# PiXL
# INSIGHTS

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS TO

## raise boys' achievement

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Educake

# PiXL
# INSIGHTS

"The most valuable resource that all teachers have is each other."

ROBERT JOHN MEEHAN

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# WELCOME

**Welcome to our second PiXL Insights publication on raising boys' achievement. This publication has felt a little like a homecoming. Back in July 2021, we were trying to work out how we could help our member schools close the gender achievement gap. We wanted to support their work while recognising that boys are not a homogenous group and therefore any intervention put in place would need to be highly personalised to each school's context.**

So, we decided the best thing we could do would be to support schools on their individual journeys as they developed small-scale projects to meet the needs of their boys in their settings. Our commitment to those schools was to support their thinking and give a platform to their insights through our first ever Insights publication which was released in July 2022.

Putting together the second issue of this publication has been a real privilege. We've been able to reflect on how far we've come with Insights – since issue 1 of raising boys' achievement we have expanded our support into EYFS, KS1 and KS2, and have run projects on three more cohorts (learners with SEND, more able learners, and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds).

As we have worked more in this area, we have had the privilege of working with many colleagues and specialists – several of whom you will be hearing from alongside our schools in the following pages. We present research from Ulster University, bring you a call to action from Boys' Impact, and share practical tips from leading experts such as Mark Roberts and Mike Nicholson.

We are also thrilled that this publication has been **sponsored by Educake** as part of their ongoing commitment to supporting young people, their teachers, and our work here at PiXL. Educake supports tens of thousands of educators as they work to raise outcomes in schools. Within this publication you'll find examples of how Educake equips teachers with valuable insights that inform their classroom practice for raising boys' achievement. Through their popular homework and revision tool, Educake has billions of data points that enable detailed insights into progress and challenges across subject, age range and various demographic cohorts.

We want to take this opportunity to thank the schools and colleagues who have volunteered to participate in the projects that make up this magazine. Schools are busy places, and we appreciate the time that staff have found to engage with us on this project. Networking and collaboration are at the heart of how we support schools at PiXL, so our door is always open for you to share any thoughts and feedback with us. Contact us on **insights@pixl.org.uk**.

*Happy reading!*

# MEET THE PROJECT TEAM

### HANNAH COSTANZO
## PROJECT MANAGER

I've had the privilege of working at PiXL for over a decade. In that time, I have worked on a number of areas of project development, from the conception and launch of PiXL's character provision to the development of our PiXL TV platform. In my current role as Head of Cross-Phase Projects, I get to work on the development and delivery of strategies that support across our entire membership network from EYFS up to Post 16. All of my work with PiXL has been fuelled by my desire to solve problems and support the brilliant work that teachers and school leaders do every day. PiXL Insights remains one of my favourite projects to work on. I'm humbled every year by the innovation and creativity of our schools.

### HANNAH GRUNWERG
## PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR

I am delighted to be going into my second year of working at PiXL having thoroughly enjoyed the variety of opportunities in my first year to support schools and colleges. In my role as Operations Co-ordinator for Secondary and Post 16, I work closely with the 11-18 team to help co-ordinate communications and projects, including PiXL Insights, as well as providing customer care for schools. The direct interaction I have with teachers and school leaders is really valuable to me, as it allows me to appreciate the impactful work they do and the dedication they bring to their profession.

### HEATHER SAGAR
## PROJECT DESIGNER

I started working for PiXL as a part-time proof-reader. With a background in graphic design, I couldn't let anything go without at least 'tidying it up' a little first! I have now had the honour of working as a design consultant for ten years, working on everything from company-wide branding, conference materials, cross-phase packages like PiXL Reading and of course PiXL Insights. My aim is to make the aesthetic of everything that comes my way, whether it's a one-page Word document or a 100-page publication, match the quality of the content written. I believe PiXL's offering is special and I want people to be able to access that in the most beautiful way possible.

### TASHA ROBERTSON
## PROJECT PROOF-READER

I have been working as a proof-reader for PiXL for five years. My background is in secondary English teaching, and I also have experience in primary and EYFS settings. I am a final set of eyes on a variety of PiXL materials, ranging from classroom provision packages and teacher guidance to conference items, network publications and company policy documents. I especially enjoy working on resources for the classroom as it allows me to put my previous experience to good use, viewing content through the lens of a teacher as well as a proof-reader. I am proud to contribute to the work of PiXL and to call myself part of the team.

# THE NATIONAL ATTAINMENT PICTURE

Girls outperform boys across education phases but unlike other attainment gaps, the gender gap is unique in narrowing during the primary school phase, before widening again during secondary school[1]. Across the key stages, headline data masks important variation by subject, with boys consistently having a narrower gap, or even outperforming girls, in maths compared to the gender attainment gap in English. Boys appear to lose ground most significantly to girls during the secondary school phase. This article covers some of the headline figures in terms of academic achievement. The following articles from Boys' Impact and Ulster University provide valuable additional context. Finally on page 116 we have an article on empowering girls in STEM, to ensure that we have eyes on all gender gaps.
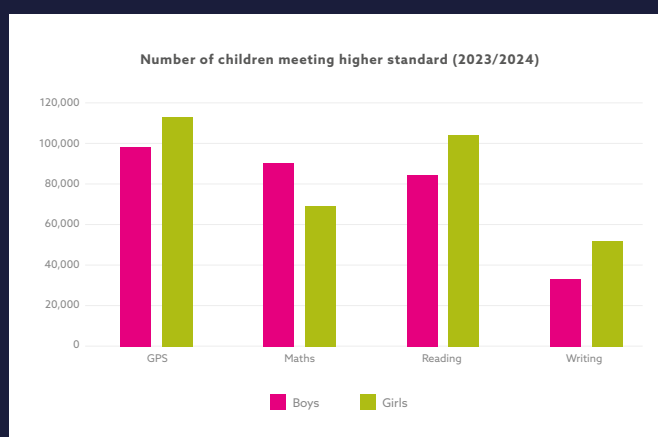
## AT PRIMARY

The gap among pupils aged 5 is already quite marked at the **Early Years Foundation Stage**: girls were 3.2 months ahead of boys in 2023. The gender gap in 2023 remained similar to 2022 but was 0.3 months larger than pre-pandemic levels. Prior to the pandemic, the gap had fallen by almost one month since the start of our series in 2013. Girls consistently outperform boys in all key learning areas but historically, this is most marked for literacy, especially writing, and least marked for maths[2].

Attainment in the **phonics screening check** increased for both boys and girls in 2024 compared to 2023. A higher proportion of girls continue to meet the phonics standard in year 1 than boys. The attainment gap is 7 percentage points in 2024, unchanged from 2023. The attainment gap has remained broadly stable since the check was introduced in 2012, when the gap was 8 percentage points. The proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard in year 1 increased from 75% to 77% for boys, and from 82% to 84% for girls.

In 2024, at the **end of Key Stage 2**, girls continued to outperform boys at the **Expected Standard** in all subjects, except for maths where boys performed slightly better (1 percentage point difference). In reading, 78% of girls and 71% of boys met the expected standard, up from 76% and 70% in 2023, respectively. The biggest attainment gap between boys and girls remains in the writing teacher assessment at 13 percentage points. In reading, writing and maths (combined) in 2024, 64% of girls met the expected standard compared to 57% of boys, a gap of 7 percentage points, unchanged since 2023.

At the **Higher Standard**, among individual subjects, the gender gap increased in reading from 6 percentage points in 2023 to 7 percentage points in 2024. In maths, the gender gap decreased from 6 percentage points in 2023 to 5 percentage points in 2024. In writing, the attainment for both boys and girls decreased, however, the gender gap remained the same as 2023 at 6 percentage points. In 2024, 9% of girls met the higher standard in reading, writing and maths (combined), unchanged since 2023 but down from 13% in 2019. Among boys, 6% met the higher standard, down from 7% in 2023 and down from 9% in 2019. Based on unrounded data, the gender gap at the higher standard remained at 2 percentage points in 2024, unchanged from 2023.



**Number of children meeting higher standard (2023/2024)**

In 2023, the gender gap at the end of primary school had narrowed considerably, to just 0.6 months, down from 2.1 months in 2022, and down by almost 2 months since prior to the pandemic[3]. Looking at reading and maths separately, girls were 5.5 months ahead in reading in 2022, whereas boys were 2.0 months ahead in maths. This means boys overtake girls in maths during primary school. The last time the gap was this small was prior to 2016, before students were assessed on the new, more challenging national curriculum first introduced in 2014. Official statistics suggest that the fall in the key stage 2 gap since 2019 may have been partly due to an increase in the reading attainment of boys (from an average scaled score of 103 to 105), alongside a decrease in the maths attainment of girls (from 105 to 104).

## AT SECONDARY

Whilst the gender gap - unlike the gaps for disadvantaged pupils and other vulnerable groups - reduces as children progress through primary school, it widens again during secondary school. In 2023, boys were 4.5 months behind girls averaging across GCSE grades in English and maths. This is down from 5 months in 2022, around 2 months lower than pre-pandemic levels, and is now the smallest gap since our series began in 2011 (when it was 5.6 months).

Official data shows that the reduction in the gap since 2019 is due to both the maths and English attainment of boys rising (respectively a 1.5 and 2.4 percentage point increase in the proportion with a good pass) and the English attainment of girls falling (a 1.3 percentage point decrease)[4]. In 2023, girls were almost 10 months ahead in GCSE English – a much larger gap than the one for reading at the end of primary school (of 5.5 months) – whilst the gap for GCSE maths was negligible (at 0.4 months). This indicates that over the course of secondary school, girls pull further away in English and almost fully catch-up with boys in maths.

At end of Key Stage 4, the gender gap in performance has fallen slightly in 2024. On average, female students achieve higher grades at GCSE than male students. However, some variations have occurred over time. For example, prior to the pandemic, the difference in high grades between genders decreased slightly—from 7.7 percentage points in 2016 to 6.5 points in 2019. This was largely due to an increase in top grades among male students, with the percentage of males achieving a grade 7 or above rising from 17.6% in 2016 to 18.6% in 2019, while female students saw a minor decline of 0.2 percentage points during the same period.



**GCSE grades in all subjects, 2016-2024**
16 years olds in England, **male** vs **female** pupils
*Cumulative percentage achieveing grade*
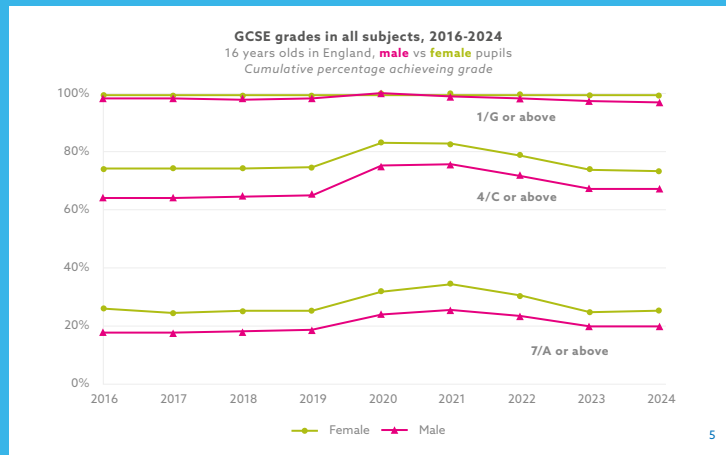
During the pandemic, the gap widened again, peaking at 9.0 percentage points in 2021. Although grades rose for both male and female students between 2020 and 2022, female students' grades increased at a faster rate. It was expected that the gender gap would return to 2019 levels over the past two years, but this hasn't fully happened. This year, the gap is slightly smaller than before the pandemic, at 5.6 percentage points compared to 6.5 in 2019, showing a modest decrease of 0.2 percentage points since last year.

Overall, the percentage of top grades achieved in 2024 is 0.8 percentage points higher than it was pre-pandemic. For male students, the share of grades 9-7 is 0.9 percentage points higher than in 2019, while for female students, it is just 0.4 percentage points higher.

## "Whilst the gender gap – unlike the gaps for disadvantaged pupils and other vulnerable groups – reduces as children progress through primary school, it widens again in secondary school."

## GCSE RE-SITS IN ENGLISH AND MATHS

Cohort sizes and gender gaps for post-16 resits increased between 2023-2024. There were 31,000 more post-16 resit entries to English in 2024 compared with 2023 and 30,000 more entries to maths.

There has been a small increase in the proportion of students achieving a grade 4 pass in their GCSE maths resit in England, pass rates for English have continued to fall. The gender gap in pass rates is particularly noticeable in post-16 GCSE English, where 26% of females achieved a grade 4 or above compared to 17% of males. In maths, the pass rate for females in 2024 was 18% compared to 17% for males.
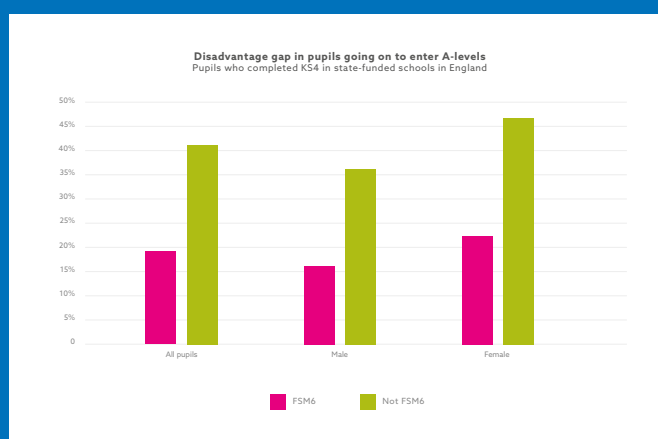
## AT POST 16

Overall grades in England remained similar for **A Level, T Level and other Level 3** results in 2024 to those in 2023, but slightly above pre-pandemic levels. For the last few years, the big headlines about A Level results have been focused on grading. But this year, for the first time since 2020, there haven't been any dramatic changes to the way that A Levels have been graded. Pre-pandemic, grades tended to be consistent across years. But in 2020 and 2021, following the cancellation of public exams, grades rose sharply. In 2021, 44.3% of GCSEs were graded A or above, compared to 25.2% in 2019.

Entries in maths A level increased by around 10k – around 7k for male students and 3k for female. In physics, as in maths, the proportional change in entries between 2023-2024 was roughly the same for both genders - up 12% for male students, up 15% for female. In further maths, it was slightly higher for male students (up 22%) than female (up 16%). But in computer science, the proportional increase was much higher for female students (up 29%) than male (up 9%).

The gender gap at A Level doesn't tend to be quite as clear cut as it is in earlier years. Male students tend to be more likely to achieve A* grades, but female students tend to get higher grades on average. During the pandemic, the gender gap in grading at both Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 grew. And at A Level, the typical gap at A* level reversed: during this period, female students were more likely to achieve a top grade than male students[6].

The gender gap at A level returned to roughly pre-pandemic levels in 2023 and has remained similar in 2024. In 16-19 education, female students achieved around a grade and a half more highly than male students in 2023, across their best three qualifications. This represents a closing of the gap since 2022, following a widening during the pandemic. The gender gap in 16-19 education is now at the narrowest level recorded since 2017. Since 2019, 16-19 attainment increased for both male and female students, but at a slightly greater rate for boys, leading to the narrowing gap. Attainment for both males and females has decreased in 2023, compared to the increased grades awarded during the pandemic and in 2022[7].

When we look at the intersection between gender and disadvantage, this adds another dimension to consider. The overall percentage gap between disadvantaged students going on to study A Levels and their more advantaged peers is 22 percentage points. However, when we look at this by gender, we can see that while disadvantaged boys are the least likely group to proceed to A Levels, the disadvantage gap is actually wider for girls (24% compared to a 21% gap for boys)[8].



**Disadvantage gap in pupils going on to enter A-levels**
Pupils who completed KS4 in state-funded schools in England

FSM6 ■ Not FSM6

## T LEVELS

There were significant gender differences in **T Level** subject choice, and retention rates remain poor. These are still relatively new vocational qualifications with occupational specialisms. 16 have now been rolled out, there are plans for 24 in total. Almost 75% of entries in T Levels by female students were in Education and Early Years, and Health. There was a greater spread of entries across the specialisms for male students. 29% of T Levels started by all students were not completed[9].

6,543 (88.7%) of the 7,380 students achieved a Pass or above in their overall T level results across all T Level pathways. For female students this was 94.7% and for male students 83.9%. Of the 7,380 students with an overall result in 2023/24: 98.3% of students achieved a grade E or above in the core component; 93.0% achieved a Pass or above in their Occupational Specialism; 95.1% completed their Industry Placement (including those completed with special consideration). The pass rate in the 16 pathways awarded this year ranged from 96.2% (Education and Early Years) to 69.9% (Design and Development for Engineering and Manufacturing).

# "The gender gap in pass rates is particularly noticeable in post-16 GCSE English, where 26% of females achieve a grade 4 or above compared to 17% of males."

1, 2, 3, 4, 7. Education Policy Institute (2024) **Education Policy Institute Annual Report 2024** [online]. Education Policy Institute.
Available from: *https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2024/* [Accessed 4 December 2024].

3, 6. FFT Education Data Lab. (2024) **GCSE results 2024: The main trends in grades and entries.** FFT Education Datalab [blog]. 22 August.
Available from: *https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2024/08/gcse-results-2024-the-main-trends-in-grades-and-entries/* [Accessed 4 December 2024].

7. Department for Education (2023) **Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2022/23** [online]. Department for Education, GOV.UK.
Available from: *https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance* [Accessed 4 December 2024].

8. Department for Education (2024) **Provisional T Level results: academic year 2023 to 2024** [online]. Department for Education, GOV.UK.
Available from: *https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/provisional-t-level-results-academic-year-2023-to-2024* [Accessed 4 December 2024].

9. FFT Education Data Lab (2024), **Intersectionality and Key Stage 5 Subject Choice**.
Available from: *https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2024/11/intersectionality-and-key-stage-5-subject-choice/* [Accessed November 2024])

Plaister, N. (2024) **Intersectionality and Key Stage 5 Subject Choice.** FFT Education Datalab [blog]. 27 November.
Available from: *https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2024/11/intersectionality-and-key-stage-5-subject-choice/* [Accessed 4 December 2024].

# BOYS' IMPACT

## Starting a new conversation about working-class boys and young men in education

DR ALEX BLOWER
**FOUNDER, BOYS' IMPACT**

As educators, promoting equity of access to educational opportunity is a purpose which, for many of us, is our reason for getting out of bed in the morning. However, one the most significant challenges in activity aligned to this aim, comes in the form of how young men who are eligible for Free Schools Meals engage with education.

And the challenge is generational. Over the last two decades, commentary on the disparity in educational outcomes has become well-trodden ground for think tanks and policy makers. From the 2006 report to the then Department for Education and Skills on Raising Boys' Achievement [1] by academics from the University of Cambridge, to the 2016 report on the underachievement of young men in education by the Higher Education Policy Institute [2], the issues have been articulated and rearticulated for years.

### So, given that policy makers have been aware of the issue for longer than young people currently attending secondary schools have been alive, why are the gaps still so entrenched?

Why is it that, in 2025, PiXL still need to produce this publication in order to provide educators with the tools to engage with the challenge in an equitable manner?

Well, it's complicated. The issues are deeply connected to wider societal inequalities in a way which can make it difficult to know where to begin. In the classroom, these play out in a range of ways with young men. It can be seen in issues arising from masculine expectations, peer pressure, relationships, mental health and poverty. They are linked to the preconceptions held by teachers, and the messages transmitted to young men within our educational ecosystems. They amalgamate to create a set of expectations surrounding what being a young man in education 'should' mean, especially if the student happens to be from a working-class background. However, for decades this complexity has been overlooked. In its place have been persistent narratives which have created a stereotypical caricature of who these working-class boys and young men in our classrooms are.

Rather than being discussed as individuals with a broad array of likes, interests, and hopes for the future, they are presented as aggressive, anti-authoritarian and morally lacking. We have seen it in the way they are presented as aspirationally deficient [3] by policy makers, and in newspaper headlines telling us that one in three teachers say boys consider being asked to read as a punishment [4]. **In short, we have done a very good job of convincing ourselves that the problem is with young men:** that they make decisions consciously, independent of the wider inequalities they may experience. And perhaps most importantly, that all of these decisions are the same. Under the collective lens we have created to view the challenge, there is no room to consider the important link between the young men and the conditions they exist in. Instead, the overwhelming focus is on how we further problematise their existence in the world.

On top of this, there is the argument about whether we should even be targeting activity specifically toward young men in the first place. In a patriarchal society which is plagued by gender inequality, sexual harassment and violence

against women and children, are the working-class boys really where we should be investing our resource? In my view, the emergence of toxic social media influencers such as Andrew Tate has gone a long way to answering that question for us. Rather than targeted engagement with young men in education being viewed as optional, the rise in misogynistic content on social media platforms such as TikTok has led to it becoming a necessity. Fitting snugly into the gap which has been made by assumptive practice with young men in education, driven by stereotypes, and narratives of deficiency, we now find education of another form. Delivered through mobile phones and three-minute videos, young men engage with lessons which inform them that their traditional role as breadwinner is under threat. That their masculinity and power is being eroded by pernicious network of educational and social actors who wish to emasculate them. With the approach taken in educational policy and practice with young men, we continue to play right into these influencer's hands.

Rather than an established societal consensus on issues linked to masculinity, inequality and educating boys and young men, we see polarisation. Arguments about whether we should work with young men because they are 'perpetrators of misogyny in waiting', or because the feminist movement 'has pushed them out'. If these are the only positions available to take in public discourse about working-class young men in education, we are doomed to failure. We need something new. To discard the broken lens we've been using to view the issue, and move forward with a new, deeper understanding of the issues young working-class men face. In the book *Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined*, JJ Bola writes:

*"Because society is generally patriarchal, in that it favours men that occupy privileged positions, it makes it seem as though men do not have issues they also suffer from. It is a kind of double-edged sword, a poisonous panacea: that is to say, the same system that puts men at an advantage in society is essentially the same system that limits them, inhibits their growth and eventually leads to their breakdown"*

**In other words, two truths can, and must, be held at once.** We live in a patriarchal society which causes hurt. It is a sword that cuts both ways, harming young men and young women alike. For men, the injuries relate to mental ill health and suicide, entry into the criminal justice system and homelessness. Whilst for women it rears its ugly head in gender pay gaps, sexual harassment, and violence against women and children.  It is a set of societal conditions which benefit very few, and one in which it is imperative that we create space for young men to talk and connect in spaces where they feel their voice is valued and valuable. Not by focusing on perceived deficiencies, not by focusing on what they can be in the future, but by focusing on *who* they can be. By working to cultivate the conditions where a happy, healthy future isn't an abstract hope or ambition, but rather it is an expectation.

