrating positive masculine identities

It is widely accepted that there is no set way to be masculine. However, as a society there are still deep rooted assumptions and beliefs around what it means to be male. Research show that perceptions of masculinity can Influence how boys Interact with education. Reay (2002) argues that traditional masculinity is in opposition to educational engagement, particularly with subjects perceived as more feminine. She further adds that for boys from low socio-economic backgrounds, social class acts as a 'fixing mechanism' for traditional masculinity (Reay, 2002, p.224).

Ingram and Waller (2014) also found that social class impacted the 'negotiation of gendered identities' (p.48). Their research investigated how a student's background influenced their experiences of undergraduate study. During this research, male focus groups were held with both working and middle-class males, where participants were asked to share images which represented masculinity for them (Ingram and Waller, 2014,p.41-42). It was found that middle-class students were more comfortable experimenting with different forms of masculinity (Ingram and Waller, 2014, p.48). Compared to working-class males, who despite already moving away from traditional working-class masculinity to some extent by progressing to HE, found it more challenging to integrate other forms of masculinity (Ingram and Waller, 2014, p.48). Ingram and Waller thought that for these men, they were holding onto positive aspects of traditional working-class masculinity whilst also avoiding aspects which could marginalise them.

Given the link between masculine identity and educational engagement, it was felt that providing a space for students to explore masculinity and reflect on what it means to be male was essential to the programme and perhaps where traditional outreach interventions are falling short of engaging with this audience.

Transition

The transition between primary school and secondary school is a key point in young boys' educational journeys and can be a point at which boys disengage with education. Harland and McCready (2012) found that boys took longer to adjust to the transition between primary and secondary school and often caused boys anxiety. They argue "Boys appeared to be unprepared for key transitional stages during adolescence" (Harland and McCready, 2012, p.82).There is also evidence to suggest that Year 9 is also a key milestone in disengagement of boys. This is something the University of Kent intends to explore further. Championing Boys was designed to work with boys early in their secondary educational journey and continue to work with them across their pre-16 education. It is hoped the sustained and progressive nature of this programme will support with maintaining an attachment to education, but this is not yet known.

Gender based stereotypes

Gender stereotyping can exist within education with regard to their specific abilities (e.g. boys are good at STEM subjects) and with regard to their behaviour in school (e.g. boys are more likely to

misbehave) (Heyder & Kessels, 2015). These stereotypes can impact the opportunities presented to students as well as how they are perceived and interacted with in an educational setting. Heyder and Kessels (2015) studied the effects of gender stereotyping on teachers perceptions of students. They found that teachers were more likely to describe boys as troublesome and this Increased for boys who "enacted their masculinity" (Heyder and Kessels, 2015, p. 478).

The Championing Boys programme wanted to challenge engagement myths outlined by Pinkett & Roberts, in their book 'Boys Don't Try'. In this book, the authors established 3 'myths' that are frequently shared around working with boys from low socio-economic backgrounds. One particular myth is described as 'make learning relevant to boys interests'. The authors push against this, arguing that this risks assuming boys all like the same things which reinforces stereotypes, encourages low expectations by letting boys know they are not necessarily suitable for things outside their current interests, and can prevent them from building social capital. With this in mind, workshops look to allow boys to experience things outside the curriculum whilst avoiding making assumptions about 'what boys like'.

Avoiding a deficit model

Integral vision for the programme was recognising and celebrating the boys and their strengths by adopting a strengths-based approach. Clarke et al (2008) implemented a programme which focused on "Helping students realize their strengths and then building upon them, as well as conveying these strengths to teachers, administrators, and parents who can reinforce the strengths, is key to this approach" (Clarke et al, 2008, p127). Their research found that boys' attendance improved, discipline issues reduced and grades for the majority of boys (apart from those in the gifted stream) increased (Clarke et al, 2008, p.130).

The importance of male role models

Baars et al (2016) argued that students are more likely to experience a shift in both their knowledge and perception of HE if they have access to a role model who has experience of going to university (Baars et al, 2016). These role models act as sources of information and provide opportunities for students to interact with university students who they perceive to be 'just like them' (Baars et al, 2016). This programme wanted to explore the value of role models, particularly male role models and provide opportunities for students to interact with a range of different male ambassadors and staff members.

Possible Selves Theory

Markus and Nurius (1986) theory of possible selves refers to the possible identities individuals perceive available in the future. Harrison (2018) addresses how the theory of possible selves can be used to address widening participation to Higher Education. Harrison argues that these perceptions are shaped partly by our social and cultural backgrounds, and therefore those from under-represented backgrounds are more likely to have a narrower view of what is possible.

Harrison (2018) describes the implications for widening participation of using a number of intervention points which can utilise possible selves as a model to support the creation of interventions which support the progression of young people into HE. Building on the Possible

Selves Theory, the Championing Boys Programme intervention points support and underpin the programme design.

Taking Boys Seriously Principles

Taking Boys Seriously (TBS), a longitudinal research project undertaken by the University of Ulster, was established in 2006 and has secured funding to continue until 2028. This project worked with a range of different educational and community partners to explore why boys from low socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to reach expected attainment outcomes and have low progression into higher education.