[1] Younger, M., Warrington, M., Gray, J., Rudduck, J., McLellan, R., Bearne, E., Kershner, R. and Bricheno, P. (2005) **Raising boys' achievement** [online]. [PDF]. DfES Publications. Available from: *https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/5400/1/RR636.pdf* [Accessed 7 Nov 24]

[2] Hillman, N. and Robinson, N. (2016) **Boys to Men: The underachievement of young men in higher education-and how to start tackling it** [online]. [PDF]. Higher Education Policy Institute. *https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/05/12/3317/* [Accessed 7 Nov 24]

[3] Adams, Richard. (2018) Ofsted chief: **Families of white working-class children lack drive of migrants.** The Guardian [online]. 22 June. Available from: *https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jun/21/families-white-working-class-children-economic-burden-lack-drive-of-migrants* [Accessed 7 Nov 24]

[4] Busby, E. (2023) **One in three teachers say boys consider being asked to read as a 'punishment'**. The Independent [online]. 08 March. Available from: *https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/yougov-geoff-barton-scotland-wales-association-of-school-and-college-leaders-b2296177.html* [Accessed 7 Nov 24]

# Boys' Impact

Back in 2023, I founded Boys' Impact. It is dedicated to addressing the gap in educational outcomes for boys and young men who receive Free School Meals. As a network of educators, researchers and practitioners, our approach is strengths-based and evidence-led. Boys' Impact exists to create ecosystems in research, policy and practice which enable boys and young men who experience socio-economic inequality to flourish. Using the Taking Boys Seriously research as our foundational knowledge-base we bring people together to meet the challenge equitably and effectively. In fact, you will be hearing from a few of our members throughout this publication. To find out more about our work visit **boysimpact.com**.

# WHAT IS PiXL INSIGHTS?

**PiXL Insights was first developed in 2020. We wanted to find a way of supporting our members with stubborn national achievement gaps. The first area we wanted to tackle was this very issue of boys' underachievement. However, we knew that there would be no silver bullets: there is no single strategy or technique that all schools could employ in order to eradicate the gender gap in their settings. Instead, we knew that context was going to be key – our students are all individuals, after all.**

## So we began to think: what if instead of sharing one idea, we deliberately sought out to share many?

What if we worked with individual schools across the network, for whom boys' achievement was a significant focus that year, and developed projects with them to specifically meet the needs of **their boys in their context**? And that's when Insights was born. In that first year, we worked with dozens of schools on different projects at KS3, KS4 and KS5, and we published the professional insights of the colleagues who ran those projects in our first PiXL Insights publication. **We then started to think that there were other cohorts of students that may benefit from the 'Insights treatment'**. We agreed that we would look at four key groups in rotation, and this publication that you are reading represents the start of our second cycle.



**In academic year 2023/24,** we published our Insights on stretch and challenge for more able learners and improving inclusion for learners with SEND. We also worked with schools on projects aimed at empowering learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and raising boys' achievement.

**In academic year 2024/25,** we are publishing the insights from those projects, as well as undertaking a new round of projects on more able learners and learners with SEND.

**In academic year 2025/26,** we will publish our insights on more able learners and learners with SEND and will once again begin projects on learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and boys.

**And that's our plan for the future: to continue this cycle of investigation, innovation and support until those national gaps close.**

Each project run as part of PiXL Insights is developed and designed by the participant school, however colleagues at PiXL are available to coach, mentor and support their thinking (you can meet our project mentors on pages 20 and 21 of this publication). We are also on hand throughout the process to help troubleshoot issues, overcome barriers and celebrate successes.

PiXL Insights is **not** action research, nor does it pretend to be. Projects run as part of PiXL Insights are just that: projects. The teachers share their professional insights (an underappreciated resource, in our opinion) and offer their perspectives on what worked well and what they would change next time.

If you are interested in participating in future projects with us, do get in touch with the team on **insights@pixl.org.uk**.

# USING THIS PUBLICATION IN YOUR OWN CONTEXT

**As you read through the projects, we hope that you gain an insight from each project into:**

- why it was conceived
- how it was implemented
- what changes (if any) the project leads made throughout the process
- what the impact or outcome of the project was
- how that project might be continued, scaled up or moved forward.

Each project is, by design, bound up in the context of that school and all the other important work that they do. Getting the most out of the ideas shared in these pages will mean thinking carefully about how those ideas can be translated into your own setting. School project write-ups have a couple of features that will help you do this:

- Each project includes some headline data about the school to help provide some context.
- We have included some ideas for how each project could be taken further or adapted for different key stages at the end of each article.

This last section is really important – don't skip over projects just because, for example, they are targeting younger/ older students than you support: there is so much that can be adapted and shared across different sectors.

**The following reflection questions may help you get the most out of what is contained in these pages.**

## SHARING THIS PUBLICATION WITH COLLEAGUES

- Who in your school should read/use this publication? Who are the key staff/SLT?
- How will you disseminate the project and its ideas to others? Remember that some of the project ideas could be adapted and implemented with different groups and at different scales.
- Make use of the index at the back of this publication to help colleagues with particular interests or responsibilities find the most relevant articles to them.
- We are also fortunate to include in this publication, alongside the projects from our member schools, articles written by experts and academics in this field. You may want to share these as a basis for team discussions.

## FOCUSING ON YOUR SCHOOL

- What in this publication might help you improve the achievement of boys in your school, college or provision? Are there common themes that emerge when you reflect e.g. communication and language, resilience, behaviour, reading, engagement in super curriculum?
- How can you identify the areas you want to focus on? What is your data telling you? How does your data compare to national headlines?
- Drawing on your professional knowledge and expertise, which projects will have the most impact in your context? What is already established? What mechanisms already work?

## REFLECTING ON YOUR 'NOW'

- Are you aware, now, of where your biggest barriers are in terms of raising the achievement of boys in your school?
- Are there particular year groups, curriculum areas, or skills that come to mind? Have that in mind as you approach the projects in these pages.
- Be careful of where advantage and gender intersect: is your gender gap masking an advantage gap in your girls from disadvantaged backgrounds? Having an eye on both is a challenge, but it's important.
- How aware are your staff of the issues relating to the progress of boys? How do you know?
- What is the culture of belonging and aspiration like in your school? Are you explicit about how this culture relates to **all** learners?

## TAKING YOUR NEXT STEPS

- **Reflect on what you have read** – are you inspired to run your own project, or implement any changes based on the insights shared in these pages?
- **Speak to a PiXL Specialist** – they are well-placed to support your thinking and to help identify target groups and areas.
- **Make a plan – identify your why.** Reflect on what and how the project can be developed, including any necessary adaptations for your context.
- **Contact us** – if you have any questions or wish to speak to us about future participation, please email us on **insights@pixl.org.uk**.

# Are we taking boys seriously?

## LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH FROM **ULSTER UNIVERSITY**

### WHAT IS TAKING BOYS SERIOUSLY?

The attainment gap for boys and young men at all levels of education is long-term, persistent and systemic. However, there is nothing inherently wrong with boys, it is our systems and pedagogical approaches that need to adapt. Taking Boys Seriously (TBS) is a longitudinal participatory action research project housed within Ulster University in Northern Ireland. Unique in its longevity (over 18 years), the research is committed to elevating the voices of boys and their educators, with the aim to influence and embed change in educational policy, pedagogy, and practice. TBS is a response to what we have termed 'compounded educational disadvantage' – an intersection of socio-cultural and political factors which, in the Northern Ireland context, include poverty, selective education systems, normative masculinities, and cultures of violence. For each challenge a boy faces, it is an additional brick in his backpack, weighing him down. These 'bricks' can work to seriously impede some boys' experience of, and ability to progress through, the education system and to achieve good outcomes.

### PLATFORMING BOYS' VOICES

TBS situates the unfiltered voices and experiences of boys at the centre of the research, constantly learning from them, valuing their voices and perspectives, and building an understanding of their lives. Since 2006, we have engaged with over a thousand adolescent boys and hundreds of educators across diverse formal and informal educational settings including mainstream schools, alternative education provision, and youth work organisations. Dedicated to transforming experiences and outcomes for boys and young men, we seek to illuminate effective practices that break generational cycles of educational inequality. Appreciative inquiry informs our approach, which simply means we focus on strengths and cases of success rather than deficits and inadequacies. We ask boys **'What is great about being a boy?'** We ask educators **'What do you like about working with boys?'** and **'What works best to re-engage boys in their education and learning?'** Appreciative inquiry is successful in that it becomes a strong and collaborative motivator for boys, teachers, youth workers, school leaders, and policymakers. It enables a focus on what is in our control, our gift to change things for the better. There is no negative judgment, only reflection, reinforcement and building on affirming actions.

### THE TBS PRINCIPLES

The pinnacle of our research is the 10 TBS principles of relational education that are rooted in evidence collected over almost two decades of TBS research in both formal (school-based) and informal (community youth work) educational settings. From 2020-2021 the TBS principles were curated and tested regionally with 442 adolescent boys and 120 educators across 37 sites in Northern Ireland. These 10 principles capture what boys consistently express as being crucial to their experience of education, what they seek from their educators and central to increasing attendance, participation, progression and holistic outcomes for those boys who are disengaging from formal education.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **#1** | **RECOGNISE THE PRIMACY OF RELATIONSHIP** | **#6** | **IDENTIFY BLOCKS TO BOYS' LEARNING** |
| **#2** | **DEMONSTRATE DIGNITY AND RESPECT** | **#7** | **CONNECT BOYS' LEARNING TO CONTEXT** |
| **#3** | **UTILISE A 'STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH' TO LEARNING** | **#8** | **ENGAGE MEANINGFULLY WITH BOYS** |
| **#4** | **CHALLENGE AND AFFIRM MASCULINE IDENTITIES** | **#9** | **ENABLE CREATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS** |
| **#5** | **PROMOTE POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH** | **#10** | **VALUE THE VOICE OF BOYS** |

## GUIDING PRACTICE

Primarily, the TBS principles are intended as a reflective framework to guide practice. They are purposely not designed to be another intervention cascaded down to educators but rather as a long-term collective vision for enriching educational cultures in which the most disadvantaged learners feel seen, known and heard. Educators make the principles visible in their learning spaces to reflect their commitment to boy-focused education. They are then utilised as prompts for conversations and actions with colleagues and young people. The principles support critical reflective practice through the informal and more formalised networks of educators and boys identifying strengths and opportunities for development. No 'toolkit' or 'how to' guide exists to prescribe the implementation of the TBS principles. This is intentional. Educators, co-working with learners, are the experts and the skills, creativity, and autonomy they bring are both encouraged and affirmed. Some educational settings have taken one principle per week and invited staff and boys to add their reflections and comments on where they see this principle at play and ideas for developing it. Other settings have taken one principle as the focus for the year, seeking to embed it in multiple ways as a cross-cutting theme. The TBS principles interconnect. For those who prioritise co-learning relationships underpinned by dignity and respect, powerful and affirming relational approaches to education continue to evolve.

## EMBEDDING THE TBS PRINCIPLES

The TBS principles are most impactful when embedded across localised educational ecosystems. With boys firmly at the centre, these ecosystems are made up of varied organisations and institutions that play a role in boys' education and learning including schools, youth organisations, families, sports, education authorities, policymakers, local businesses, and so on. Educational ecosystems that enable boys to thrive harness collective capacities. Collaboration between schools, youth organisations, and universities is evidenced as particularly successful in our research, where use of the TBS principles has fostered a shared language and vision for work with boys and young men. Transformation is not limited to the education system either. The ecosystem reaches out beyond education to other social spheres. Novel examples of this have included partnering with a local pizza franchise Four Star Pizza, who displayed the TBS principles in their stores and gave 20% off to boys who showed their TBS pin badge they received for participating in the research, reflecting affirming messages to boys about themselves in their wider communities.

While the scale of issues associated with a long-term systemic problem and the many layers of compounded educational disadvantage can seem overwhelming, using the ecosystem approach, alongside the TBS principles, can foster positive change. We can choose to give voice to boys and young men, to really listen to what they have to say, to engage them in the process, to direct our finite resources appropriately and to work in meaningful collaborative ways that can ultimately transform the experiences and outcomes of boys in education. To take part: utilise the TBS principles, engage in appreciative inquiry, identify the gifts that you and your organisation bring, and invite others along, enabling us all to become part of a systemic solution.

**Dr Andy Hamilton and Susan Morgan**
**SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL AND POLICY SCIENCE**
ULSTER UNIVERSITY

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Keep these principles in mind as you read and reflect on the articles, projects, and case studies in this publication. Do certain principles have more resonance with you, or strike you as being particularly well-embedded in your setting? Which principles might be a powerful lever for turning the tide of boys' achievement in your setting?

- Consider your own ecosystem: beyond the gates of your own school or college, what other institutions make up your boys' ecosystem? How do you work with these organisations? Consider whether there is value sharing the TBS principles with local sports groups, youth clubs, or libraries – anywhere you know your boys spend significant time when not in school.

- The article from Ferndown Upper School on page 78 is a brilliant example of the impact that can be seen when the principles are embedded thoughtfully and carefully.

# HELLO FROM OUR SPONSOR

**Educake**

**At Educake, we believe that education has the power to transform lives. Our mission has always been about more than just creating a great educational platform – it is to support schools in making that transformation possible for every student, no matter their background or circumstances.**

We know that the challenges faced by today's educators are complex and multifaceted. The persistent gap in academic achievement between different groups of learners – whether it's between boys and girls, students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, or those with differing levels of support at home – is not simply a data point. It's a reflection of wider societal issues that seep into our classrooms, shaping the experiences of young people and their outlook on education.

At the heart of these challenges is the question of equity. How do we ensure every child has the opportunity to succeed, to feel valued, and to see a future for themselves? **This isn't about one-size-fits-all solutions. It's about recognising the individual stories behind the statistics and finding ways to engage students in a way that resonates with them**.

Educake is committed to helping teachers address these barriers – not by reducing young people to stereotypes, but by providing tools that open up new ways of learning and connecting with their potential. When we think about the barriers boys from disadvantaged backgrounds often face, the issue isn't simply academic. It's a tangle of societal pressures, expectations around masculinity, and a lack of representation in spaces that show them education can be relevant and empowering.

Our platform is designed to be accessible, adaptable, and engaging. By giving students opportunities to interact with material in manageable, bite-sized ways, and by delivering immediate, constructive feedback, we help build confidence and create momentum for learning. For students who might otherwise feel left behind, these small but significant moments can reignite their belief in their ability to succeed.

Schools such as The Angmering School (featured on page 62-65) and Barnwell School (featured on page 28-31), who we also work with, have shared how they are meeting their goals and bridging those gaps. Their contributions to PiXL Insights have not only informed the ongoing development of Educake but have also provided invaluable perspectives on the challenges and successes of today's classrooms. We deeply value their input and are inspired by the innovative ways they are using Educake to support their students and teachers alike.

Educake contributes to real success in the classroom and beyond. As Adam Crossley, Head of Science at Denefield School shared, 'our Combined Science results have improved from the bottom 4% (2019) in terms of student progression to the top 25% (2022). We are on track to improve on this figure this year. **Educake is one of the main driving forces behind the exceptional improvement in student progression**.'

Our dedication goes beyond the classroom. We believe in supporting teachers as they navigate these challenges, not just by providing tools but by fostering conversations about the deeper issues affecting students. Whether it's through sponsoring research or highlighting resources on social issues, we want to play an active role in the wider educational ecosystem. Our goal is to create a partnership with schools, one that values the wellbeing of both teachers and learners.

We have worked with some of our fantastic Educake schools to put together articles addressing the strategies they employ to tackle the gender gap in their schools and how they boost the achievements of disadvantaged boys. We would like to thank Blackwood Comprehensive School, Castleford Academy, Castle View Enterprise Academy, and Woodchurch High School for donating their time and sharing their expertise.

Ultimately, our commitment comes down to this: every student deserves the chance to thrive, and every teacher deserves the support they need to make that possible. At Educake, we are proud to be part of the effort to close gaps, challenge assumptions, and empower the next generation to see education not as a barrier, but as a bridge to their brightest future.

Small changes can lead to big transformations. Whether you're tackling achievement gaps or building confidence in the classroom, Educake is here to help. Try it out with a free trial and see the impact for yourself.

**HAVE A LOOK AT**
**www.educake.co.uk/pixl**
or get in touch with us directly for a personalised demo –
**support@educake.co.uk**.

# Meet the Educake Team

### NICOLA ALLEN
## MANAGING DIRECTOR

To me there is nothing as important as understanding how we can make an impact at school and take the ever-increasing pressure off the shoulders of hardworking teachers. As a parent of three children at secondary school, I use my experience as a parent and of the challenges of GCSEs to help inspire and engage students. It's incredibly rewarding to help educators use Educake to its full potential, making their work just a little easier and more impactful for students.

### EMILY PARKER
## PARTNERSHIPS & CONTENT MARKETING EXECUTIVE

Before joining Educake, I was a history teacher, and I'm thrilled that I can continue to support both teachers and students in my current role. I work closely with incredible individuals and organisations across the edtech industry, building partnerships that strengthen our community and share valuable expertise. Every day brings new opportunities to collaborate, and I love being part of a team that's so dedicated to education.

### ANNA WALLIS
## PRODUCT DIRECTOR

With a background in cognitive science, I bring a problem-solving approach to my work at Educake. I collaborate closely with teachers to ensure that every feature, design element, and piece of content we create is user-friendly and genuinely addresses the challenges they face. It's an honour to play a part in making teaching and learning that little bit easier, and I'm constantly inspired by the dedication of the educators we support.

## What is Educake?

Educake is an award-winning online platform for retrieval practice and revision in primary and secondary schools. With over 100,000 specification-matched questions written by subject experts, Educake simplifies classwork and homework by providing automatically marked quizzes and detailed performance analysis. Teachers can quickly assess understanding, identify learning gaps, and refine their teaching, while students benefit from regular practice and self-motivated revision. Educake could be just the addition your school needs – try it for free and see what you think at **www.educake.co.uk/pixl**. PiXL schools receive a 10% discount on Educake.

# OUR PiXL PROJECT MENTORS

Every school that undertakes a PiXL Insights project is assigned a project mentor. Our mentors are all current or former senior leaders in schools. Their role is to offer high support and high challenge to colleagues undertaking projects in schools. They meet with schools three times over the course of the project and are on hand throughout to support via email.

## CATHERINE CONNAUGHTON

I am an educational consultant with over 20 years' experience in secondary and post 16 leadership and  an active member of PiXL since 2010. During my 11 years as Deputy Headteacher and Head of Sixth Form in a large mixed comprehensive school in South Manchester, I implemented and embedded key PiXL strategies which were an integral part of our hugely successful Sixth Form. Central to my work has always been an unwavering drive to improve the life chances of young people which is synonymous with everything PiXL believes in and underpins the premise of Insights. Working alongside colleagues to support their Insights project has been a real privilege this year and the students they have worked with have already started reaping the rewards of this initiative.

## NICOLA MANSFIELD

I work full time at PiXL as a Primary Curriculum Manager, where I'm privileged to work with educators who are equally committed to improving the outcomes and enriching the education experience of young people. Before joining PiXL, I was part of a large senior leadership team leading  on curriculum development. I'm fervently passionate about the incredible work that schools do to support and challenge all learners, especially those from less privileged backgrounds. What fuels me is the belief that sharing practices between schools can unlock untapped potential and improve outcomes for pupils. It's an exciting journey, and I'm delighted to have contributed to this Insights project.

## EVE HEDLEY

I am an education consultant who works with schools and colleges across the country, supporting them with school improvement and raising the quality of education across the curriculum. I have 23 years of teaching experience in the MFL classroom, across all phases, and am passionate about languages, raising achievement, and improving the quality of teaching and learning in our schools. I am a former Deputy Headteacher, a skilled coach, Advanced Skills Teacher and Specialist Leader in Education. I have worked with over 50 PiXL schools, and have also supported PiXL with MFL, Teaching & Learning and ECT strategies and resources.

## GARY LOBBETT

My career in education began as Head of Music in Devon and progressed to Deputy Headship with secondment to the International Learning and Research Centre in Bristol. My experience has been with schools in areas of low aspiration and where social deprivation is high. As Headteacher and NLE we built the capacity to provide qualifications and training provision to support primary and secondary schools across the West Country. As CEO for an all-through, inner-London Academy Trust for children aged 3-19, we extended the Trust's provision to include degree-level adult education programmes. My involvement with PiXL schools extends over 15 years. I have worked for many years supporting primary and secondary schools and Academy Trusts to embed high expectations, improve quality of teaching and learning and develop talent and leadership at all levels and I am privileged to support schools involved in shaping and implementing such innovative PiXL Insights projects across the primary, secondary and post 16 sectors.

## JENNY GAYLOR

I have had over 20 years of senior leadership experience and am currently Co-Principal of a large 11-19 academy in South West London, having worked previously in inner city boys' schools in Liverpool and London. I have a keen interest in understanding how to improve boys' achievement, particularly in the context of social disadvantage. My work with PiXL over the last decade has centred around curriculum, achievement and ensuring that partner schools are kept well informed of the latest educational changes. As a practitioner, I fully understand the challenges that we face in the current climate, and so it has been a privilege to work with some amazing leaders across a range of PiXL schools on the Insights project, looking at ways to raise achievement and improve engagement in learning. I know the other PiXL schools will benefit greatly from hearing their stories and perhaps thinking about ways that they might replicate some ideas in their own situations.

## SARAH MURRELL

I am an educational consultant who has worked in education for over 30 years. I taught in West London schools for over 20 years, the last 14 of which were spent in a boys' school with a mixed sixth form. As a Deputy Head, my key focus was on the curriculum, assessment, data, teaching and learning, and staff CPD. It has always been important to me to reflect upon how and why students reach their highest possible outcomes, with a special focus on the learning and teaching they experience. I currently collaborate with PiXL on a number of projects, and with many schools in England and Northern Ireland. It has been an honour to work with so many schools on the Insights project. They have been inspirational in the way they have developed, implemented and reflected upon their projects which are focused on boys' achievement and their attitudes to learning within their varied contexts.

# BUILDING INVESTMENT IN LEARNING

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS TO **RAISE BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT**

**CROSSHALL JUNIOR SCHOOL**   TARGET YEAR GROUP: KEY STAGE 2

# Raising aspirations in boys: what can motivate them and ignite ambition?

## INTENT

This project was important to us as we wanted to investigate reasons why we had a gap between boys and girls at the end of Key Stage Two in reading, writing and maths, where girls were outperforming the boys (2022-23). This was especially evident in writing (a difference of 31%). We had a team of talented teachers and teaching assistants in Year 6, and yet the gap between boys and girls was less prevalent in Years 3, 4 and 5. So why was the gap widening when the children were in Year 6?

We noticed that some boys lacked motivation and ambition which was seen in their attitudes to learning, body language within lessons, and their career choices when thinking ahead to their own futures. We wanted to investigate what can motivate boys and ignite ambition within them to achieve more in the short-term (end of Key Stage Two) and the long-term (career choices).

**The project itself involved three components.**

1.  We wanted to investigate the **impact of peer coaching** because of the evidence of impact behind this as detailed in the Education Endowment Foundation report on peer tutoring[1]. We selected three boys from each year group and paired Year 6 boys with Year 4 boys, and Year 5 boys with Year 3 boys. The Year 6 boys were chosen because they had a perceived lack of ambition. The Year 5, Year 4 and Year 3 boys were chosen because they were demotivated in learning and under-attaining in either maths or reading.
2.  We wanted to investigate the school's use of '**promoting purpose**' within the curriculum. Did all learning journeys within all subjects have a clear purpose that motivated all learners (including boys)? How could we further highlight the purpose for the learning to all students?
3.  We wanted to investigate how our already-established **careers education programme** (Future Me) has impacted the selected boys this year, and how we could improve this in the future, using pupil voice. 'Future Me' is a bespoke careers education programme created by Crosshall Junior School.

# IMPLEMENTATION

Before implementing the three components above, we wanted to investigate whether our teachers had different expectations of female and male pupils (conscious or subconscious bias). We used a questionnaire from *'Boys Don't Try?'* authored by Mark Roberts and Matt Pinkett[2]. This revealed that there was no bias or difference in expectations for both genders among our teaching team. After selecting the children for the peer coaching programme, we first wanted to gain their views of themselves, how they felt in school and who/what inspires them. We used the Belonging Scale[3] (Jean Gross, 2023 – based on the work of Carol Goodenow, 1993: *Psychological Sense of School Membership*) to inspire our questions.

**The following questions were asked:**

- How do teachers treat boys in this school?
- What do teachers think of boys in this school?
- What do you want to be when you are older? Why?
- What inspires you?
- What do you do at home that helps you at school?

- What adults in school inspire you to be your best?
- What adults out of school inspire you to be your best?
- Have there been any visitors to the school that have inspired you?

From this, we found that boys generally thought that teachers were fair between boys and girls, with boys in the upper school specifically using terms such as 'fairly and equally'. We expected the boys to list male members of staff and family members for people who have inspired them, but there was a fair balance between male and female adults listed by the boys. Interestingly, all boys listed only male visitors to the school that have inspired them; they ranged from authors, footballers, zookeepers, NFL players and cricketers. We therefore decided this would be good to focus on as part of our project.

## 1. PEER COACHING

The class teachers of the boys selected for peer coaching formed a working group who met termly to discuss the progress of the boys, the peer coaching programme and how to overcome arising barriers. When pairing the boys together (Y6 with Y4, and Y5 with Y3), class teachers spent time ensuring personalities would complement each other and that the Y5 and Y6 boys had the abilities to close the gaps of the Y3 and Y4 boys in reading or maths. The project leader introduced the initiative to the boys and led the first session whilst a highly experienced TA was asked to observe so that she could continue to lead the future sessions in a facilitative role. The sessions continued to happen every Thursday afternoon for 20 minutes for eight months. From previous end of year tests, gaps were identified for the Y3 and Y4 boys which the peer coaches aimed to close by the end of the autumn term. Gaps from autumn term testing were then identified for spring term coaching, and gaps from spring term testing were identified for summer term coaching. We wanted to keep the peer coaching as simple as possible but execute it well.

## 2. PROMOTING PURPOSE

a. **Writing:** As part of a whole-school improvement linked to purpose and audience and a fresh approach to success criteria, the English leads implemented, in January, the James Durran 'Boxing Up' method of success criteria[4]. All year groups implemented this within their next units of work and the follow-up meeting revealed that teachers thought it was an instant success, especially in Year 6. Teachers reported that children initially struggled to discuss the audience and purpose of a piece of writing, which we had anticipated. Each class displayed their Boxing Up work on their working wall and referred to these throughout the unit of work. Year 6 teachers reported that children engaged with the learning journey better and were more able to focus their end piece of writing towards a specific audience which incorporated all parts of their Boxing Up. Following the success of this, the English leads stated they'd like every unit of work linked to a piece of writing to start with this method.

b. **Reading:** When speaking to the focus group of boys, it was clear they didn't have a sense of purpose for reading. They couldn't explain why reading was important or how it linked to later life. They said they never see 'cool guys' reading. We asked them what a 'cool guy' was, and they replied with someone who wears trendy clothes, has a nice hairstyle, is calm and wears sunglasses. As part of our Future Me programme, we have several visitors talk to the children throughout the year about their careers and how they achieved it. Our intention was to invite males in from a range of professions to talk about their careers and how important reading skills were in achieving their goals. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to achieve this this year, but intend to investigate in the future.

c. **Foundation subjects:** Part of the whole-school development this year has been to ensure there is a clear purpose for learning within all subjects, not just the core subjects. In every subject, there is a clear end-goal which we have called the 'Fabulous Finish' and this is discussed with the children before the unit starts so that they know what they are aiming towards and what the purpose of their learning is. We have also, over the past few years,

developed our own bespoke curriculum progression maps for every subject. These detail how each skill within each subject progresses from Year 3 to Year 6. Every lesson, the skill is discussed with the children, and they are shown what they learned the year before and what they will be learning the following year. Therefore, giving them a purpose for learning in every single lesson. Year 3 teachers have taken time to understand where the children came from in Year 2, and Year 6 teachers have taken time to understand what the children are going to learn in Year 7.

## IMPACT: FINDINGS, EVALUATION AND REFLECTION

### 1. PEER COACHING

Operationally, we have found this an easy way to close gaps in reading and maths whilst boosting confidence in boys and giving them a sense of purpose. Teachers have reported that, when their children in Year 4 and Year 3 are collected by their peer coach, they have a smile on their face and are happy to leave the classroom. One boy even stood up and said to his class/teacher *'This is my reading buddy!'*. The peer coaches in Year 6 regularly ask if the sessions are going ahead and look forward to coaching their younger peers. One Year 6 boy said, *'I really enjoy teaching other boys what I have learnt and being a role model for them'*.

| Child (coachees) | MATHS | | | READING | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Baseline | End of Year | Baseline | End of Year |
| M (Y3) | 93 (SAS in GL assessment) | 24/75 | - | - |
| H (Y3) | - | - | 7/30 | 9/30 |
| J (Y3) | 102 (SAS in GL assessment) | 21/75 | - | - |
| D (Y4) | - | - | 15/40 | 22/40 |
| A (Y4) | - | - | 8/40 | 16/40 |
| M (Y4) | 33/40 | 39/40 | - | - |

| Child (coaches) | MATHS | | | READING | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Baseline | End of Year | Baseline | End of Year |
| W (Y5) | 44/110 | 64/110 | - | - |
| H (Y5) | - | - | 6/45 | 18/45 |
| T (Y5) | 75/110 | 96/110 | - | - |
| M (Y6) | - | - | 19/50 | 30/50 |
| A (Y6) | - | - | 32/50 | 35/50 |
| D (Y6) | 28/110 | 63/110 | - | - |

This data shows that progress was more prevalent among children who were the coaches for their peers. This is not what we expected to happen. From this finding, it will inform our decisions of who becomes a coach next year (B1 and A2 children). A challenge we have found with this model is that there have been times when we've had to cancel sessions due to events in the school and clashes with room bookings. Furthermore, the facilitating TA may be redeployed to cover absence elsewhere in the school. Going forward, we are looking to increase the number of sessions to two per week and ask SLT and SENDco to protect the programme so that the facilitating adult isn't redeployed. Furthermore, due to the success of this and the ease of facilitating, we are looking to scale this up to include some or all of our students eligible for Pupil Premium funding too.

### 2. PROMOTING PURPOSE

James Durran's Boxing Up success criteria has been fully embedded across the school and teachers saw instant improvement with children engaging with writing. There was a clear sense of purpose for a piece of work and children had a clear audience to write for. In Year 6, we feel it has been an accelerating factor for the boys' progress this year. Below shows the progress made and the gap between boys and girls in writing.

| | GIRLS (WA+ IN WRITING) | BOYS (WA+ IN WRITING) | DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GIRLS AND BOYS | PROGRESS |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Start of 23-24 | 51% | 30% | 21% | - |
| End of 23-24 | 87% | 72% | 15% | Girls +36%  Boys +42% |

Children in Year 6 have enjoyed writing for a range of purposes and audiences. Boys, in particular, have frequently asked to visit the headteacher with their writing for recognition of their achievement and progress. They have also been motivated by using our new podcasting facility where they audio-record their writing and it gets put onto our social media page for the community to enjoy.

We saw another success in Year 6 during our dance unit of work. During the first lesson of dance, there was an overwhelming sense of reluctance and negativity among boys. After a staff meeting about having an end goal in each subject for each unit of work (Fabulous Finish), we told the children that they'd be performing their final dances to

the headteacher as she loves the creative arts. There was an instant improvement in engagement from the boys, who throughout the learning journey, became more and more engaged. Some of the most reluctant boys also asked to have solo, improvised parts.

Our geography leader shared her findings with us linked to purpose. At the start of the year, she implemented a new style of evidencing work in 'Locational Knowledge' across the school. One year group (Year 3) incorporated an end goal (Fabulous Finish) whereby children had to use their knowledge to work out Santa's route across the world. When the geography leader carried out a pupil voice in the spring term, she found that the Year 3 children were much more able to talk about their learning in the unit and how they remembered the end goal. The geography leader believes this is because the children had a clear sense of purpose and therefore engaged with the learning more and could recall what they had learnt several weeks later too.

## NEXT STEPS

### FUTURE ME

This year we have observed how the boys across the school have engaged with our careers education programme (Future Me). 53 boys engaged in Year 3; 31 in Year 4; 29 in Year 5; and 26 in Year 6. There is a decline as the boys grow older. We have therefore asked ourselves if we feel the programme needs a fresh look in the upper school to revitalise engagement. We also want to look at getting more 'cool guys' to visit us to talk to the children about their careers and how reading has impacted them. Do we aim these just at boys? Overall, we have found this project very insightful, and it has inspired our whole-school approach next year towards staff CPD, children's learning and inspiring boys to be more ambitious. Our End of Key Stage Two results this year indicate impact from this project:  Reading – 83% WA+; Writing – 80% WA+; Maths – 82% WA+.

**Martin Righetta**
**HEAD OF YEAR SIX**
CROSSHALL JUNIOR SCHOOL

**With thanks to Chris Dorey, Catherine Hemingway and Michelle Mascall (Working Group members) and Caron Peaurt (Peer Coaching lead).**

[1]  Education Endowment Fund. (2021) **Peer tutoring.** Education Endowment Fund [online]. Available from: *https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/peer-tutoring* [Accessed 7 November 2024].

[2]  Pinkett, M., Roberts, M., (2019) **Boys Don't Try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools.** London: Routledge.
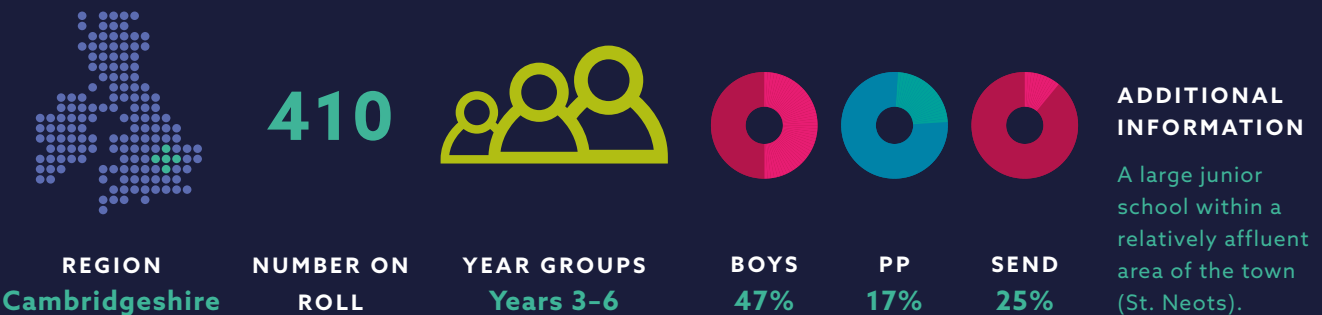
[3]  Goodenow, C. (1993) **The Psychological Sense of School Membership among Adolescents: Scale Development and Educational Correlates.** Psychology in the Schools. 30, 79–90.

[4]  Durran, J. (2019) **Re-thinking 'success criteria': a simple device to support pupils' writing.** James Durran Blog [blog]. 24 January. Available from: *https://jamesdurran.blog/2019/01/24/re-thinking-success-criteria-a-simple-device-to-support-pupils-writing/* [Accessed 7 November 2024].

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- **Are low levels of motivation or ambition a barrier to attainment for some boys in your setting? What criteria might be used to identify these pupils? In which subject areas are lower levels of pupil motivation most apparent?** Boys at Crosshall Junior School listed only male visitors to the school when identifying visitors who they felt had inspired them. Could similar strategies be beneficial for exploring pupils' perceptions of themselves, their sense of belonging and who or what inspires them in your school?

- **Martin has highlighted the impact on attainment that occurred for the boys who provided regular coaching for their younger peers.** If you wanted to do something similar in your setting, how would you decide which pupils to involve?

# CROSSHALL JUNIOR SCHOOL

**410**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cambridgeshire | | Years 3–6 | 47% | 17% | 25% |

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

A large junior school within a relatively affluent area of the town (St. Neots).

TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 11

# Positive conversations and messages to motivate and boost outcomes for underachieving male students

## INTENT

There is a continuing picture on results day of the male cohort of students underperforming as compared to the female cohort. This echoes the national picture[1]. Male students frequently appear to lack the intrinsic motivation that female students have to spend time outside of school completing additional work to prepare them for assessments. Furthermore, as a department we noticed that the engagement of boys in the classroom was noticeably lacklustre when compared to their female counterparts. Therefore, my focus for this project was to use strategies to motivate male students to take pride in putting in the extra effort into their learning, mainly within the classroom setting but also to have a positive impact on the learning that was taking place outside the lesson.

Whilst focusing on a cohort of selected students identified as below progress, these strategies were deployed for all members of the teaching groups on which the study was conducted as a strategy that is beneficial for one, and likely to be beneficial to all. This is a tenet of adaptive teaching[2] where it is no longer the practice to single out students and give them a separate task to meet their needs, but instead using a whole-class approach to meet their needs, and as such universal support in SEND provision[3] is favoured.

The aims of this project were to minimise the number of male students in the identified groups being moved to foundation tier and therefore prevented from accessing their target grade, and to improve outcomes for identified students.

The project involved Year 11 students who were male and who, through analysis of data, were identified as underperforming and at risk of being moved to foundation tier for science. The rationale of the whole study was to use scripted and targeted positive conversations and messages home to shift the student mindset to value the following:

- **increased focus and attention to detail when reading questions**
- **time spent thinking hard as opposed to rushing and not considering the options**
- **putting in effort to produce quality responses that contain specific detail**
- **investing time in both addressing gaps in knowledge and preparing for assessments.**

From analysing KS4 data from Year 10 and 11, 16 male students were selected from a combined science top set whose data shows that they were below target. In addition, due to scoring grades of 43, 44 or 54, many were on a list of students that were being considered for being moved to foundation tier for their actual GCSE exams. The project ran from February for five months until June when students sat their GCSE exams.

## IMPLEMENTATION

**The strategies that were put in place for this project are as follows.**

### POSITIVE CONVERSATIONS IN CLASS

Positive language is an essential teacher tool for empowering students[4]. Moreover, with the correct language we can encourage students to value the right things and shift their perception from thinking that academic success is predetermined by intelligence[5] to the fact that attributes such as focus, effort, being detail-oriented and thinking hard are the factors that contribute to improvements in attainment. Aiming to improve motivation in the key attributes listed above, rough scripts were drafted for positive conversations when students were seen to demonstrate one or more of these behaviours.

**Rough scripts for learning conversations**

1. *"Really good effort for that work, look at the positive outcomes that occurred because of this."*
2. *"I really appreciate the quality of your answer, you've worked hard to put a lot of detail into that, which has therefore got you more marks."*
3. *"Well done for taking the time to redraft and improve that response/graph/calculation, that shows you understand that you can always improve."*
4. *"I'm impressed, you were really focussed on this task which meant you got a lot more high-quality work done."*
5. *"Excellent effort, you didn't give up on that task even though you found it challenging, you really thought hard to get through to the end."*

To ensure that there were opportunities for students to demonstrate the key behaviours, independent tasks were planned for in lessons that required students to make use of some or all these attributes. Furthermore, within my lesson dialogue I paid attention to narrating the value of the desired attributes wherever it was appropriate so that students became familiar with these.

During independent work, circulating the classroom was essential to be able to 'catch' students in the act of using the desired behaviours. When a student was seen to be demonstrating a positive behaviour, I would have a quiet one-to-one positive conversation recognising what they had done and why this improved their work and outcomes for the task. This form of adaptive teaching, whilst centred on the 16 students identified, was also utilised for any student who was seen to demonstrate positive behaviours.

### MULTIPLE-CHOICE TASKS

Well-written multiple-choice questions can provide more than retrieval practice opportunities. It was our belief that they could develop two of the key attributes we were trying to foster in our learners – namely, increased focus and attention to detail when reading questions, and thinking hard and considering all options before making a choice.

Cognitively demanding multiple-choice tasks were written using the guidance on what makes this style of assessment effective[6], and students completed one of these at the start of every lesson. These were then self-marked, and the data collected and entered in a tracking sheet. The assessment tasks themselves were structured using a set format, and students were given 8 minutes to complete them – so slightly longer than a normal starter. The longer time was to give students time to read the questions carefully so that they could focus on the detail and have time to consider the options carefully.

## POSITIVE COMMUNICATION HOME

Using the data from the multiple-choice starters, students who improved by 10% received a positive message home to highlight how they had used positive learning behaviours to improve their outcomes. Messages home were carefully written to ensure that the message students and families received were consistent and centred on the benefits of focus, attention to detail and effort, with the focus being thinking hard on improving the outcomes for these assessments.

## IMPACT

**Indicators that demonstrate the effectiveness of this programme to increase motivation for underachieving boys in science include:**

- Increased number and frequency of positive conversations recognising student use of desirable learning behaviours
- Increased engagement in independent learning within lessons
- Increased quality of responses
- Greater resilience when attempting more challenging styles of questions, such as extended responses and multi-step calculations
- A reduction in the number of male students within this group being moved to foundation tier (4/16 as compared to potentially 11/16), including two students moved back up to higher tier
- Improved outcomes in assessments after mocks
- Positive communication from parents and carers to say that their sons are working much harder at home
- Consistent high scores on multiple-choice assessments
- Increased number over time of positive school comms messages home
- Increased attendance at after-school and school holiday revision and support sessions for boys
- Positive feedback from students on the benefits of the multiple-choice tasks and how this informs their revision.

## EVALUATION

Not only have the strategies used in this study benefitted the students for whom they were targeted, but all the students in the respective teaching group benefitted. In addition, this research has led to a shift in my own teaching practice in that I have shifted how I use positive language in my teaching and am now more vigilant for the positive behaviours I want to encourage in all the students that I teach, recognising and praising these using the phrases developed during this project.

**In terms of workload for implementing the strategies outlined in this study, some considerations are as follows:**

- Emails to admin team to request for positive messages to be sent home: these were roughly drafted and therefore had minimal impact on workload.
- Planning for independent tasks did not increase workload as this is part of current teaching practice.
- Writing multiple-choice tasks did increase workload but now I have built a bank of questions that I can add to so that in future impact on workload is minimal.
- Setting up and tracking student outcomes for multiple-choice tasks did require additional work within lessons but this was completed when students were working independently, and I was circulating looking for positive learning behaviours.

## NEXT STEPS

Due to the successful outcomes of this study, I will now be considering how to extend the reach of the strategy to incorporate a much larger sample of students. The sample will cover a wider range of year groups within science and will include other members of teaching staff participating and incorporating the practices developed.

**Therefore, the plan will be to:**

- Analyse outcomes for boys included in initial study once GCSE data is available.
- Identify groups so that the impact of these strategies on different learning abilities and key stages can be measured:
  - low and middle ability sets as well as top sets at KS4 (Years 9, 10 and 11)
  - KS3 teaching groups that are mixed ability (Years 7 and 8)
  - KS5 teaching groups.

- Identify students within these groups who meet the criteria of boys who are achieving below expected.
- Collect baseline data for these students: attitude to learning, engagement in home-based learning and academic progress.
- Recruit science colleagues to participate in the extended project and then train them.
- Conduct the project over a full academic year and collect a greater quantity of data.
- Create a bank of multiple-choice questions to aid in production of MCQ tasks and that can be added to by all members of staff.
- Look at available MCQ platforms on the market to see if any are suited to our needs or are adaptable to meet these needs.
- Look at how AI can be used to reduce workload, either for MCQs or for data analysis.

**Beth Casserley**
**JOINT HEAD OF SCIENCE**
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## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Carefully crafted communication with parents proved to be effective for supporting key groups of students to make progress in Science at Barnwell. Could a similar strategy be beneficial for motivating and encouraging students in your school? How might you identify students you might benefit most significantly.
- Beth's focus in this project was to improve boys' intrinsic motivation. You can read more about this in the article from Mark Roberts on page 36 of this publication, which has more ideas and strategies for tweaking feedback to improve boys' intrinsic motivation.
- This project provides evidence of the impact of strategies for encouraging deep thinking in students. You may want to look at the PiXL Thinking Hard materials, which includes CPD and classroom resources.
- Barnwell School has described the positive impact of their multiple-choice strategy. If you are considering similar approaches to support students in your school, also consider the range of resources available in the PiXL Independence strategy (for secondary/post 16).

# BARNWELL SCHOOL

**1323**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hertfordshire** | | **Years 7–13** | **51%** | **26%** | **21%** |

**ALPERTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL**          TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 11

# Boys' academic mentoring

## INTENT

Over the years, we have noticed from our key groups that our male Black Caribbean students are one of the most underachieving groups. With this group, we found a similar trend in attendance, punctuality, homework, behaviour and attitude to learning, all being generally lower than their peers. Raising the achievement of boys from Black Caribbean backgrounds is a boroughwide priority.

In order to improve the general attitude and motivation for this group, we provided an intervention called Academic Mentoring. The idea was that the mentor would spend quality time with the students, on a regular basis, to understand their background, challenges, lifestyle and develop a positive relationship to provide tailor-made support for them. We had a special focus on Year 11 due to GCSE exams, across all subjects. The size of the group varied throughout the year, ranging from 15-20. There were various stakeholders involved including parents, subject teachers, pastoral managers and the Senior Leadership Team to ensure the students were getting the most out of this mentoring support. Although this group was the core focus, the mentoring support was also extended to other students such as those eligible for Pupil Premium funding, those who suffer from exam anxiety, and others identified as needing extra support at points throughout the year.