As a result of their research, TSB created a set of principles, which they argue should be embedded into all educational settings which work with boys and young men to support them in thriving in that environment . The Championing Boys Programme embedded these principles within the programme.

Findings

Overall, there was evidence to support that the programme had motivated students to think about future career opportunities and potential progression into higher education. Additionally in all focus groups, students also mentioned that they enjoyed the programme and would like it to continue in Year 8.

Exploring a range of different potential identities

The programme aimed to explore a range of different potential identities through exploration of subjects which extend past the curriculum and link into potential future careers.

Some students expressed how the programme had encouraged them to think about their future and possible future careers. Student D particularly enjoyed forensic science, as exemplified by the following exchange:

> Student D: "I have just researched for the salary and what qualifications you need to become a forensic scientist (…) I've already talked to my mum and family about It"

Some students weren't interested in a career in particular, but felt the programme had encouraged them to think about their future education and what they could do after school. One student in particular remarked that he understood he had to "pay a bit more attention in classes to (…) get somewhere".

There are strong links here with possible selves, with some students suggesting that during the campus visit they were imagining themselves as a university student. This also indicates a sense of agency within the boys, in that they recognised a sense of ownership to their education.

The importance of being heard and the perception of bias

Students felt safe and heard through the Championing Boys Project. Through the focus groups, it became apparent that students felt the programme was nurturing and inclusive. “If you got confused on something, they [the facilitators] would tell you it,” reported one student, speaking to his appreciation of not being left behind by the facilitators. Another student added to this, “They’d say it in easier words to comprehend.”

The student ambassadors played a pivotal role in this; their ability to listen and support students was integral to the success of the programme. It became apparent through the focus groups that students were craving the connection and understanding from staff delivering the sessions.

Students voiced a perception that in schools girls were treated differently from boys; “They’re more lenient with girls”. In their view, whereas girls were allowed to ask questions when they did not understand the materials, if boys were to do the same they were more quickly perceived as being ‘troublemakers’ or intentionally wanting to disrupt the class. In their opinion this was more strongly felt when supply teachers were present. In contrast, they felt that the Championing Boys project encouraged them to ask questions, and they felt heard in return.

Here is an instructive exchange from the second focus group, which came in response to the question of whether they preferred the style of learning practised in Championing Boys to that practised in school:

> Student X: Yes. Because you’re in groups and if you don’t know but someone next to you does, you can ask them for information about it.
>
> Student Y: Normally, we’d get told off, if we said that kind of stuff in school. Like, ‘Can you please help me with this?’ ‘Oh, no talking. That’s a behaviour point’.

The prompt about learning styles was intended to open a discussion about the active pedagogical approach utilised by most of the facilitators, compared a didactic or rote approach with which we assumed the students might be more familiar. What Student X and Student Y took from the question, though, was an opportunity reflect on the open environment that was cultivated in the Championing Boys workshops. Implicitly, they do indeed speak positively to the active and collaborative approach taken by facilitators; what is perhaps surprising, however, is that Student X and Student Y expressed this via an appreciation of the space they were afforded to ask questions, a space in which information did not only flow down from facilitators or ambassadors but could move freely among students. The latter here point cannot be overstated. While the idea of support is central, we should not assume that the students desire only the support of an authority figure, like facilitators or ambassador. Rather, there was a concomitant desire to support, and be supported by, their peers. It is thus notable that the question posed by Student Y, “Can you please help me with this?” does not have an object: it could be asked of a teacher or a friend.

Later in that same group, another student added to this rather oppressive picture:

> Student W: In school, my maths teacher, if you put your hand up, recently she’s been asking me to put my hand down, even though she’s answering other people. They’re not really helping you, because we’ve got tests and a lot of them [lessons] are revision now. Every time we ask her to help us to discover something, she’s not helping. She’s just saying, ‘Oh, I’m going to put the answers up in a minute’.
>
> Researcher: So, did you feel that was a different story in the Championing Boys project? You felt a bit more supported and listened to?
>
> Student W: Yes, because they all answered your questions that you had.

We can take from this that Student W felt unable to speak in their classroom. This can, of course, happen for a variety of reasons and we do not intend to apportion blame on the school or particular teachers. It is however a recurring theme in interactions with school students which should be documented.

Conclusion

Both the programme design and the evaluative findings identify a need to specifically address the intersectionality of gender and disadvantage in both education and widening participation to Higher Education. The academic research which underpinned the programme design, identified key areas which may influence differences in attainment and progression gaps. The evaluative findings also highlight a need to think more carefully about gender within education and how to engage with young boys. It identifies areas where further research and reflections are required, particularly with regards to whether or not boys are treated differently in educational settings, and even if the latter is the case, consider the importance that boys identify a perception of bias at a minimum. Further research is needed into the classroom environment and how we can better promote an open learning experience for students within the parameters and constraints faced by schools. Finally, it highlights a space with which HEIs can operate to support schools and male students progression, creating a space for students to step outside traditional constructs of being a boy in education.

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