**Through this mentoring, we wished to achieve the following:**

- Ensure students have a realistic study routine at home.
- Have a consistent space to do homework.
- Support with revision by providing resources and strategies.
- Educate about social media, healthy diet, sleep etc.
- Offer yoga sessions for mental wellbeing.
- Lesson drop-ins to support with various aspects.
- Support with Sixth Form colleges and subject choices.
- Instil a positive outlook in life and have a 'can do' attitude when they leave the school.

## IMPLEMENTATION

To achieve the above objectives, the following were implemented:
- One-to-one meetings with the mentor
- After-school homework club
- Regular interaction with parents
- Lesson drop-ins

### ONE-TO-ONE MEETINGS:

The one-to-one meetings happened on a weekly or bi-weekly basis either during their lesson, break or after-school homework club times. Each meeting would last for 30-40 minutes. These meetings were one of the most impactful aspects of mentoring for the following reasons:

- The students developed a strong positive relationship, built on trust. This allowed the students to share any challenges they faced throughout the year, be it academic or personal.

- Each student had a tailor-made routine or timetable at home (and this was continuously revised based on their priorities). The schedule included time for homework, revision, social media, games, gym, extra-curricular activities etc. Their time was well balanced across the week. The regular follow-ups allowed the mentor to monitor their progress and offer timely feedback.

- Each week was planned in advance with a theme, which the discussion revolved around. Examples of such themes were revision techniques (mind map, notes, exploration of resources etc.), exam papers, motivations, yoga, social media, organisation, college applications etc. In total we focused on around 16-18 different themes.

# "Realising that I had to pass my GCSEs in order to achieve my goals was put into my blood by my mentor"

### AFTER-SCHOOL HOMEWORK CLUB:

Many, if not all, students from the core group had a poor record for producing high-quality homework. They also had a habit of starting work and revision really late at home. The purpose of this club was to get the students to think about work immediately after school finishes, as well as to provide a warm environment with computing facilities so they can produce high-quality homework. The attendance to this homework club was brilliant as most of the students attended successfully. There were 10-12 students who were asked to come. If they did not attend, it is largely because they had other interventions.

### INTERACTION WITH PARENTS:

The parents were contacted once a month to share updates on their progress, and also to discuss any aspects that required attention.

### LESSON DROP-INS:

This was a very impactful aspect of the mentoring for the following reasons:

- As some of the students had behavioural issues, the mentor's presence in the class ensured these students behaved well. This made sure the students participated and completed the class work, as expected.

- It allowed the mentor to train the students on how to make notes in the class, how to ask and answer questions, how to be organised, how to reach out for support, what strategies to be used for revision etc.

- The teachers felt more confident working with these students as the students were more receptive.

- The lesson drop-ins often became the conversation during the one-to-one meeting.

# IMPACT

The impact on the students was measured in various ways throughout the year. This included questionnaires, feedback from the teachers and parents, and trackers.

**Below are some of the tangible impacts that were seen in the students:**

- Their motivation to do well in GCSE, and in life, has massively improved. They felt really confident, nurtured and inspired throughout the year.

- On a scale of 1-5, 5 being most useful, 80% of the students rated the Academic Mentoring a minimum 4.

- The following were shared as the aspects that helped them the most:
    - Better study routine at home
    - Provision of useful resources
    - Exam techniques
    - Improvement in attendance and punctuality
    - After-school revision session

- Whilst some students struggled to make progress, they felt the mentoring supported their mental wellbeing. The regular conversations made them feel at ease.

- There was a high attendance to the after-school homework club, which allowed the students to produce good quality homework. Also, it successfully instilled a habit of getting them to work immediately after school.

- The parents were very appreciative of the support and felt their child was looked after well.

- Their screen time on phones (particularly on social media) went significantly down. At the beginning of the academic year, the average screen time on social media was 6-7 hours a day. By the end of April, it came down to 2 hours a day.

### PUPIL VOICE QUOTES (STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE)

"I learned a study routine that I now follow regularly, and it has helped me a lot"

"The provision of computers for online homework after school is the best part"

"The motivation that was provided throughout the year is what I needed the most"

"Sir, I can feel you truly believe in me. I don't think other teachers do. They just say – so I feel happy about it ha-ha"

### COMMON THEMES THE STUDENT PROGRESS MENTOR, KO, DISCUSSED WITH STUDENTS

"Technology is for us to use. Don't get used by it. Is it too difficult to put a device or an app away?"

"Social media owners are making billions of dollars at the expense of your life. Is this fair?"

"Social media is meant for recreational purposes. How did it find its way to your main life?"

"It is not about being superhuman. If you see that being human is super enough, many things are possible."

# FINAL WORD FROM KO (STUDENT PROGRESS MENTOR)

I feel that when the students were struggling and disengaged in their work, that this was not always because they were not trying. Their heart and head were not in the right place. Their home and social situations weren't necessarily nurturing their process. Only when they felt cared for, and that they had someone to listen to and believe in them, did they find themselves able to grow. Personally, I feel that GCSE students are not going to learn much from sanctions or punishments, or even praise. They had already gone past that stage when I started working with them. They brought about change and transformation only with powerful and meaningful conversations with 100% integrity attached to it. Sometimes, the teachers need to be vulnerable to their emotions and feel part of their journey.

# NEXT STEPS

Overall, the students felt the academic mentoring made a big difference to their attitude, learning and motivation. Their only wish was that it could have started a bit earlier in Year 10, at least. Now, we await the GCSE results for these students, and have already started with a new group of students who are going into Year 11 next academic year!

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**Kogilan Amirthamoorthy**
**STUDENT PROGRESS MENTOR**
ALPERTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Meghan and Kogilan have described how the success of this project related to the sense of trust and quality of relationships that were developed through mentoring. Are there specific pupils who would benefit from one-to-one or small group mentoring in your school and how would you decide who might benefit the most?

- Alperton involved parents, subject teachers, pastoral managers and members of the leadership team in building confidence, resilience and raising students' aspirations. If you are considering establishing mentoring provision in your school, how would you identify the most effective mentors and role models? How might parents contribute to developing a robust triangulated approach?

- In their 'next steps' they identify that students would have benefited from this mentoring intervention even earlier. What are some of the common behaviours or trends that you notice in older students in your setting, that you may be able to tackle through early intervention in younger year groups?

- Studies undertaken by the Education Endowment Fund in primary and secondary schools have shown that programmes with multiple objectives can be equally or more effective than approaches with a single focus on improving academic attainment. Are there priorities included in your school's development plan to which a successful programme of mentoring might contribute?

# ALPERTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL

**1923**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|--------|----------------|-------------|------|-----|------|
| London | | Years 7-13 | 54% | 18% | 9% |

**AN ARTICLE BY MARK ROBERTS**　　TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

# Enhancing feedback to boost boys' intrinsic motivation

## BACKGROUND

### WHY IS MOTIVATION SUCH AN IMPORTANT PART OF FEEDBACK?

Effective feedback can help underperforming boys make rapid gains. Ineffective feedback, by contrast, can have a disastrous impact on boys' progress and motivation. As Gamlem and Smith point out:

> **"Feedback leads to learning gains only when it includes guidance about how to improve, when students have opportunities to apply the feedback, understand how to use it and are willing to dedicate effort."** [1]

Gamlem and Smith's crucial point – that good feedback needs to be motivational – is, however, often overlooked by teachers.

## WHAT KIND OF FEEDBACK DO BOYS GET?

Research indicates that boys and girls tend to receive different types of feedback. Boys are often given negative managerial feedback, which can be defined as feedback that criticises their work habits.[2] Feedback, for example, that focuses on presentation, SPaG mistakes or task incompletion. Girls, meanwhile, are more likely to receive feedback that praises their neatness, productivity and offers clear, specific guidance about how to improve.

And the impact on boys receiving negative managerial feedback? Unsurprisingly, it leads to them losing confidence in their ability, losing interest in the work and disliking their teacher.

## BOYS AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Research has shown that boys tend to be extrinsically motivated. By contrast, girls tend to be driven by intrinsic motivation. While girls are more likely to view learning as rewarding in itself, boys are more likely than girls to be driven by the prospect of a concrete reward rather than seeing gaining knowledge as an inherently fulfilling endeavour.[3]

An extrinsically motivated boy, for instance, might finish his art homework because he is keen to get a merit mark or wants to avoid a detention for not submitting work. Another boy, by contrast, might complete his art homework because he finds learning about Picasso's Blue Period inherently satisfying.

**The problem of boys and extrinsic motivation**

To recap, then:

- **Motivation is a vital and overlooked aspect of effective feedback.**
- **Boys tend to receive feedback that is demotivational because it criticises them as individuals rather than telling them how to improve.**
- **Compared to girls, boys often lack intrinsic motivation and are generally driven by external factors.**

But why does it matter if boys and girls are motivated to learn in different ways? It matters greatly because research frequently shows that extrinsic motivation – which is more often present in boys – is related to poor self-efficacy, anxiety and lack of control.[4]

## BOYS AND GOAL SETTING

Other studies show that as well as lacking intrinsic motivation, boys are much more likely to set performance goals than mastery goals.[5] Academic performance goals focus on reaching certain standards, such as *if I don't get at least 90% in this spelling test, I'm a failure.* Whereas mastery goals focus on increasing knowledge about a particular topic, such as *I want to develop my understanding of how prefixes influence spellings in English.*

Research has shown, however, that performance goals – which boys tend to set – are less likely to lead to high-achievement outcomes than mastery goals.[6]

## USING FEEDBACK TO DEVELOP BOYS' INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AND PROMOTE MASTERY GOALS

In light of these findings, our feedback should be designed to nudge boys towards intrinsic motivation, encouraging 'learning-orientated' mastery goals over 'grade-orientated' performance goals. As Marilla Svinicki puts it:

> ## "When students adopt mastery-orientated goals, they engage in more effective learning strategies, such as learning from their mistakes, changing strategies that don't work, and seeking help when necessary."

Yet, when it comes to feedback, teachers often rely on approaches that inadvertently fuel boys' extrinsic, performance-obsessed outlooks. So how can teachers modify their feedback to develop boys' intrinsic motivation and promote the use of mastery goals?

## SOLUTIONS

### 1. STOP GIVING BOYS NEGATIVE MANAGERIAL FEEDBACK

Avoiding negative managerial feedback, like the demotivational examples below, is an important first step in getting more boys to act on our feedback:

| "Why haven't you finished all three paragraphs?" | "Underline the title in pencil using a ruler." | "Your answers are good but your handwriting is scruffy." |

Instead, we should be using motivational feedback that avoids blaming boys and provides specific guidance for improvement:

| "Develop your answer by explaining how China's one-child policy attempted to avoid famines." | "Use powerful adjectives to make your character description more interesting. See my model paragraph for ideas." |

### 2. MOVE AWAY FROM FEEDBACK INVOLVING PERFORMANCE GOALS

Feedback linked to performance goals encourages boys to choose easier tasks and finish them quickly to attain a certain level. As a result, boys grow to dislike feedback that prompts deeper thinking that takes time away from task completion.[8]

For this reason, we should avoid feedback like this that references performance goals:

| "Include a colon in this paragraph to achieve Greater Depth." | "To reach grade 5, refer back to the question during your essay." | "88% - poor algebra revision stopped you getting full marks." |

Mastery-orientated feedback, by contrast, not only helps boys to improve specific tasks but also intrinsically motivates them to develop as learners.[9] For example:

| "Use a colon when giving a specific reason e.g. why frogs are amphibious." | "For more consistent arguments, practise linking your ideas back to the key words from the question." | "Revise forming the expression for the area of a rectangle to keep developing your understanding of algebra." |

### 3. HAVE HIGH EXPECTATIONS TO ENSURE BOYS ACT UPON YOUR FEEDBACK

While effective feedback can promote intrinsic motivation, boys must trust their teacher for any feedback to be acted upon. An intriguing study by Yeager et al. found that: **"Mistrust can lead people to view critical feedback as a sign of the evaluator's indifference, antipathy, or bias, leading them to dismiss rather than accept it."** [10]

Researchers Hattie and Timperley agree, arguing that the 'classroom climate' has a crucial impact on student motivation.[11] Boys need to feel safe to make errors in our classroom. They need to trust we are acting in their best interests. But how can we persuade boys to place trust in us and engage with critical feedback? Students in Yeager et al.'s study were given a note attached to their work, which simply read: **"I'm giving you these comments because I have high expectations and I know you can reach them."**

And the effect of this note on the recipient? The researchers saw an improvement in intrinsic motivation and learning outcomes, especially among students who, like underperforming boys, might usually be more 'mistrusting of school'.[12] Obviously, teachers don't have time to write messages like this for boys who are reluctant to respond to feedback. But what's stopping us from conveying these sentiments verbally before handing out written feedback? Giving highly effective feedback isn't always easy. But if you're going to get boys motivated to excel in your school, it's an absolute priority.

# NEXT STEPS

Take time to reflect on the following questions:

a.    **What kind of feedback do boys receive in your school?**
b.    **Are boys acting on written and verbal feedback?**
c.    **Does feedback promote extrinsic motivation (through praise, rewards, performance goals) or intrinsic motivation (through a focus on personal bests and continual, gradual improvement)?**
d.    **Do boys feel safe to make errors in lessons and feel comfortable asking for help?**

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CARRICKFERGUS GRAMMAR SCHOOL

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12    Yeager, D., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., Brzustoski, P., Master, A., Hessert, W., Williams, M., & Cohen, G. (2014) **'Breaking the cycle of mistrust: wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide'**, Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 143:2, pp. 804–824.

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

•    Reflect on the questions that Mark has posed in the article. How can you build a picture of the feedback boys receive in your context?

•    Mark is the author of three education books that may be of interest to you: *Boys Don't Try?* (co-authored with Matt Pinkett), *The Boy Question* and *The Behaviour Whisperer*.

•    Reflect on recent strategies and approaches taken in your school to raise students' motivation. Have they been built on extrinsic or intrinsic motivation?

•    Mark also features in an episode of our PiXL in Conversation series – in which PiXL CEO Rachel Johnson sits down for an in-depth conversation with an expert in their field. Mark's episode – Closing the Gender Achievement Gap – is in series 2 and PiXL members can stream it via our PiXL TV platform now.
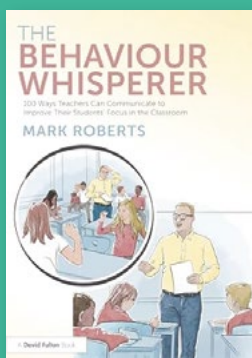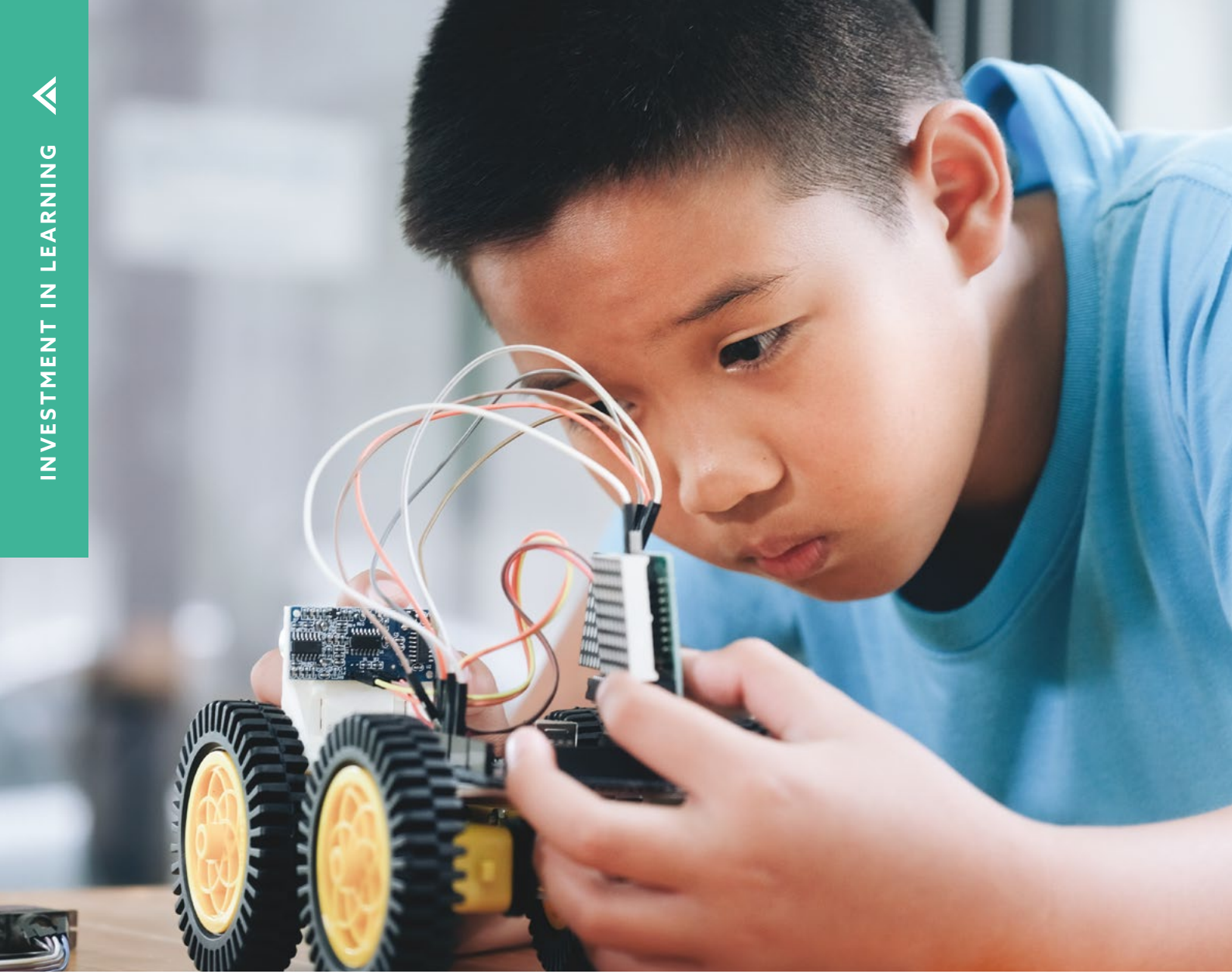
**WOODCHURCH HIGH SCHOOL**   TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

# Relationships, relevance, and results: transforming investment in science

In schools situated in disadvantaged areas, the challenges of education are amplified by the complex backgrounds of many students. For many boys in particular, disengagement from education can stem from a lack of connection between their studies and their perceived future opportunities. Nationally, these patterns have led to lower achievement levels among disadvantaged boys, with barriers such as inconsistent attendance, behavioural struggles, and a limited view of education's relevance to their lives. Yet, amidst these challenges, some educators are finding ways to break through, turning obstacles into opportunities. At Woodchurch High School, Birkenhead, thoughtful strategies – rooted in making learning relevant, practical, and deeply personal – are helping to re-engage students and unlock their potential.

## RELATING SCIENCE TO REAL LIFE AND CAREERS

One of the key barriers to engagement in science is students' perception of its relevance – or lack thereof. Many boys from disadvantaged backgrounds often prioritise English and maths, the "core" subjects needed for further education and jobs. Science can seem like an unnecessary hurdle. However, by linking the subject matter to real-life careers and skills, educators are bridging the gap between the classroom and the future.

Science lessons at Woodchurch will incorporate examples tied to the local job market and the students' likely career paths. Rather than abstract discussions about theoretical concepts, the curriculum touches on practical applications like construction materials, plumbing systems, and even the physics behind sports. By connecting science topics to roles students can envision themselves in – plumbers, architects, builders – science transforms from a distant subject to a tool for tangible success.

For many, seeing how scientific concepts relate to their own aspirations makes learning feel meaningful. It's not just about preparing for careers in medicine or engineering; it's about fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills that resonate far beyond the classroom. These are the skills that shape adaptable, curious individuals, capable of navigating a variety of paths in life, whether that's designing buildings, fixing machinery, or innovating in ways they haven't yet imagined.

## PRACTICAL LEARNING: HANDS-ON SCIENCE

Another powerful method used at Woodchurch High School is fostering an environment of active, hands-on learning. Traditional classroom activities can often fail to capture the attention of students who thrive through physical and practical experiences. Curriculum Leader of Science Jen Taylor finds that practical experiments and group activities allow boys to connect with the material in a way that feels dynamic and exciting.

Practical work isn't just about pouring liquids into beakers or measuring reactions – 'it's about sparking curiosity and showing the "how" and "why" behind everyday phenomena'. Experiments can turn abstract principles into visible results, giving students a sense of accomplishment and immediate feedback. This interactive approach also taps into the natural inclination of many students to engage with the world physically, making learning more intuitive and enjoyable.

## SEEING THE STUDENT BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Beneath these strategies lies a fundamental truth: relationships matter. Disengaged students, especially those from challenging backgrounds, often need to feel understood and valued before they can invest in their education. A teacher's ability to connect with their students as individuals is pivotal. This includes being attuned to their struggles outside school, having open conversations, and creating a safe space where they feel seen and heard. For boys, this rapport can be the deciding factor in whether they attend school, participate in lessons, or simply give up.

A teacher's efforts to personalise their approach – knowing what resonates with each student and tailoring their methods accordingly – fosters trust. It also allows the educator to deliver content in a way that feels tailored rather than generic, turning science lessons into experiences that resonate on a personal level. What truly sets this approach apart is its acknowledgment that education extends beyond the classroom walls. Understanding the broader context of a student's life and integrating this into teaching is not just a method; it's a philosophy.

The focus on science as a vehicle for career preparation isn't about pushing students toward academic elitism; it's about equipping them with tools for life. Whether it's through discussions about materials used in construction or the mechanics behind electrical systems, the goal is to inspire confidence and curiosity. These lessons are as much about developing skills as they are about fostering a sense of agency.

**Educake**

## "The goal is to inspire confidence and curiosity."

## WOODCHURCH HIGH SCHOOL AND EDUCAKE: A WINNING COMBINATION

Woodchurch High School's success is bolstered by their use of tools like Educake, an online platform designed to make learning accessible and engaging. The school's commitment to innovative teaching is reflected in how they integrate Educake into their science curriculum, using it to reinforce concepts and track progress effectively. For Jen Taylor, her students 'enjoy using Educake, particularly for its ability to provide instant feedback which builds confidence over time, and that sense of confidence helps them with their mindset towards science'.

For Woodchurch, Educake complements their ethos of meeting students where they are, providing a supportive framework that aligns with the school's emphasis on personalisation and relevance. Whether it's revisiting challenging topics or celebrating small wins, the platform has become a trusted ally in their mission to empower students.

## CONCLUSION

At the core of this educator's work is a recognition of the diversity in how boys and girls learn and respond to teaching. While some students excel through competition or hands-on activities, others may need different forms of support. Recognising these nuances and adapting strategies to meet students where they are is a hallmark of effective teaching. The challenges of educating disadvantaged boys in science are significant, but they are not insurmountable. By creating meaningful connections between the subject and students' lives, fostering an interactive and practical learning environment, and building strong personal relationships, educators can transform disengagement into enthusiasm. This approach is not about following a prescriptive set of rules but about reimagining the role of education as a tool for empowerment and opportunity. For every student reached, the effort is a reminder of the transformative power of teaching.

At Woodchurch High School, making lessons relevant and engaging has been transformative. With Educake, you can explore new ways to personalise learning and transform your classroom teaching – sign up for a free trial today and see how it could work in your school. PiXL schools receive a 10% discount on Educake.

Interview with
**Jen Taylor**
**CURRICULUM LEAD OF SCIENCE**
WOODCHURCH HIGH SCHOOL

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EDUCAKE

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Educake

### ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Jen has described the importance of creating relevance in education, specifically how subject matter for science in a secondary setting has been related to real-life contexts and pupils' future aspirations. If this is an area for development in your science curriculum, also check out our PiXL Futures resources for both Primary and Secondary for career-related resources.
- Depending on your local context, there may be specific career sectors that will have resonance with your students and communities – for example, agriculture or specific types of manufacture. How do you build this into your curriculum?
- Woodchurch High has also embedded the teaching of subject related critical thinking and problem-solving skills. How are essential life skills taught in your setting? If this is an area for development in a primary setting, also consider PiXL Learning and Life Skills Therapies for Year 1-6 for teaching and consolidating skills across the curriculum.

"That sense of confidence helps them with their mindset towards science."

# WOODCHURCH HIGH SCHOOL

**REGION**
Wirral

**NUMBER ON ROLL**
1419

**YEAR GROUPS**
Years 7–11

**BOYS**
55.3%

**PP**
36.4%

**ISLEWORTH & SYON SCHOOL**  TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 11

# Striving for improved GCSE outcomes for underachieving disadvantaged students with high prior attainment in an all-boys setting

## INTENT

In line with the broader national picture, our disadvantaged boys make less progress than their peers at the end of Key Stage 4. We chose to focus on a subset of our Year 11 disadvantaged cohort, specifically those with high prior attainment in English and Maths from their Key Stage 2 data. These students were projected to achieve under or significantly under their Minimum Target Grades in at least 4 of their GCSE subjects in June 2024. Using their Year 10 internal exams as the measure, we selected 20 students with an expected GCSE outcome of 6+ in Maths and/or English but who were at risk of significant underachievement in a number of subjects. 50% of the selected cohort were making insufficient progress in at least 6 subjects and producing Subject Progress Indicator scores of between –0.5 and –3.43. In our attempt to accelerate the progress of these students and ensure they had as many options available to them at the end of the year, we focused our project on the close monitoring of our selected students. We used student voice, parent/carer meetings and a rigorous scrutiny of their data at key moments throughout the year.

## STUDENT VOICE

Once the targeted students had been identified, the students and their families were informed of their inclusion within the monitoring group and they were met with during their afternoon study support. At this point we asked them to complete a student voice survey where they could speak honestly about their GCSE progress and their plans for the end of Year 11. From these questions, three threads really stood out.

1.  Students had a high level of aspiration for their future. 80% intended to study A Levels or complete an apprenticeship.
2.  Engineering was the most popular area of study with 40% intending to continue study or training in this area.
3.  The most common barrier to progress identified by the boys was that they felt that they did not know how to revise. English and History were identified as subjects that they felt poorly equipped to prepare for independently.

These findings were disseminated to the staff as a whole, during a whole staff INSET dedicated to the most recent data on Year 11. In response to the third point, the message we wanted for staff was that lots of students didn't recognise techniques used in class as being something they should, or could, translate to their own independent revision at home. For example, completing individual extended writing questions, replicating the tried and tested essay structures used in timed conditions within class.

## ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

We were able to dig deeper with the focus group and their parents/carers during Year 11 Parent/Carers' Evening in November. An appointment with me for each of these students was added to School Cloud to discuss their holistic progress. Having these one-to-one meetings away from peer groups made a significant difference to the quality of the interactions: outside of the glare of their peers, they could let their guard down and speak more openly and honestly about their concerns regarding underachievement in their subjects.

Parent/carers spoke openly about broader circumstances that were pertinent to understanding the students' barriers to learning. What was resoundingly clear from the families I met with (twelve out of the target twenty) was that there was support in place at home and a high level of aspiration for their child/ward but a feeling of frustration and helplessness about how they could support, particularly in the run up to the exams.

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

At this point, seeing the better impact of the face-to-face individual meetings, we added in a stage that we hadn't planned for at the start of the year. In the build up to the December internal exams, we asked for 20 staff volunteers to work as mentors. Staff selected the student with whom they felt they could have impact with and were given a resource pack to use to frame their conversations with their mentee.

Immediately there was an impact for the students with the vast majority responding with real gratitude for the one-to-one support. Within a week, the Head of Maths – working with one of our most disaffected students – reported that the day after meeting him for the first time he attended his first ever revision session and his Geography teacher reported that he had the best lesson from him throughout the GCSE course. However, this initial momentum was difficult to maintain with students and teachers struggling to find a regular meeting slot.

## CHECKING IN ON PROGRESS

Our review of the December internal exams returned mixed results with some students making excellent progress. There were some clear signs of progress from approximately 15% of the cohort, however, the vast majority of students' projected grades remained marks below or significantly below target.

As students completed their exams in the last school week in December, results – and therefore discussions - were under embargo until the end of the second week in January. This, coupled with the increased intensity of the five-week half term, meant it was difficult to capitalise on strides made in November and December. Tellingly, a staff voice survey asking about capacity to continue received only three responses. It was clear that this additional request for more teacher time was not sustainable in the model as it stood.

## REFINING THE APPROACH

At this point we divided the cohort into smaller groups for meetings using the Horsforth Quadrant. This was for us to identify the specific features that were allowing progress and preventing it. A recurring motif of the project is how difficult it has been to maintain regular contact with the students in the focus group. This was made even harder by making them meet in three groups rather than one. The only times available for meetings was in afternoon study support however, as they weren't consistently scheduled for the same time and location, they became poorly attended and disjointed. The energy of these catch-ups was high with Group 1 who were clearly very motivated by the improving grades and very grateful for the mentor intervention. Groups 2 and 3 were reluctant to open up, either in person or via student voice.

At the start of February, I was able to go to Carshalton Boys' School and observe their embedded compulsory revision sessions for Year 11. I was really struck by the non-negotiable way that revision had been built into the school day with all Year 11s attending an independent revision session once every 10 school days. There were clear routines whereby one member of staff was able to monitor almost 100 boys with minimal disruption and high levels of buy-in. Speaking to a group of students, they admitted they didn't particularly like it, but fully saw the benefit of the timetabled revision sessions. Returning to school, we immediately changed our use of the library after school from a general study area to a Year 11 revision space. We introduced a Year 11-only  area and ensured the key revision resources were available. We specifically targeted the focus group with letters home and one-to-one conversations with the Head of Year but ensured it was equitably advertised for all Year 11s. The library went from being largely unused for Year 11 revision to an area which, while not always quiet, was well attended until the start of the GCSEs in early May. Of the 20 students, eight were regular attendees (2+ times per week) and a further six were semi-regular attendees (once per fortnight) and over 40 students made regular use of the library in that time. Perhaps most important to the immediate success of the strategy, we ensured refreshments were available for those students who stayed for an hour. This was, by some students' admission, a bigger motivating factor for choosing to stay than the intrinsic value of revising for *An Inspector Calls*. As one student said, "You revise and you get something to eat, you win twice". Again we saw some progress in the March internal exams – but this was from the students who had been making progress at Christmas. Disappointingly, we saw a regression in grades from about 50% of the cohort in this final assessment opportunity in exam conditions despite all the work undertaken. After Easter we tried to relaunch the mentoring programme, asking staff to meet at least once a week with their student as they prepared to take the final exams. Staff continued to support the project but, when surveyed, reported it was too labour intensive to be used as a long-term solution. Moving forward, we are looking into external companies to offer more structured mentoring with future staff being deployed more strategically and in smaller numbers in a mentor role.

## IMPACT

Thinking back over the programme from September until now, it is clear to me that the project has shifted from a focus on a small number of students to something which has looked at the systems in place that can support student progress in Year 11 in general. Moving forward, I believe we are better able to support and target potential underachievement earlier with a more wrap-around system in place. This would mean making use of the Year 11 Revision Club as a central hub for meetings, intervention and support.

Student voice at the end of the process stated that students feel much more able to revise than they did in September when first asked. Only 15% stated that they felt unsure how to prepare for their assessments. However, this might be indicative more of students giving the answers they think the teachers want to hear. In terms of the actual progress made against the September starting point, there are still high levels of underachievement within the cohort. The results, when used alone as our main measure, might reveal the success of the project to be limited as can be seen from the table.

| Student number | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Projected Summer 2 (Yr 10) | 5.4 | 5.9 | 5.4 | 4.6 | 3.1 | 4.4 | 2.5 | 5.6 | 5.9 | 3.0 | 4.5 | 5.0 | 4.5 | 3.8 | 4.1 | 3.8 | 2.8 | 4.9 | 4.8 | 5.1 |
| Projected Autumn 2 | 5.0 | 5.6 | 5.4 | 4.4 | 3.9 | 4.5 | 3.3 | 4.3 | 5.8 | 3.6 | 5.1 | 4.9 | 5.3 | 3.5 | 4.0 | 4.1 | 3.5 | 6.0 | 5.5 | 4.3 |
| Projected Spring 1 | 4.8 | 6.4 | 5.4 | 4.9 | 2.9 | 4.9 | 4.1 | 4.6 | 6.1 | 2.7 | 4.8 | 5.8 | 4.6 | 3.5 | 4.0 | 4.3 | 2.4 | 5.4 | 5.4 | 5.4 |
| Projected Spring 2 | 4.8 | 6.1 | 5.5 | 5.1 | 3.4 | 5.0 | 4.4 | 5.3 | 7.1 | 2.6 | 4.5 | 5.3 | 4.8 | 3.9 | 4.6 | 3.9 | 2.5 | 5.3 | 5.6 | 6.3 |
| Projected Final | 5.3 | 5.9 | 5.8 | 5.0 | 4.9 | 5.3 | 4.3 | 5.0 | 6.6 | 2.9 | 4.4 | 5.3 | 4.9 | 3.4 | 4.6 | 4.1 | 2.4 | 5.3 | 5.5 | 5.3 |
| Target Grade | 6.8 | 6.3 | 6.0 | 5.8 | 6.8 | 6.4 | 6.4 | 6.9 | 6.5 | 5.4 | 6.0 | 5.6 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.8 | 5.6 | 4.9 | 6.5 | 6.6 | 6.8 |

Unfortunately, despite all these efforts, statistically, there was no significant impact on student GCSE results. While this is disappointing given all the resources allocated, other "softer" impact measures such as 'transition data' was more positive. For example, the vast majority of the target Year 11 cohort stayed on within the school Sixth Form moving onto, either, level 2 or 3 pathways. Such a positive transition in terms of the next steps and student numbers had not been predicted. Indeed, while a unexcepted impact measure, it does represent a huge success and, crucially, is a genuine reflection of the incredibly strong and committed professional relationships which staff mentors developed over the time span of this project. I think the power of the project has been the identification of systems that would support all Year 11s, more explicit information about internal exams, short-term rewards for attendance at Revision Club and looking for the best programmes to support students' diverse needs. While we will make use of staff again next year, we will support this by paying for specific work-based programmes. We have signed up for Future Frontiers for next year's Year 10s, recognising that by Year 11 the opportunities to improve progress are more limited against the backdrop of time pressures and deadlines.

# IN CONCLUSION

## WHAT WORKED WELL

- Creating a more structured, staffed environment for students to complete revision in school with access to resources, that also acts as a hub for Year 11 academic interventions. Having this in place makes it far easier to support all students but, in particular, disadvantaged students, to complete coursework and revision.
- Maximising use of Parent/Carer Evenings to make contact with the families of disadvantaged students has been incredibly powerful. We have extended this approach to all year groups.
- Short-term extrinsic rewards for those who demonstrate effort and/or progress within the scheme. Short-term rewards allow students to plug in quickly and mid-/long-term rewards allow for a more meaningful recognition at the end of a half term/term.

## EVEN BETTER IF?

- Choose the correct number of students to work with for interventions: the bigger the sample size, the harder it is to give the specific intervention support students need to make progress.
- Use Intersecting data – Rather than focusing purely on Key Stage 2 data as a starting point for selection of the students involved, cross reference with other data, such as Attitude to Learning. It is more achievable to focus on a motivated group from Horsforth Quadrant 2 for this sort of intervention. (High effort, low progress)
- Prepare for relaunch at the start of every half term – there is natural momentum lost over the school breaks so plan for very targeted intervention in the half term.

**Tom McDonnell**
**CURRICULUM LEADER FOR PERFORMING ARTS / DISADVANTAGED COORDINATOR**
ISLEWORTH & SYON SCHOOL

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- The most common barrier to progress identified by the boys involved in this project related to their ability to revise effectively and to apply strategies used in class when learning independently. If this is also a priority for boys in your setting, check out PiXL 'How To' Guides including *How To: Form habits and be motivated* for further research and evidence about forming effective learning habits and including practical ideas and strategies for helping children and young people in schools.
- Tom talks about the logistical challenges of finding times available that all boys in the group could attend, and that he was inspired to change his approach by visiting another school. Your PiXL Specialist can speak to you about how we can help connect you with other schools to share ideas and strategies.
- The purpose and impact of supporting students with short- and longer-term rewards are clear in this project. Are there opportunities to develop and differentiate the rewards system for the purpose of enhancing pupils' motivation in your setting? If you are exploring the use of rewards, also check out **EEF Increasing Pupil Motivation Trial** for strategies implemented in schools with an average pupil IDACI in the highest 10% in England.

# ISLEWORTH & SYON SCHOOL

**1101**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|--------|---------------|-------------|------|-----|------|
| London | | Years 7–13 | 99% | 26% | 14% |

TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 11

# Setting themselves up for failure? Turning the tide for boys eligible for pupil premium funding

## INTENT

Bishop Perowne is a school where nearly half of the students we serve live in the 30% most deprived lower super output areas for the entire country, and we have had a historic battle to close the gap in progress between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. Therefore, a clear priority for this year's school development plan was the attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11. A further analysis of the previous year's Year 10 mock exam prediction data highlighted that, whilst our girls eligible for Pupil Premium funding were broadly average (0.02), their male counterparts were a real concern (-0.54). As these students progressed into Year 11, the boys' Pupil Premium strategy began to take shape. As Mark Roberts argues:

"It must be said that for every boy who tries to succeed, there is another boy who tries to fail" (Robert. M, 2019)[1]

At the core of our strategy was identifying which of our disadvantaged boys were setting themselves up for failure (albeit often unconsciously) and creating an environment where they not only had no choice but to succeed, but also did so willingly. The first part of the strategy involved creating an identified group of disadvantaged Year 11 boys that would become the centre of the project. After meetings with the Head of Year and Data Manager, 18 boys were identified based upon their progress data. The initial scope of the project was to raise the profile of these students across the school – but especially with teachers and the attendance and pastoral teams – to ensure that these students received a bespoke package in all areas of school life. The aim was to close the gap in their attainment and progress.

## IMPLEMENTATION

**The first strand** of the strategy was to raise the profile of boys eligible for PP funding. Once the 18 boys were identified, their images and names were shared with all staff in the September Teacher Education Day as a priority focus. These students had their work marked first, were asked the most assessment for learning questions in lessons and were the first in line for any subject-specific, attendance or pastoral interventions. Throughout the year the boys were routinely and regularly brought back to the forefront of staff minds through morning curriculum briefings and student voice videos.

**The second strand** of the strategy involved the boys and their parents participating in a one-hour Academic Support Plan meeting with me as Assistant Headteacher to review their curriculum. Actions were shared with relevant teaching staff and reviewed half termly; this enabled any barriers to learning to be dealt with rapidly.

**The third strand** of the strategy was a Reverse Parents' Evening. After the first round of Pre-Public Examinations in November the 18 boys, along with 15 identified girls eligible for Pupil Premium funding, led a Reverse Parents' Evening where they took the role traditionally given to the teacher. Students were briefed by members of the Senior Leadership Team on how to hold their conversations with staff and what questions to ask to maximise their progress. The evening was held immediately after school during staff CPD time. Students remained stationary at their allocated desks while teachers circulated the room at their allotted time to respond to the students' questions regarding their progress. In advance of the evening, staff had received training on these conversations. Students had their mock papers and mock results data to facilitate their discussions. Both staff and student feedback was overwhelmingly positive about the event. One student commented: *'this has really helped me to understand exactly what I need to do to get better. I am going to make some flashcards now on key quotes from Macbeth'*.

**The final strand** of the strategy was to implement the work of Mark Roberts, author of *'The Boy Question',* into Year 11 lessons. The aim of this aspect of the strategy was to ensure quality first teaching that raises motivations and engagement for all learners. We adapted Mark Roberts' motivational tips of 'feed for fulfilment', 'rephrase to amaze' and 'let them write like you' to give our disadvantaged boys the self-belief that they could and would achieve their aspirational targets in the summer.

What we saw in lessons was clear modelling and scaffolding using the 'I do, we do, you do' approach. In addition, we observed targeted questioning of the identified learners based on feedback from whiteboards after whole-class checking for understanding and follow-up questioning along the lines of 'say it again, better'. Finally, we witnessed teacher circulation of the room which led to one-on-one check-ins with the at-risk boys that reassured and built confidence. All staff were involved in the CPD sessions, and the Senior Leadership Team monitored the impact through learning walks and student voice.

# "According to student voice, the most impactful parts of the project… were the Academic Support Plan meetings and Reverse Parents' Evening."

## IMPACT

The August GCSE results data shows that we have halved the disadvantaged boys' gap overall and the identified PP boys have significantly improved their attainment and progress during the year. Interestingly, a secondary and unplanned impact of the project is that our PP girls have also improved in terms of their attainment and progress and their disadvantaged gap has more than halved. Whilst the PP girls were not the focus of the project, they appear to have benefited from the Reverse Parents' Evening and quality first teaching approach as much as the boys did.

An analysis of the data shows us that the group that still requires further thought are those students eligible for Pupil Premium funding (regardless of gender) who fall below 90% attendance and become persistently absent. Unsurprisingly, these students did not demonstrate the same levels of progress as those with good attendance.

According to student voice, the most impactful parts of the project for raising the profile of disadvantaged boys were the Academic Support Plan meetings and the Reverse Parents' Evening. It is challenging to consider how these strategies could be scaled up to work effectively with a greater number of learners as, by their very nature, it is the small and identifiable number of learners within this boys' PP strategy that made it achievable, manageable and, as a result, impactful. We shall certainly look to repeat Reverse Parents' Evenings and Academic Support Plan meetings next year, whilst also focusing on key attendance strategies for our persistently absent pupils.

**Victoria Reeve-McKew**
**ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER**
BISHOP PEROWNE CHURCH OF ENGLAND COLLEGE

[1]   Roberts, M. (2021) **The Boy Question: How To Teach Boys To Succeed In School**. Abingdon: Routledge.
     Pinkett, M. and Roberts, M. (2019) **Boys Don't Try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools**. London: Routledge.

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- This project from the team at Bishop Perowne School is a strong example of upstream thinking. Could similar strategies be effective for tackling barriers to achievement for disadvantaged boys or other key groups of pupils of younger ages?

- The involvement of parents and teachers in the creation of bespoke Academic Support Plans has been crucial to the success of this project. Could there be benefits for strengthening parental engagement for disadvantaged pupils in your setting, for example, exploring how different strategies impact parent/carer-child engagement and improve outcomes for key groups of pupils?

- This project highlights the importance of feedback (both from the teacher and the student) in helping students make progress. Be sure to check out the article by Mark Roberts on page 36 of this publication, as he goes into more detail about how we can use feedback to improve the progress of boys in our classrooms.

# BISHOP PEROWNE CHURCH OF ENGLAND COLLEGE

**1108**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND | HPA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Worcester | | Years 7–11 | 51% | 37% | 19% | 21% |

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**
Nearly half of the students we serve live in the 30% most deprived lower super output areas for the entire country.

"We have halved the disadvantaged boys' gap overall and the identified PP boys have significantly improved their attainment and progress during the year."

# READING, WRITING AND LITERACY

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS TO **RAISE BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT**

**BIRKBECK PRIMARY SCHOOL**      TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 6

# Facilitating greater depth writing in Year 6

## OUR STARTING POINT

Our journey to improve the writing of the most ambitious in Year 6 has been a transformative experience. This project stemmed from a realisation that achieving greater depth in writing is not merely about teaching advanced grammar or stylistic nuances explicitly. Instead, it involves cultivating an environment where students can explore and experiment with language thus deepening their understanding and application of grammatical concepts. Above all, it is about agency. Greater depth writers make sophisticated writerly choices that are their own and they do so with such assurance that their confidence seeps through the pages of their books.

One notable observation in the context of writing proficiency in primary schools is that male greater depth writers are less common. Research by McCarthy et al. (2012) has shown that girls generally develop language and literacy skills earlier than boys, and this early advantage can persist throughout primary school. Furthermore, the National Literacy Trust explains that societal norms and cultural expectations often influence behaviours and interests differently, with boys receiving less encouragement to engage in expressive writing and reading. Boys may also exhibit less interest in traditional writing tasks compared to girls, partly due to the types of writing activities offered in classrooms. This project aimed to address these disparities through targeting this specific dynamic head on, providing them with a tailored programme to enable them to reach the greater depth standard of writing by the end of KS2.

## DEVELOPING A RESPONSIVE APPROACH

Before beginning this project, my typical lesson structure was repetitive and while it was methodical, in the sense that it provided pupils with a formula for creating good writing, it did not facilitate the kind of freedom that is so important to develop writing at greater depth. In response to this, I designed a dual input lesson structure in which each group received three mini-inputs from myself throughout the lesson. In practice this meant that the children requiring highly chunked guided practice still received this level of scaffolding, whilst the focus group were able to receive a tailored explorative input from myself, before having in-depth discussions with each other and putting various aspects of writing craft into practice. This meant they were not limited by the constraints of the chunk of learning we were focusing on in the lesson.

To effectively gauge the impact of a more facilitative approach, I selected six students who were on the cusp of achieving greater depth in their end of Key Stage 2 assessments – four of these students were boys. These students became my focus group, providing a manageable and targeted cohort to work with. Their progress served as a barometer for the success of the strategies implemented and provided insights into the broader applicability of these techniques within classrooms across our whole setting.

At the core of my approach was the concept of responsive teaching. Responsive teaching is an approach focused on adapting to students' immediate needs in the classroom. By being attuned to students' understanding by collecting and reviewing evidence of thinking, teachers can adjust their methods to refine teaching to meet the needs of pupils more precisely. This approach is essential as it makes instruction relevant and accessible to all students, fostering a supportive environment where they feel valued and understood. Consequently, it enhances motivation and engagement, addresses diverse learning needs, bridges gaps in understanding and promotes deeper comprehension of the material.

A typical example of how I was responsive in the context of writing during the project was when I used the first chunk of input with the group to identify their proficiency with using subordinate clauses to set the mood of a setting description. I explained and modelled and then asked the pupils to prepare their own example on their mini whiteboards to exemplify their understanding. While they were writing, I circulated the room and observed the level of automaticity. I used choral display to view the remaining whiteboards. I realised that some children had clearly grasped this concept securely and so I set them off to independent writing. However, there was a group who had clearly misunderstood how to use the grammatical concept for impact.

Using a responsive teaching approach allowed me to deliver whole-class instruction while also dedicating time to my focus group and actively addressing their individual needs as they navigated the complexities of the power language can hold if used correctly. By balancing these two aspects, I could ensure that the entire class received essential learning, yet the focus group could delve deeper into more advanced texts and the grammatical structures that were intentionally used to draw the reader's attention to specific opinions and thoughts.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology we employed was a cyclical process of reading, questioning and applying. I took great inspiration from various blogs I had read (such as Primary Colour by Christopher Such and Miss Stanley's Den) that explained the importance of backwards fading not the difficulty of the task but the difficulty of the context that the task sat within. As greater depth writers, it became clear that the children had the ability to break down the writing process, yet they could only do this when writing within a context familiar to them.

To enable the group of six to begin to apply some of these advanced writing techniques into unfamiliar contexts, we read a known passage together before critically analysing the authorial choices within it using a range of questioning techniques from *The Writing Revolution*. This allowed the children to pick out the purpose, intent and outcomes of the piece of writing in such a way that their thinking became more concise as the unit of learning developed. The children were then able to apply this authorial choice in a similar context before gradually removing the scaffold of a known context until the children were ready to apply their thinking in a range of unfamiliar contexts.

An example of this is when I introduced the children to the idea of manipulating the purpose of a text to entertain the reader while writing in the genre of horror. We identified that the author intends to create a feeling of suspense by writing in the way that they do. We identified that the mechanism for achieving this in the writing was the use of short sentences to build tension. The children then practised building suspense and tension using a familiar context – haunted houses – before slowly manipulating the context into something they would not necessarily relate to being

a tense moment – such as ordering some food from a food hall. This iterative process helped solidify the students' understanding and gave them the confidence to experiment with writing styles and their authorial voice, often combining different purposes in the same piece of writing.

One particularly successful example of this approach was our exploration of non-chronological reports. Traditionally taught as purely informative, we set out to create information texts that not only informed but also entertained the reader in a way that reached further than merely "using figurative language so the reader isn't bored". To achieve this, we drew upon the idea that pun and a play on words could be used as a type of 'extended metaphor' throughout a text to keep drawing the reader's attention back to the point the author was trying to highlight. For instance, in an information text about American Football (chosen to align with the interests of the boys within the group), the children discussed how current topics in America could be used within their text to provide satire to their reader. This process began by unpicking what satire is, exploring examples of satire in a familiar context to the children and then applying satire to the unfamiliar context of the information text they were writing. The children produced some excellent work that spanned from poking fun at the current presidential race to delving deeper into topics such as the 'American Dream' and how this is unachievable in the modern world that we live in.

# "As a class teacher, this project has fundamentally shifted my understanding of how to approach teaching writing."

## MEASURING IMPACT

The results of this project were encouraging and highlighted the effectiveness of facilitating greater depth writing through a focus on how intent within writing can enhance the power that language holds. I believe that this project showed that this is a much more effective pedagogic approach to greater depth writing than merely teaching grammatical accuracy. **Five out of the six focus students achieved the greater depth standard in their end of KS2 assessments, underscoring the potential of the approach and its impact on student writing.** Contextually these children were deemed to be nearing a greater depth level in Year 5 due to their ability to write with control at length, however their understanding of writing for an impact was limited. They were all avid readers who could comprehend and synthesise a variety of texts yet could not make the link between this and being a thoughtful writer. This project has shown that if children are explicitly taught the links between these two domains within English, their writing outcomes can significantly improve.

As a class teacher, this project has fundamentally shifted my understanding of how to approach teaching writing. The success of the focus group has reinforced the importance of enabling our greater depth learners to work outside of the formula as we attempt to 'crowbar' the subject of writing into nice, easy-to-learn chunks. It has reminded me that rather than treating writing as a grammar checklist of items to be ticked off in order to meet age-related expectations, we should view it as a chance for children to use their cognitive toolkit to enhance the clarity, intent and creativity of their thoughts and enable them to engage with a much wider audience than those within the four walls of their classroom.

## NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, in my role as writing leader next year, I plan to extend this approach across the school, starting from Year 4 as Bereiter and Scardamalia's Model (1987) proposes that young writers move from a 'knowledge-telling' strategy to a 'knowledge-transforming' strategy around this age. The knowledge-transforming strategy involves setting goals for writing, planning content, and revising drafts, indicating more intentional writing. Using this research as a basis, my goal is to embed the practice of using grammar for intent throughout the curriculum. By fostering an environment where students regularly engage in reading, questioning and applying advanced writing techniques, I believe we can cultivate a school-wide culture of using writing as a mechanism to effectively express thoughts on specific topics and the world that we live in. Additionally, by providing more autonomy over what the children can write, I aim to advance the trajectory of male writers within the school as this can cater towards their interests and own authorial styles.

To implement this on a whole-school level, I will collaborate with teachers to develop a cohesive plan that integrates these principles into their teaching practices. Professional development sessions will equip teachers with the necessary skills and strategies to enact this vision. The long-term vision is to create a continuum of writing excellence from Year 4 to Year 6, ensuring that by the time students reach their final year of primary school, they are well-versed in using grammatical concepts for intent. This will not only enhance their writing abilities but also prepare them for the demands of secondary education and beyond.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Facilitating greater depth writing in Year 6 has been an enlightening and rewarding experience. Through a focus on writing intent and the purposeful use of grammar, we have seen significant improvements in student writing. By facilitating greater space for talented writers to think deeply about the writerly choices they make and how they connect, we have seen improved engagement (at least anecdotally) and ambition. The success of the focus group serves as a testament to the effectiveness of this approach and highlights the potential for broader implementation across the school. By fostering an environment where students can explore, question and apply advanced writing techniques, driven by a commitment to agency, we can nurture a generation of writers who not only achieve academic success but also develop a lifelong appreciation for the power of the written word.

**Olly Cakebread**
**YEAR 6 TEACHER AND WRITING LEAD**
BIRKBECK PRIMARY SCHOOL

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## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Olly has highlighted the impact of their project on developing writing skills for boys with the potential to achieve Greater Depth at the end of Key Stage 2. If you have identified similar priorities in your setting, also consider exploring the wide range of **PiXL Subject Webinars for writing** that includes 'exploring greater depth writers' (primary) and **PiXL Disciplinary Literacy** for developing skills for writing in subject-specific contexts.

- Olly has also illustrated the impact of creating an environment in which Year 6 pupils felt able to explore, question and apply advanced writing techniques. This is a strong example of upstream thinking. Are there any specific challenges for older students in your school that could be better tackled lower down the school with the right strategy or intervention?

# BIRKBECK PRIMARY SCHOOL

**590**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | FSM/PP | SEND |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Kent** | | **EYFS – Year 6** | **51%** | **11%** | **15%** |

## CASTLEFORD ACADEMY  TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

# An integrated approach to overcoming literacy barriers

## "It's not just about stretching the top; it's about raising the floor."

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES VAUSE, DIRECTOR OF SCIENCE

### WHAT DRIVES THE CASTLEFORD APPROACH?

Boys in UK schools often face unique challenges, particularly in literacy, confidence, and academic engagement. These struggles can lead to significant gaps in achievement. Castleford Academy, West Yorkshire, has adopted a dedicated strategy to help bridge this gap, emphasising inclusive progress over singular academic achievement. This commitment, guided by Castleford's ethos of 'Care, Aspire, Succeed' which motivates staff to "raise the floor" for all students, ensures that boys can grow in an encouraging environment that builds both academic and personal resilience.

Castleford's efforts extend beyond lifting high achievers, aiming to uplift each student by focusing on literacy, emotional resilience and a structured support framework. This approach benefits all students – particularly boys struggling with certain academic expectations – by helping them overcome any challenges they may have with engagement and confidence. Recognising that many boys benefit from incremental gains in confidence and language skills, Castleford fosters an atmosphere where all students, regardless of their starting point, have the tools they need to excel.

# CASTLEFORD'S ACTION PLAN

A cornerstone of Castleford's approach is an integrated programme aimed at overcoming literacy barriers. Some boys arrive in Year 7 with limited vocabulary and language comprehension, making reading a daunting task. To tackle this, the "Aspirational Text" programme sees teachers reading advanced literature across subject areas, helping to expose students to the best of what has been thought, said and written. Different subjects choose different aspirational texts to read, allowing staff to share their passion for their subject which in turn boosts engagement. By introducing students to challenging texts such as *Sapiens* by Yuval Noah Harari, they gain insights into broad topics, expanding their perspectives while building language skills. Teachers reinforce these sessions by encouraging the use of formal, sophisticated language across all subjects.

Further strengthening this programme is a structured, tiered teaching model that introduces concepts gradually. Starting with basic questions to build a foundation, teachers progress to more challenging material. This helps boys, particularly in subjects like science, build confidence step by step. Tools like the Frayer Model[1] simplify complex ideas, aiding comprehension and allowing boys to experience success with challenging material, thereby boosting resilience and long-term engagement.

| DEFINITION | CHARACTERISTICS |
|---|---|
| | WORD |
| EXAMPLES | NON-EXAMPLES |
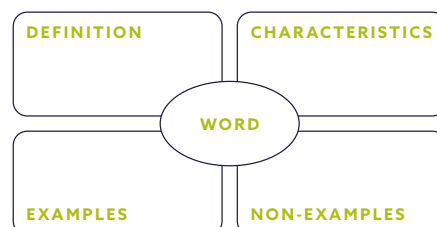
[1] Frayer Model

## TECHNOLOGY IN LEARNING

Castleford has embraced technology to support learning and monitor progress. Through Educake, students complete regular quizzes that provide immediate feedback on their understanding. Teachers can monitor each student's progress, enabling them to identify areas that require more support. For James Vause, **'This immediate feedback can be especially motivating for boys, as it provides a concrete sense of accomplishment and makes their progress visible'**.

By setting a series of core questions that remain the same every week of the unit, students can see their knowledge increasing and build upon it as the content develops. Additionally, Castleford's use of Educake is intentionally non-competitive, focusing on individual progress rather than ranking students. By allowing students to work at their own pace, and do so privately, **'students are motivated without the risk of creating "winners" and "losers"'**. This promotes a positive learning atmosphere where students can celebrate their own achievements without feeling discouraged by comparisons, helping support motivation and engagement across all starting points and ability levels.

## ENGAGING THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

Parental engagement is another essential element of Castleford's approach. Recognising the significant impact of family support on students' success, the Academy has begun to host regular information evenings for parents, offering guidance on supporting learning at home. The Academy remains committed to involving families in multiple areas of school life, as research shows that sustained family support can significantly enhance boys' motivation and academic performance. Additionally, vocabulary booklets are sent home to encourage those at home to take part in the student's learning, reinforcing the link between home and school.

## A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

Castleford's strategy is built on the idea that every student should attain a core baseline of knowledge, referred to as "automaticity" - the ability to recall essential facts effortlessly. This foundation improves retention and helps students connect ideas, which is essential for mastering more advanced material. As they achieve fluency in the basics, students gain the confidence to explore more challenging concepts and make interdisciplinary connections. Each topic begins with key terminology, and teachers return to these terms regularly to ensure they are retained and actively used. This approach is especially effective for boys, who may find independent reading challenging, as it provides consistent, guided support in language development.

**Educake**

> "This immediate feedback can be especially motivating for boys, as it provides a concrete sense of accomplishment and makes their progress visible."

# MEASURING IMPACT

Castleford's initiatives have fostered measurable growth in both academic achievement and personal development. The structured approach to literacy, use of technology, and emphasis on parental engagement has cultivated a motivated and supportive school culture. Staff members report that these efforts have given students a clear purpose, helping them stay engaged and work toward their full potential.

This focus on both foundational knowledge and emotional wellbeing prepares students for success beyond exams. For many boys, Castleford's approach has instilled a sense of purpose and resilience. Families have responded positively, with many seeking additional ways to support their children's learning journey.

The use of technology such as Educake has also been instrumental in assessing and refining Castleford's teaching approach. By offering detailed, question-level analysis, Educake allows teachers to adjust lessons to focus on those areas. For the boys in particular, the chance to see their progress clearly in specific skills helps build confidence. This steady, visible improvement encourages them to stay engaged, giving them small, achievable goals to work towards.

Castleford's strategy has shown that nurturing well-rounded individuals is about finding ways to inspire students to take ownership of their learning, with measurable improvements in their application of knowledge and attitude towards learning across the board. This approach is practical, adaptable, and scalable – suitable for multiple year groups or for schools with varying levels of resources. The real shift lies not in focusing purely on attainment but in fostering a motivating, enriching environment where improved engagement and positive learning attitudes naturally lead to progress. Through a culture of consistent support and respect, Castleford has shown how schools can truly elevate every learner.

Every learner deserves the tools to succeed. Castleford's story highlights the power of tailored support and innovative technology. Curious to see how Educake fits into your approach? Book a no-obligation demo and explore the possibilities. PiXL schools receive a 10% discount on Educake.

Interview with
**James Vause**
**DIRECTOR OF SCIENCE**
CASTLEFORD ACADEMY

Written by
**Emily Parker**
**PARTNERSHIPS AND CONTENT MARKETING EXECUTIVE**
EDUCAKE

**HAVE A LOOK AT** www.educake.co.uk/pixl
or get in touch with us directly for a personalised demo at support@educake.co.uk.

Educake

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Castleford's literacy strategy involved expanding students' perspectives of each subject whilst also developing their use of more sophisticated language. How do you encourage students to gain broader insights and expand their literacy skills? For further ideas and suggestions, also check out **PiXL Spoken Language and Vocabulary Leadership Thinking Guide** (Primary) and **PiXL Vocabulary** and **Disciplinary Literacy** resources (Secondary).

- Encouraging students to read broadly around their subjects can be a powerful way of extending learning and curiosity beyond the taught curriculum. For older students, we have extensive subject-specific reading lists for students to explore. We also have reading canon selection guides that offer schools PiXL-exclusive discounts on a diverse range of books as part of our PiXL Reading strategy.

- This project also describes how students retain knowledge and develop 'automaticity'. What strategies are in place in your setting to support this? If you are refining strategies for achieving similar aims in secondary settings, also consider exploring PiXL Know it, Grasp It, Think It resources for supporting pupils of all ages to apply and embed subject related knowledge.

> "By introducing students to challenging texts… they gain insights into broad topics, expanding their perspectives while building language skills"
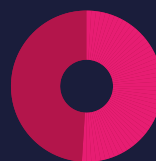
# CASTLEFORD ACADEMY

**1500**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| West Yorkshire | | Years 7–11 | 51.5% | 25.8% |

**THE ANGMERING SCHOOL**    TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 9

# The Boys' Book Club

## INTENT

In the aftermath of Covid-19 it was clear that there were gaps emerging in the progress data, especially between boys and girls. The disruptions caused by the pandemic significantly impacted students' academic performance, with reading skills notably suffering within my school. Recognising the need to revive and enhance these skills, I launched an initiative to foster a love of reading among boys, many of whom struggled not only with their reading abilities but also with their confidence. I felt that by focusing on boys it would also tie in with the problem of boys not making as much academic progress as their female counterparts. According to the DFE data, in the 2022/2023 academic year *boys were nearly twice as likely as girls to be suspended, and slightly more than twice as likely to be permanently excluded.* DFE data also showed that by the end of primary schooling, *63% of girls met the expected standard in English reading and writing, compared with 56% of boys*.[1]

The project aimed to create an engaging and supportive environment that would reignite boys' interest in reading whilst helping them to develop essential literacy skills and build their self-confidence. By focusing on a specific group of Year 9 boys, I sought to address the challenges they faced, ensuring they received the encouragement and resources needed to improve their reading proficiency and overall academic success.

## IMPLEMENTATION

To implement the reading project, I collaborated closely with the Year Team Leader to identify the boys who would benefit the most from the nurturing and relationship-focused aspect of the group. We carefully analysed reading data gathered from Accelerated Reader, overall progress scores, and also considered factors such as home life and behaviour data, to ensure we selected those who needed the most support. Recognising the importance of positive influences, I recruited strong male role models with leadership responsibilities: the Assistant Headteacher for Behaviour, one of the Deputy Headteachers and the Year 11 Year Team Leader. We felt it was important for the boys to have a male role model who would read to them, and with them, each day.

The project was initially launched in the summer term of Year 8 (2023) and has continued throughout their time in Year 9. For the purpose of consistency, I decided to use three DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) sessions which take place every day for 20 minutes so it meant that the boys would experience almost an hour of high-quality intervention. Initially the group consisted of 14 boys but I soon realised that this was probably too large and some of the quieter students felt intimidated by the more outspoken boys in the group. While the group dynamics required some adjustments, leading to a few changes in the participants, a core group of eight boys have remained committed since the project's inception and all have benefited significantly from the stability and continuity of the programme.

I wanted to ensure a cohesiveness within the group so I decided that reading the same book together would be an effective strategy. This approach allowed the boys to engage in shared discussions, fostering a sense of community and collective achievement. I carefully selected books that I believed would resonate with their interests and experiences, aiming to capture their attention and spark their enthusiasm for reading. After the boys completed the first book, I gave them the opportunity to select the next one, allowing them to have input in the decision-making process. At the end of each book the boys would also write up a book review: what they enjoyed…and didn't, and whether they would recommend the book to others. This not only empowered them but also increased their investment and interest in the reading project, making them more likely to participate actively and enjoy the experience.

## EVALUATION

After the first term, I collected student feedback, which revealed varied responses. Seventy percent of the boys reported enjoying the book club and the books they read. However, only 54% felt that their reading and confidence had improved, and 53% felt they had learned new words. Interestingly, a significant 91% of the boys appreciated that the club was run by male members of staff, citing that "it would feel awkward with girls" and that it was generally "better" without them there. This feedback highlighted the importance of creating a comfortable and relatable environment for the boys, reinforcing the value of male role models in encouraging their engagement and participation.

During the next term, the student feedback reflected similar attitudes. Many boys felt that their reading had improved, and there was a noticeable increase in those who felt their confidence was growing. Impressively, 100% of the students said they would recommend the book club to other students. This positive response underscored the club's effectiveness in not only enhancing reading skills but also in building confidence and creating a supportive community that the boys valued and wanted to share with their peers.

However, during the most recent summer term, when I collected student feedback again, the results were even more positive. 74% of the boys reported that their enjoyment of reading had improved. Additionally, 85% felt that their confidence in reading out loud had increased, with some stating that they "loved reading out loud" and appreciated doing so "without being judged". Many also mentioned that they now read a book every half term. These results indicate that the project has made significant strides in not only improving reading skills but also in fostering a genuine love for reading and enhancing self-confidence among the students.

## "The books have been really good and I feel that my confidence has grown"
STUDENT AT ANGMERING SCHOOL

In terms of quantitative data, this has also been really positive with all but one student reaching a reading age that corresponded with their chronological age, and with some improving their reading age by up to 3 years. In the final week of the Boys' Book Club this year, a celebration ceremony was held where the boys were given certificates, prizes and a book of their choice. This created a sense of pride and achievement for these boys and they enjoyed the recognition of their achievements in the Book Club for that year.

## NEXT STEPS

In terms of the next steps for the project, I have initiated a similar reading programme with a group of Year 9 girls. This new initiative is already proving to be successful. Having previously run the project with the boys, I was able to address and overcome initial challenges more efficiently, allowing for a quicker and smoother implementation. This experience has streamlined the process, enabling us to replicate the positive outcomes and further expand the reach of the reading programme within the school.

With the current Year 9 boys, the project is evolving as they take on a different role next year. All the boys have expressed a desire to continue with the Book Club, and for two of their sessions, they will now mentor and read with Year 8 boys who have low reading scores. This marks a significant transformation from where these boys initially started, demonstrating their growth and maturity in being able to confidently mentor younger students and be a positive role model for them and for the school.

**Leanne Kelly**
**ASSOCIATE ASSISTANT HEAD AND LITERACY LEAD**
THE ANGMERING SCHOOL

[1]   House of Commons Library (2024) **Educational attainment of boys**.
      Available from: *https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2024-0043/* [Accessed August 2024]

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Angmering School initially identified a group of boys in Year 9 who might benefit from being engaged in opportunities to develop reading skills in a nurturing and supportive context. You may want to consider exploring our PiXL Reading strategies (available for both Primary and Secondary/Post 16) for further support. The strategies include ideas for helping parents read with children and young people at home, as well as ideas for creating diverse and varied reading canons.

- For more ideas on how schools across the PiXL network have been developing reading, do check out our regular PiXL Reading bulletins for Primary and Secondary.

- This school identified their target group in part based on whether it was felt that the students would benefit from a "nurturing and relationship-focused" group. If you think about the students in your school, regardless of age or gender or academic progress, who are the ones that you think would most benefit from a group like this?

## THE ANGMERING SCHOOL

**1375**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND | HPA |
|--------|----------------|-------------|------|-----|------|-----|
| South East | | Year 7–13 | 52.9% | 22.3% | 18.3% | 12.3% |

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION** A state comprehensive school with a Specialised Support Facility for students with a physical or sensory impairment.

# "I have loved reading out loud without being judged"

**AN ARTICLE BY KAREN COLLINS**

# Reading non-fiction for pleasure

As a SENDCo I can remember visiting a local primary school to talk to a pupil and their parents about the transition to secondary school. The boy was a reluctant reader and writer. During the conversation it became clear that he loved Minecraft, both playing it himself and watching others play on YouTube. We talked about storytelling and how content creators generate a narrative to engage their audience, how accurate a lot of the science is in the game and about some of the books that had been written about Minecraft. It turned out that he did read for pleasure: Minecraft books, guides for how to play Minecraft and Minecraft blog posts. I talked with his parents about how they could encourage this form of reading for pleasure and how this could be extended into writing his own blog posts, scripts for Minecraft clips and reviews about his favourite YouTube videos. Although anecdotal, this highlights the disconnect that some parents and teachers have between reading for pleasure and non-fiction.

*"Those who read non-fiction are more likely to want to take care of the environment compared with those who don't read non-fiction (68% vs 49%)."* COLE ET AL., 2022

## THE IMPACT OF READING NON-FICTION FOR PLEASURE

The Minecraft anecdote emphasises the importance of choice in developing reading for pleasure. In one study, 80% of children said that the book they had enjoyed most was the one they had chosen themselves (DfE, 2012). This same research also found that **access** to books (via ownership or borrowing), **familiarity** (repeated experiences with books, or reading a book series), and **social interaction** were also key features of young children's motivation to read (Gambell, 1996).

Research also suggests that more than half of children and young people read non-fiction, although this decreases with age, from 69% for children aged 8 to 11, down to 44% for post-16 students (Cole et al., 2022). Reading non-fiction helps to build background knowledge and understanding of academic vocabulary in context, introduces students to complex thought, and assists in cross-curricular learning (Dearnaley, 2023). Reading non-fiction also increases the opportunity to introduce discussion and comprehension activities (Yopp and Yopp, 2012), activate prior knowledge allowing students to become experts, and develop an identity as a reader (Dearnaley, 2023).

## WHAT CAN WE DO TO SUPPORT READING NON-FICTION FOR PLEASURE?

When developing a library to enable students to read non-fiction for pleasure, there are many different types of books to consider, including procedural texts such as 'How to…' guides and cookbooks, books describing facts and explaining how things work, and biographies (Clarke, 2024). These could be situated in a school library as well as in individual classroom reading corners. Strategies for increasing reading non-fiction for pleasure include:

- **Broadening** the range of books used during read-aloud experiences, to include non-fiction and texts outside life sciences (Yopp and Yopp, 2012).
- **Non-fiction November** – This is an annual celebration of factual materials, encouraging reading for information and exploration of interests, organised by The National Literacy Trust *https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/non-fiction-november/*
- **NewsWise** – This is a free programme by The Guardian Foundation which contains teacher guides and classroom resources for children aged 7-11, helping them to understand and critically navigate and report real news *https://theguardianfoundation.org/programmes/newswise/get-involved*
- **Drop everything and read (DEAR)** – If your school subscribes to this strategy, remember to include non-fiction opportunities. Consider having newspapers or newspaper articles for the older students, and subject-specific non-fiction texts available in the classroom.
- **The PiXL Reading Canons for secondary and post-16** – These include examples of non-fiction texts and are available on the PiXL website *https://auth.pixl.org.uk/members/feature/1/49892463*

> **"They're facts and I enjoy reading about facts because then I know about them so I can tell people and then they find it interesting (12-year-old boy)."**
> ALEXANDER AND JARMAN, 2018

**Karen Collins**
**PiXL HEAD OF CURRICULUM FOR SCIENCE, ASSESSMENT AND RESEARCH**

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ST. PETER'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL      TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEARS 2 & 6

# Evaluating the impact of focussed daily spelling activities on the spelling and writing outcomes of boys in Year 2 and Year 6

## INTENT

Following analysis of the Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar Assessment (SPaG) at the end of Year 6 in 2023, we recognised that low spelling scores were affecting pupil outcomes, particularly for boys. Only 68% of all pupils and 57% of boys achieved the expected standard in SPaG, and only 23% of all pupils, all of whom were girls, achieved the greater depth standard. In writing, 71% of all pupils and 57% of boys achieved the expected standard and 10% of pupils, again, all of whom were girls, achieved the greater depth standard.

We wanted to improve outcomes for boys in both Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar and in Writing and decided to focus on two key year groups, Year 2 and Year 6. We reviewed our teaching of spelling and decided to implement two new spelling programmes, one at the end of each key stage. The programmes were delivered to 30 pupils in Year 2 and 32 pupils in Year 6. Depending on the success of each programme, we then wanted to consider how either or both of the programmes could be rolled out across the rest of the key stage or the school.

# YEAR 2 PHONICS

## IMPLEMENTATION

As part of our implementation of the 'Little Wandle' phonics programme for Early Years and Key Stage 1, we introduced the spelling aspect of the programme to pupils in Year 2. This included a review of phase 3 sounds in the first half of the autumn term, bridge to spelling sessions in the second half of the autumn term and daily 20-minute spelling sessions throughout the spring and summer terms. The Little Wandle spelling programme was much more prescriptive than our previous programme and taught at a much faster pace.  Spellings were also taught daily, including a daily focus on common exception words.

In the end of year SATs Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) assessment, on average pupils scored 8.7 out of 20, with boys scoring 8.3 out of 20. Progress is difficult to assess as pupils were previously only assessed on weekly taught spellings and as a school we had not previously used the Year 2 SPaG test. In writing, 47% of boys achieved the expected standard at the end of Year 2, slightly higher than the 45% of the same boys who were working on track at the end of Year 1.

## IMPACT

The impact on progress and outcomes of the Little Wandle spelling programme is less than we had hoped. However, through discussion, we have identified several significant learning points from our project in Year 2:

- **The teaching of spelling in the Little Wandle Year 2 programme started from a higher point than the children had reached at the end of Year 1 in the previous programme, meaning that there were gaps in their learning.**
- **Next year, spelling progress will be tracked more closely throughout the year using the spelling aspect of the SATs assessments to give us a more accurate check on progress.**

The Year 2 teacher did observe that there were a higher number of pupils than may have been expected who could spell the word 'beautiful' in the SATs assessment. She felt that this was because this was a word which had been taught regularly through the Little Wandle spelling programme.


# YEAR 6 SPELLING

## IMPLEMENTATION

In Year 6 we implemented the Jane Considine spelling programme, 'The Spelling Book'. This included a comprehensive initial assessment to identify gaps in spelling knowledge, some of which were as a result of disruptions to education during Covid-19 in Years 2 and 3. Once the gaps had been identified, the class teacher included additional spelling sessions in her weekly timetable where spelling patterns and rules were explicitly taught, following the timetable below:

| Thursday | 30-minute teaching session 1 |
|---|---|
| Tuesday | 20-minute teaching session 2 |
| Monday | |
| Tuesday | 10–15-minute practice sessions, focusing on a different spelling rule each day |
| Thursday | |
| Friday | |

The sessions were all based around investigative learning and testing out ideas about words, rather than simply learning spelling rules. This was in contrast with our other Key Stage Two year groups, where there is one 30-minute taught spelling session each week and a spelling assessment of the words taught the previous week.

## IMPACT

The impact of this more intensive approach to the teaching of spelling in Year 6 can be seen in the improvement in outcomes for all pupils in Year 6. The average spelling score out of 20 has risen from 9.3 in September 2023 to 14 in the SATs Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar Assessment in May 2024.  This is a rise of 4.3 words for all pupils and for boys a rise of 4.5. This improvement in spelling contributed to 83% of boys achieving the expected standard and 39%

of boys achieving the greater depth standard in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar. This compared to an increase in 2023 of only 0.2 words for all pupils, from a score of 10.9 to 11.1 words and 1.6 words for boys, from 9.4 words to 11 words.

Although only 67% of boys achieved the expected standard in writing in 2024, this was an increase from 28% of the same group of boys who were working at age-related expectations at the end of Year 5. This was also an increase from 57% of boys achieving the expected standard in writing in 2023. For several children, their progress in spelling was noted in their end of year report. For example, 'While she struggles with grammar, her spelling has improved significantly.'

In evaluating the impact of the project, compared to spelling attainment and progress data from 2023, there is a clear link between the intensity of spelling teaching in Year 6 throughout the academic year and outcomes in spelling as part of the Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar Assessment. Although this impact appears to be seen in writing outcomes, it is not clear if this spelling programme was the only contributing factor and the programme needs to be taught across Key Stage Two for the impact on writing to be fully evaluated.

## OUR NEXT STEPS

We are now looking at using the teaching strategies from the Jane Considine spelling programme, The Spelling Book, alongside existing resources from the Spelling Shed to teach spelling more regularly throughout the week and to create a bespoke spelling curriculum for the children in KS2 at St Peter's.

Although there appears to be less impact from the Little Wandle Spelling Programme, we will more closely track progress and evaluate the impact again over the next two years to see if there is a greater impact of teaching the programme over a longer period of time.

For both programmes, one further area for consideration is the training of staff to ensure that both The Spelling Book and Little Wandle can consistently be delivered to a high standard.

In comparing the two year groups over one year of running each of the projects, the impact in Year 6 can be seen much more clearly than in Year 2. However, taking into account the mitigating factors outlined above, it will be interesting to see if in the longer term, the impact of the project in Year 2 is greater than just over one year of the project and can match the impact of the Year 6 project.

**Cathy Quinn**         **Katie Stafford**          **Abigail Pratt**
**HEADTEACHER**         **YEAR 2 TEACHER**          **YEAR 6 TEACHER**
ST PETER'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Jane Considine Education (2024) **The Spelling Book Training with Jane Considine.**
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**ADAPTING THESE IDEAS**

• As part of the PiXL Primary assessment cycle, the team regularly produce Implication for Teaching reports for SPaG (as well as Reading, Writing and Maths). These may be useful documents in helping you think about students' specific gaps in spelling, punctuation and grammar. The reports are available to all PiXL Primary members.

• The team at St Peter's looked at two different but related strategies, one at the start and one at the end of Key Stage 2. If you were to think about persistent issues across the key stages in your context, which year groups might you want to focus a project on?

"The average spelling score out of 20 has risen from 9.3 in September 2023 to 14 in the SATs Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar Assessment in May 2024. This is a rise of 4.3 words for all pupils and for boys a rise of 4.5 words."

# ST PETER'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manchester | 254 | EYFS – Year 6 | 54.3% | 46.5% | 18.1% |

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION** St Peter's is a one-form entry primary school located in an area of high deprivation. Almost half of all pupils are disadvantaged and 28% of pupils speak English as an additional language. There are more boys than girls in the school and in some classes there is a very uneven split between boys and girls, for example both Year 2 and Year 5 are 63% boys and 37% girls.
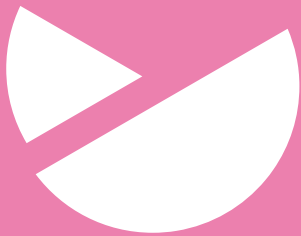
# CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

AN ARTICLE BY MIKE NICHOLSON OF PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITY

# Promoting positive narratives of masculinity in our schools

Being an English Teacher was all I'd known for 18 years and, quite frankly, something I would have been happy doing for the rest of my professional life. But I grew increasingly concerned about the social narrative around masculinity and its impact on boys and young men: the ubiquitous term 'toxic masculinity', the seeming lack of access to positive male role models, the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of masculinity within the media, the loss of meaningful real-world connections in the lives of boys and young men. Is it any wonder that charismatic online influencers who push regressive, dominance-based models of masculinity are finding such fertile ground for their ideologies?

Imagine being a confused 13-year-old boy who feels unseen, unheard and frustrated: who very rarely sees positive representation of someone like himself. Imagine then stumbling across a TikTok of a man who is articulate, confident, athletic, surrounded with extravagant displays of wealth and he offers you the secrets and shortcuts to masculine success; all you have to do is subscribe to his socials and follow his teachings. It's a very powerful, almost cult-like, rhetoric and right now there is an entire industry of masculinity influencers, gurus, bros and 'experts' targeting our boys with these tactics (which essentially amount to radicalisation).

At Progressive Masculinity we create safe, nonjudgemental spaces to openly discuss issues like this as well as topics often considered taboo within the male world and the response from the young men who we work with has been phenomenal. *"These sessions made me realise I don't have to pretend to be someone else. Someone I don't like being anyway"* (Year 11 Pupil). Below is a series of tips which we have found to be very effective when trying to create supportive environments in educational settings.

### GET CURIOUS, NOT FURIOUS

The work of Dr Kaitlyn Regehr, Director of Digital Humanities at University College, London, highlights some of the reasons why disenfranchised boys and young men are vulnerable to the more extreme ideologies promoted online. Interestingly, the frustrations of feeling unseen/unheard and the idea that nobody in society 'has their back' are prominent reasons. A very articulate pupil in one of our workshops once said *"It seems like every other group has someone speaking up for them: Feminism, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ. But when we look around, we don't see anybody doing that for us"*. Male pupils often report that when they voice an opinion they are met with angry responses about male privilege and patriarchy.

We have to strike a balance here. If a pupil voices an opinion purely to disrupt, shock or sabotage a discussion then that is not acceptable and the school will have policies in place for this. However, if a pupil voices a genuine opinion then shutting him down is the worst thing we can do: it won't change his opinion, he'll just learn that it isn't safe to say what he thinks in front of us. Now he will retract this opinion and store it internally where it can't be challenged or guided. Dr Emily Setty, Head of Criminology at Surrey University, believes we must see these as "teachable moments" and coined the wonderful phrase *"call him IN rather than calling him OUT"*. We can't value the voice of boys only when their voices are the same as ours. A big part of Progressive Masculinity's work is exploring how we can challenge each other as men without humiliating or escalating the situation. Are we modelling this enough in the classroom? Our classroom might be the only place in this young man's life where these ideas are challenged, and challenged respectfully. Any environment which doesn't embrace healthy challenge and debate is an environment focussed on control, not growth. Let's get curious, not furious and create spaces where boys feel seen, heard and valued.

### LANGUAGE MATTERS

How we frame the language around this topic is incredibly important. The words we use often unconsciously reflect our attitudes, mindset and bias. In our 'Exploring Masculinities' program, three different pupils from three different schools told me last year that they very rarely hear the word masculinity without 'toxic' attached. Conflating these terms creates the idea that masculinity itself is inherently toxic, causing a defensive and often aggressive response. Could we instead use the term 'dominance-based masculinity'? This term specifically highlights the issue without seeming to demonise an entire gender, thereby avoiding the defensive response. Mercifully, I very rarely hear the term 'man up' in education now but consider the connotations and impact of frequently used terms like "boy-heavy-class" and "boys will be boys". What do they reveal about the way we view boys, and how might we re-frame terms like these?

### CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

When speaking at a conference, event or delivering our staff training sessions, I always set myself a challenge: can I make everyone in the room smile or laugh at least once? The reason for this is twofold: firstly, I want our talks and sessions to be engaging and enjoyable. Secondly, it is extremely rare to see anyone talk about masculinity today with a smile on their face and this impacts the way we approach the topic. Our masculinity can be something we're proud of and a real force for good in the world, but this isn't the aspirational narrative boys and young men are receiving. One of the most enjoyable parts of our pupil workshop program is sharing the stories of some of the amazing men out there. Men whose masculinity is based on values like compassion, selflessness and loyalty.

# "Is it any wonder that charismatic online influencers who push regressive, dominance-based models of masculinity are finding such fertile ground for their ideologies?"

Something amazing happens when we share the stories of these men: it's almost like the boys we work with didn't know there were men like that out there. That men like that existed. There's a good reason for this: the algorithms which dictate their digital content don't recommend these kinds of men. In fact, they are often programmed to recommend the kind of masculinity influencers mentioned earlier. What if we set ourselves a challenge? Once a half term, share the story of a man you really admire. A man you believe represents the best of what masculinity is capable of. Representation is important so try to include different intersections of race, sexuality, neurodiversity etc. This is a low effort, high impact way to gradually 'change the narrative' by introducing our pupils to positive role models who represent the incredible potential of masculinity.

## EXPLORE, DON'T DICTATE

Everywhere our boys and young men turn someone seems to be telling them what it means to be a man: imposing and dictating their own ideas about masculinity. Masculinity is a social construct and there should be no 'one size fits all' approach. There are four billion men in the world, which means there can be 4 billion different ways of being a man. With that in mind let's ask our boys the question nobody seems to be asking them: what kind of man do you want to be? Connect them to what they believe their key values are and then support them to construct a model of masculinity around those values. In our final workshop, the most popular values selected are resilience, selflessness and loyalty … what an incredible base upon which to build the friend, colleague, partner, father and man you wish to be!

In the last three years we have worked in every kind of institution you can imagine: state schools, private schools, rural, inner-city, football academies, Alternative Provision, Pupil Referral Units, Youth Offending Institutes etc and every time I walk away with hope because it's obvious there is a real desire in our boys to become the kind of men this world needs. Our role is to support them through this very difficult and confusing transitional period where they have left the world of children behind and are trying to figure out where they belong in the world as men.

**Mike Nicholson**
**FOUNDER**
PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITY

Spinks, S. (2023) **INCELS: an Extremist Ideology?**. SSSLearning. 16 January. Available from: *https://sssleaning.co.uk/safeguarding-articles/incels-extremist-ideology?srsltid=AfmBOootopSbb3sscH8NY64BP4H7kpraa2_5zJ5G8Rwk1KNzJBOMhWMS* [Accessed 8 November 2024].

Regehr, K. et al. (2024) **Safer Scrolling: How algorithms popularise and gamify online hate and misogyny for young people** [online]. [PDF]. University of Kent. Available from: *https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Help%20and%20advice/Inclusion/Safer-scrolling.pdf* [Accessed 8 November 2024].

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Mike has proposed a challenge for us all to change the narrative and introduce our pupils to positive male role models. What would be the most effective settings in your school for sharing stories of the men you admire, for example, with individual pupils, in groups, at assemblies, in lesson contexts?

- This article conveys the need for pupils to feel seen, heard and valued when voicing genuine opinions. If this is an area of further development for your school, could the concept of 'teachable moments' be helpful for creating a shared strategy for embracing healthy challenge and debate?

- Are there places in your school where boys feel that they can express themselves authentically without fear of reprimand or judgement? How do you **know** that? Could you make use of external speakers to help create this space? Some students may be more comfortable with someone they have not engaged with in the past.

- Helping students engage in these conversations can be challenging, and we can help by ensuring they have access to the emotional vocabulary that they may need to express their feelings and experiences. At Primary, we have an Emotional Literacy package that can help you in developing these skills. Our secondary and post 16 members, may want to make use of our Tune Up and Tune In resources as part of PiXL Unlock.

"Let's ask our boys the question nobody seems to be asking them: 'what kind of man do you want to be?'"

## Progressive Masculinity

Progressive Masculinity was born from a genuine need to address the negative impacts of regressive masculinity models. Mike Nicholson's extensive experience in education, combined with his passion for supporting men, led to the development of their program. Over the years, we have refined their approach through research, piloting, and feedback, ensuring their workshops and training sessions are effective and impactful.

Their journey began with a focus on educational settings, delivering pupil workshops and staff training to create cultural change within schools. Recognising the broader societal need, they have since expanded into the corporate sector, supporting inclusive DEI policies and promoting gender allyship in the workplace. Their work has been featured in national media, including The Guardian, The Times, Channel 4, and BBC Radio 4, highlighting the significant impact of our programs. Mike has also presented at a number of PiXL conferences and events.

Find out more at **www.progressivemasculinity.co.uk**

**FERNDOWN UPPER SCHOOL**   TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

# Bringing the Taking Boys Seriously principles to life

## INTENT

Nationally, there is a need for schools to develop and refine processes that support boys in education. This is due to an ever-increasing gender gap within results, issues with attendance for boys, higher levels of exclusion from education and an increase in mental health issues for young men, in particular suicide rates.

These issues are present within our school context, with the South Coast of England having some of the highest suicide rates for young men in the country. Ferndown Upper School is located within East Dorset, where there is economic diversity meaning our school context has a range of different needs to be accommodated within centralised programmes such as our Taking Boys Seriously programme.

Our school improvement journey to Taking Boys Seriously began five years ago when, fuelled by emerging research about the lack of progress made in this area of education, we decided to set about addressing the problem within our own context. Collaborating with the University of Ulster and Arts University Bournemouth, we wanted to apply the Taking Boys Seriously Principles[1] and establish a programme that was tailored to the needs of the boys within our school, addressing the key barriers to boys being successful within an educational environment. Working with the Arts University Bournemouth and Dr Alex Blower, we were able to provide our boys with an arts experience that helped them explore their masculinity in ways that were not available to them in the classroom.

We were keen to provide boys in our school with educational support, opportunities to improve their wellbeing and establish safe spaces to communicate about their own masculinity and navigate its development.

[1]   Read more about the Taking Boys Seriously principles, developed by **Ulster University**, on page 16 of this publication.
The 10 principles are: #1 recognise the primacy of relationship #2 demonstrate dignity and respect #3 utilise a 'strengths-based approach' to learning #4 challenge and affirm masculine identities #5 promote positive mental health #6 identify blocks to boys learning #7 connect boys learning to context #8 engage meaningfully with boys #9 enable creative learning environments #10 value the voice of boys.

# FIRST STEPS

Within our context, we were able to adapt the Taking Boys Seriously Principles into six key strands that were tailored to the boys within our school community. Our timeline of implementation saw us training staff, identifying key focus points for the principles across parts of the school, and implementing a mentoring scheme to assign to a cohort of our boys who we felt were most likely to engage well with and benefit from the boys' programme.

### STAFF TRAINING

Our journey began with engaging with the research and using it to inform our programme. We explored how the research could be applied to our context, for both staff and students.

**We chose some key pieces of research and used these as the bedrock for our practice. These were:**

•   Emotional bank account – Stephen R. Covey (1989)
•   Non comfort-based approach – Rattan et al. (2012)
•   Myth of low aspirations – Harrison and Waller (2018)
•   Botheredness – Hywel Roberts (2012)
•   Differential between how boys and girls are sanctioned – Pinkett & Roberts (2019)

We shared this with the whole staff and introduced the principles whilst asking them to reflect on their practice, especially with key students. We set up a CPD programme that was delivered across the year which focused on classroom strategies, communication approaches and aspirations. Staff were asked to reflect on the way they approached behaviour between boys and girls and how they practised questioning.

### AUDIT

The Taking Boys Seriously principles formed the basis of a whole-school audit. We asked each area of the school to rate their efficacy against the principles. This created a heat map of provision through the lens of the principles. This provided an immediate improvement plan. We could see which principles needed embedding. In our case we saw that identifying barriers to boys' learning needed to be addressed across the school as well as valuing the voice of boys as a cohort. The audit encouraged all stakeholders to reflect on where their departments supported boys more fully and this led to rich conversations at SLT level and at faculty level. Areas of the school shared their experiences and provided best practice to others. The results of the audit became an excellent way to engage staff members as the principles provided a tangible tool for improvement. Staff could see where the improvement needed to be and could develop a strategy around the principle. The principles are non-prescriptive and this allowed for staff members to have autonomy.

# DEVELOPMENT OF BOYS' PROGRAMME

### MENTORING

An important part of our programme was to provide our boys with mentors who could act as a coach and a support for them across their subjects. Our mentors met with the boys once a fortnight to touch base and ask them questions about how they were feeling within their learning journey. Our mentor programme focused on 22 boys with individually selected mentors from across our school community, including support staff. We designed a range of questionnaires based on questions given by the University of Ulster that mentors could work through across their sessions. They were then able to record information on a form to share with us.

One of our most influential sessions was focused on a memorable learning experience. This was an opportunity for our boys to reflect on when they remember learning something (this did not have to be something within a school context). This gave the boys an opportunity to articulate why it was a memorable experience, what they learnt and why it was important to them.

The data that was obtained from the mentoring programme enabled us to create a spreadsheet with key information for the boys in our cohort, which we shared with class teachers in order to support them within their classrooms. In particular, boys were able to share their interests which enabled teachers to apply learning to contexts and give hooks to the boys within some of their subject areas. The mentoring programme was a vital part of our broader boys' programme, and the mentors were able to support emotionally, academically, and even secured work placements for our boys. All the mentors who took part in the programme last year have agreed to continue with it this year and we have been able to broaden the programme to support a greater number of mentors as well as boys being mentored.

### ENGAGING WITH EXTERNAL SPEAKERS

As our programme grew, we felt it was important for boys to hear from the lived experience of others. We saw the need to bring in external speakers who could connect to the boys in a range of different opportunities and ways.

We have been able to bring in external speakers such as Nick Elston, who spoke to our boys about mental health, OCD and depression as part of our Men's Health Awareness Month in November. We were also able to bring in Shaun Flores, an ex-Vogue Model, who spoke to our boys about addiction to pornography as well as body image. Both sessions were delivered to every boy in the school in year group sessions throughout the day. As engagement with the external speakers increased, so did the boys' willingness to talk about sensitive and potentially controversial issues in a supportive forum. This led to the development of an open and honest culture surrounding key issues affecting boys, their wellbeing and their development of their own masculinity.

What we were able to identify, early on, was the importance that these opportunities gave our boys in finding their voice. As a consequence of Nick's session at the start of the year, the boys trusted in the external speakers that we brought in and, by the time Shaun arrived, our boys were sharing their own lived experiences of body image in front of all of their peers – who supported and embraced each other's experience of being a boy.

Our programme provides an opportunity for our boys to suggest aspects that they feel would support them alongside the principles. We send out a survey after each of our external speakers visit to gather feedback from the boys which has resulted in engaging with local institutions such as a gym, where our boys were able to learn about the importance of physical health as well as speaking to a life coach about how to communicate as a man.

### LITERACY PROGRAMME

Our literacy programme was created using the TBS principles, the EEF guidelines and the national curriculum. We enlisted the help of former professional rugby player, author and now TikTok influencer, Ben Mercer, to create a programme of high aspiration around both modern and classic literature. They chose to read Hemingway and shared their love of non-fiction from Aurelius to autobiographies.

We recognised the links between the EEF guidance and the Taking Boys Seriously principles but also PiXL strategy. We therefore created a programme which supported the boys to read more widely and use the texts that they were reading with Ben to discuss masculinity, societal norms and problems faced by teenage boys in today's world.

This was then coupled with PiXL strategies such as Diagnosis, Therapy and Testing, personalised learning checklists and exam wrappers. The strategy was clear, the boys knew that reading for pleasure created opportunities. Ben spoke to them on a level that was personal, they were able to share their thoughts and feelings in a safe space and be heard. Our programme incorporated the principles but also linked the boys to their educational context.

## TAKING THE PROGRAMME FURTHER

The culture that we have been able to foster through this programme has opened doors to new opportunities for our boys but has also identified new elements that we need to develop.

We have identified the need to include parents and carers as more active participants within the programme, giving them information about the support on offer as well as providing them with knowledge and understanding of the topics discussed to continue to support conversations at home.

We also felt that it is important for the girls within our school to have some engagement with the talks to give them an understanding of what boys go through to also provide a network of support around them.

On an extra-curricular level, we are looking to embed more opportunities for our boys to develop leadership skills and acquire new skills. In particular, we are excited for our boys to be able to engage with a fishing programme, boxing academy and a rowing club. These opportunities create a low-stakes but high-impact experience that encourages our students to find their own intrinsic motivation. This converts into longitudinal marginal gains and sees improvements in attendance and effort in class. We are also expanding our literacy programme with specific pathways for each of our year group cohorts and increasing the range of external speakers we have coming to speak to our boys. The boys are proud of their programme – they are grateful for the opportunities they are given to have conversations in safe spaces and engage with their masculinity in different ways.

# WHAT WAS OUR IMPACT?

As we are now several years into our boys' programme, we have been able to see impact in the attendance of our boys to school, with this cohort attending school more than any other cohort. We have seen a reduction in behaviour incidents for the students taking part in the programme, resulting in more time spent within the classroom. We have also seen improvements in outcomes for our boys, including a reduction in the gender gap in key subject areas such as English and across the school as a whole. There has also been a significant increase in uptake for boys at A Level English, with boys opting for both Literature and Language at a higher level. Within the boys' cohort we have also seen that disadvantaged boys have outperformed non-disadvantaged boys in English alongside a reduced FSM gap. And on a broader school level, our boys with special educational needs had a positive progress 8 across all subject areas.

We have also been inspired by the changes within the way our boys value their voice, participating in external providers' sessions, openly discussing their own issues with masculinity and body image. There has been an increase in boys taking up leadership positions in the school and volunteering for future events that we embed within the programme. Male students are more willing to share feedback and offer suggestions for future events that they feel would benefit both their own and their peers' journey inside and outside of education and beyond.

The impact that has been identified has helped to build a culture of trust and pride within our boys. We are seeing an increase in participation across all year groups where boys know that they are a part of something special and are thankful for the opportunities that they are presented with. We have now seen a desire within the female students at the school to participate in some aspects of the programme, so that they are able to understand the barriers that boys face and the struggles to articulate their masculinity both inside and outside of school.

**Deneen Kenchington**
**DEPUTY HEADTEACHER**
FERNDOWN UPPER SCHOOL

**Oli McVeigh**
**ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER**
FERNDOWN UPPER SCHOOL

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Deneen and Oli began their work with an audit of the Taking Boys Seriously principles to produce a 'heat map' of provision across their school. Why not do the same with colleagues, especially those in different curriculum areas or year groups? You can use this to identify areas of strength to build on, and areas to focus development.

- Engaging with external speakers in a focused and meaningful way has had a lot of impact at Ferndown. How can you build on the impact that external speakers have in your setting? Do you have ongoing relationships with key speakers, to help students build up relationships with them?

- Reflect on how student voice is gathered in your setting. In what ways does it contribute to an ongoing and transparent conversation about student experiences? Do students get to talk about what they want to talk about? Do you actually find out what you wanted to know? How could these processes by refined?

- Look out for an opportunity to visit Ferndown when they host a PiXL Open Day later on this year (check our Specialist & Networking Platform for more information).

# FERNDOWN UPPER SCHOOL

**1161**

**REGION**
**Dorset**

**NUMBER ON ROLL**

**YEAR GROUPS**
**Years 9–13**

**BOYS**
**50.5%**

**PP**
**22.6%**

**SEND**
**16.5%**

# Raising expectations with care and consistency

## "Don't put a ceiling on them"

INTERVIEW WITH GLYNN PALMER-BELL, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF ENGLISH

Castle View Enterprise Academy, located in Sunderland, is a single-sponsored academy serving over a thousand students aged 11 to 16. Rooted in the working-class heart of the North East, the school embraces its normality, striving to provide meaningful opportunities for every child. With a significant proportion of its student body eligible for Pupil Premium funding and many requiring SEN support, the academy takes pride in fostering care, consistency, and high expectations without resorting to labels or rigid frameworks.

The academy's approach to supporting disadvantaged students, particularly boys, is neither flashy nor complex. Instead, it focuses on meeting students where they are – academically, emotionally, and socially – while maintaining a culture that values care over criticism.

# A CULTURE OF CARE AND CONSISTENCY

Since the pandemic, Castle View has maintained a remarkable sense of stability. Its systems and procedures have remained consistent, allowing staff to prioritise the classroom experience. Literacy has emerged as a key area of focus, particularly for boys who often display lower levels of engagement with reading.

Data from the academy's literacy interventions highlights that boys are more likely to fall into these programmes than girls. This may reflect broader societal attitudes towards literacy or the unique challenges boys face in developing confidence. Teachers at Castle View have observed that some boys hesitate to engage fully, appearing to fear failure and its impact on their self-esteem.

To counter this, the academy has cultivated a culture of support rather than judgement. When students are invited into intervention programmes, they are reassured that this is about growth, not punishment. Staff avoid framing the process as "catching up" but rather as an opportunity to practise and develop their skills. This positive messaging helps to break down defensive barriers and encourages engagement.

The interventions themselves are diverse, ranging from structured reading sessions during the school day to after-school programmes, working with the National Tutoring Programme, and peer reading initiatives. In one particularly effective programme, confident Year 10 readers work with younger students, fostering a sense of community while reinforcing the importance of literacy as a foundational skill for all subjects.

### PRACTICAL STRATEGIES IN THE CLASSROOM

Castle View's whole-school approach to teaching and learning prioritises evidence-based practices. Staff regularly engage with strategies such as Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction  and Tom Sherrington's "Walkthrus". These frameworks emphasise clarity, repetition, and actionable feedback, enabling teachers to deliver high-quality lessons.

English teachers at the academy have found success by isolating specific skills – such as crafting topic sentences or integrating quotations – and providing focused opportunities for students to practise them. This targeted approach prevents students from becoming overwhelmed and allows them to build confidence incrementally. For boys, in particular these small, manageable successes often lead to greater motivation and engagement.

### THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN SUPPORTING DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Technology has also played a pivotal role at Castle View, with tools like Educake offering students immediate feedback and personalised learning opportunities. Educake's accessibility is particularly beneficial for disadvantaged students, enabling them to continue their learning beyond the classroom.

The immediate feedback feature is invaluable for students who struggle with certain topics. **'They can quickly see where they've gone wrong and make improvements without the fear of embarrassment.**' This ongoing cycle of assessment and adjustment helps students take ownership of their learning, which is crucial for building self-confidence, especially for those who need extra support.  Teachers at Castle View also use the data from the platform to identify gaps in knowledge and to plan focused interventions where necessary.

By enabling students to continue their learning at home, **'Educake helps ease the pressure on teachers to cover every detail in the classroom'.** This flexibility allows students to work through content at their own pace outside of school hours, ensuring that learning doesn't stop when the bell rings. Castle View makes it a priority to support reading using technology as a way to engage students. For disadvantaged students, this access to resources at home helps level the playing field, offering them the same opportunities to revise and practise as their peers, even if they may not have the same resources available outside of school.



**Educake**

## "When students are invited into intervention programmes, they are reassured what this is about growth, not punishment."

## SHIFTING MINDSETS: AVOIDING LABELS

One of Castle View's guiding principles is to avoid pigeonholing students. Staff believe that defining disadvantaged students by their circumstances risks imposing limits on their potential. Instead, the academy fosters a mindset of positive bias. A key example of this mindset is the school's reward system, which actively seeks to recognise and celebrate the achievements of students eligible for Pupil Premium funding. At least one of the two students nominated for each reward must come from the Pupil Premium cohort. This isn't about token gestures; it's about acknowledging the genuine contributions and successes of disadvantaged students. It ensures that these students are seen for their efforts and their growth, not just the obstacles they face. It sends a message to every student that they are valued and that their hard work will always be recognised, no matter their background.

The school's leadership emphasises that no two disadvantaged students are the same, and staff are encouraged to get to know each child as an individual. This philosophy extends to classroom teaching, where educators aim to provide tailored support that acknowledges both the individual strengths of the student and the specific challenges they face.

# CONCLUSION

Castle View Enterprise Academy exemplifies how care, consistency, and high expectations can make a profound difference for disadvantaged students, particularly boys. Its approach is built on the belief that every child has the potential to succeed when given the right opportunities and support. For Castle View, supporting disadvantaged students isn't about imposing labels or focusing on deficits. Instead, it's about celebrating strengths, breaking down barriers, and ensuring that every child feels valued. This ethos underpins the academy's success and serves as an inspiring model for schools across the country. Small, consistent gains lead to big changes. Educake empowers schools like Castle View to make learning accessible and engaging for every student. Why not try it yourself? Start your free trial today. PiXL schools receive a 10% discount on Educake.

**HAVE A LOOK AT** www.educake.co.uk/pixl
or get in touch with us directly for a personalised demo at support@educake.co.uk.

Interview with
**Glynn Palmer-Bell**
**ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF ENGLISH**
CASTLE VIEW ENTERPRISE ACADEMY

Written by
**Emily Parker**
**PARTNERSHIPS AND CONTENT MARKETING EXECUTIVE**
EDUCAKE

Beale, J. (2020) Barak Rosenshine's **'Principles of Instruction'.** The Tony Little Centre [blog]. 7 January.
Available from: https://cirl.etoncollege.com/barak-rosenshines-principles-of-instruction/ [Accessed 12 December 2024].
Sherrington, T. (2019) **Rosenshine's Principles in Action**. Woodbridge: John Catt.

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Castle View identified the need to provide bespoke literacy interventions and support for boys who often displayed lower levels of engagement with reading. Do the diagnostic strategies currently implemented for your school ensure that all pupils who may require similar support are clearly identified? Also check out our PiXL Reading Leadership Thinking Guides for further suggestions.

- This project describes how the schools' rewards strategy is underpinned by a 'mindset of positive bias'. Does your rewards system provide data that could be used to actively recognise and celebrate the achievements of key groups of students, potentially including disadvantaged or underachieving boys? Is there scope for developing your rewards system to ensure that data gathered is used to empower students?

"It sends a message to every student that they are valued and that their hard work will always be recognised, no matter their background."
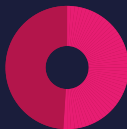
# CASTLE VIEW ENTERPRISE ACADEMY

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sunderland | 1027 | Years 7–11 | 51.6% | 44.5% | 17.5% |

**ALPERTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL**          TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 7

# Championing our Year 7 boys: the 'This is Me' programme

## INTENT

When our new Year 7 cohort began in September, it was evident that we had a core group of boys who were experiencing the similar difficulties that are mirrored across the country – low effort, low progress and behavioural issues. As a school we have a number of interventions to ensure every student realises their potential, but knew that we needed to put additional measures in place to help this group. Brent has one of the highest poverty levels in London and our students face many obstacles to be the best they can be, but our values and mission state that everyone in our community will 'aspire, commit and succeed.' Our intention was very specific from the outset – we wanted to change the narrative of our group and see an increase in their number of positive points, extra-curricular activities, wider reading, positive phone calls and meetings with parents. The students would have a 'go to' person, who would motivate and encourage them, as well as get to know their hopes and ambitions and drive them to succeed. Jenny Gaylor, our project mentor, was a real help in making the aims even more precise. This resulted in the most important intention – each teacher would meet a student for 20 minutes on a daily basis for six weeks. All of this culminated in the 'This is Me' programme, with the meeting between the student and their 'Y7 Champion' at the heart of it.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The first stage was to identify the students who would benefit from the 'This is Me' programme. Data was used to highlight the students who had large numbers of behaviour points, detentions and other sanctions. The profile of each student was analysed to ensure all vulnerabilities were considered. The 20 students had a range of needs and existing interventions that meant additional support was crucial.

I spoke with each student to explain that they had been chosen for the programme based on their unique qualities and potential, and emphasised to them that with the right support and guidance, they can truly excel. All of the students were happy to participate and in fact, I had other students who wanted to be added!

Students completed a questionnaire about their experience of school so far and what they would like to achieve in the future. Here are a few of their comments:

*"I feel I can do better, but I don't know how."*
*"I want to make my mum proud, so need help to make better choices."*
*"I am excited about the rewards - I want everyone to know I am trying."*

**A letter was then sent to all parents/carers to explain the programme. It was essential that parents were on board and fully invested from the outset. The letter outlined the key elements of the 'This is Me' programme. This is a summary of what was sent:**

### 1. READING *YOU CAN DO IT*

Your child will have access to a copy of *You Can Do It* by Marcus Rashford and Carl Anka – a book aimed at empowering individuals to achieve their goals and overcome challenges. This book will serve as a source of inspiration and guidance throughout the programme.
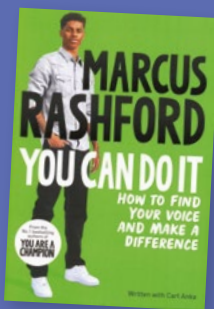
### 2. REGULAR CHECK-INS WITH CHAMPIONS

Your child will benefit from 20-minute daily check-in sessions with our dedicated champions. These sessions will provide them with a supportive space to discuss their progress, challenges and goals.

### 3. PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

We recognise the importance of parental involvement in your child's journey. As part of the programme, we will maintain regular contact with you to keep you informed about your child's progress and to seek your input and support.

### 4. ENGAGEMENT WITH TEACHERS

Your child will be encouraged to engage actively with their teachers, seeking support when needed and building positive relationships with those who can guide and inspire them.

### 5. EXTRA-CURRICULUM INVOLVEMENT

We will encourage your child to explore and participate in a range of extra-curricular activities, fostering their interests and talents outside of the classroom.

### 6. CHARACTER PASSPORTS AND REWARDS

Your child will be guided in the development of their character passport, recognising their achievements and positive contributions. Additionally, rewards such as vouchers will be provided to celebrate their progress and efforts.

**This was positively received by parents and carers!**

I then began the recruitment process of the champions. Our staff are wonderful and many responded to the call to champion a Y7 who needed them. Staff consisted of support staff, teachers and SLT. Each was provided with a card and stickers to monitor the daily check-ins, a planner for the students, and guidance regarding You Can Do It. Each champion had to take their student to the library so the students could reintroduce themselves to the librarian and borrow You Can Do It. Champions also incentivised reading to the students and additional rewards were given to those who read at least one book a week and wrote a book review for the library. Finally, staff were tasked with ensuring all of the parts of the programme were completed with their student. This was left open-ended, which meant implementation for the remainder of the programme was bespoke for each student, depending on their needs. Some of the champions spent time completing lesson drop-ins to provide additional support, some had regular meetings with parents/carers to give advice on how to help at home, and some students were added to numeracy and literacy interventions. Others received resources and were added to after-school tuition classes to help raise attainment, and many received student leadership positions to help build confidence. Some of the boys were included in specific mentoring groups to target key behaviours. Above all, students and parents/carers had someone else who was fully invested in helping them become the best that they could be.

## IMPACT

*"Thank you for believing in my son and getting him to believe in himself!"*

*"Thank you Miss for being my champion!"*

*"You have been there for me the whole time."*

At the end of the six-weeks of daily sessions, the rate at which the boys had been receiving behavioural points had decreased and 25% of the boys did not receive any additional behavioural points and increased their positive points by at least 10%. Most champions continued to meet with their student; some continued this daily, whilst others decreased it gradually. Some champions continued communication with parents, teachers and other support staff.

As this was a programme that took a holistic approach, it has been difficult to measure the impact with the use of data. However, 100% of student 'attitude to learning' improved, when compared to their first ATL data drop. However, the effect of the change in behaviour for most of the boys had a ripple effect across the year group, as the rest of the students saw the effort that was being made by them. This was also the case for staff and parents/carers. The boys were given more opportunities to express why they may have made incorrect decisions and given a chance to reflect and change.

The programme will be continuing in the coming year for the new Y7 cohort. There are teachers that now have 'Y7 Champion' on their timetable, so will meet with students on a weekly basis. These students have been identified based on primary school data. Other champions will begin the daily six-week programme. This will serve as a proactive approach to transition, as well as trying to resolve any issues that have already been flagged by their primary school.

The programme will now be overseen by the Head of Year and the Pastoral Manager. This will allow a more in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of the programme and the changes that need to be made to make it more impactful. The Y8 team will also run an adapted version of the programme for targeted Y8 students. Ultimately, as Rita Pierson said, **'every kid needs a champion'** and this will continue to be the mission for us.

**Simone Ryan**
**ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER & KS3 LEAD**
ALPERTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Rashford, M. and Anka, C. (2022) **You Can Do It**. Hampshire, England: Macmillan Children's Books.

TED (2013) **Rita Pierson: Every kid needs a champion** | TED Talk.
Available from: *https://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion?subtitle=en* [Accessed 14 November 2024].

*"It has been a real pleasure to be a champion and made me remember the impact we will have if we begin from Y7".*

**ADAPTING THESE IDEAS**

• Alperton identified a specific need to provide bespoke support for a key group of boys in Year 7. How do levels of motivation and engagement compare between cohorts of pupils in your school? Are strategies for identifying your priority pupils effective? Are these pupils on the radar of all members of staff?

• Criteria for quantifying the success of this project were identified at the start, these included positive behaviour points and rewards – including phone calls to parents – participation in extra-curricular activities and evidence of wider reading through engagement in the library. What are some of the ways that you could evidence changes in students' engagement in your setting?

• Flexibility in approach and quality of relationships were critical factors for the future success of this project. Could there be benefits of connecting target groups of pupils with key members of staff in your school? Remember that the first Taking Boys Seriously principle is recognising the primacy of relationships.

• The team at Alperton are going even further 'upstream' and using data from their feeder primary schools to help identify students for the programme before they have even started at the school. How could you get upstream of key transition points in your setting, to ensure that students are identified before they begin to disengage?

# ALPERTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL

| REGION | NUMBER ON | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|--------|-----------|-------------|------|-----|------|
| London | 1923 ROLL | Years 7–13 | 54% | 18% | 9% |

TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 10

# Raising boys' aspiration and motivation

## CONTEXT

Our school is in an area with many outstanding schools and grammar schools. We have a noticeable disparity in academic results with girls outperforming boys with a significant gap in P8 in 22/23. Part of our school improvement plan focuses on raising boys' achievement. My project was in direct response to this need. My plan was to create a mentor group for 12 Year 10 boys and work with them, the school, and parents to raise aspiration and motivation among the group. I was the only member of staff working directly with this group but have been supported throughout by my SLT line manager and PiXL mentors.

## FIRST STEPS

I started by speaking to the Head of Year 10 and tutor team about students they felt were not achieving their full potential: students who had low aspiration and motivation levels. I cross-referenced the names I had been given against limited data as we had no KS2 SATs scores. I used data from internal assessments and looked at effort scores to ascertain motivation. All Year 10 students completed a survey designed to gauge levels of aspiration. I combined this with data on attendance, punctuality, behaviour points and achievement points to use as baseline.

**For me, this project was about so much more than measuring data but hey… we work in schools and therefore having a way to measure impact was important!**

I selected 12 boys with varying levels of academic success who were identified as having the potential to achieve significantly more. My initial idea was to inspire aspiration by focusing on future careers and then working backwards to show the students how to achieve their goals.

## COMMUNICATING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

My SLT line manager was very supportive while also giving me autonomy. I checked in with him every two weeks, and his practical suggestions balanced my creativity. I met with the boys to confirm their commitment to the group and discussed ways to keep them engaged. They suggested ideas like weekly hot chocolate meetups and inspirational trips, and they decided the group's name, 'Future Stars'. I knew from my years of working at Caterham High School that the engagement of parents would be pivotal to the success of this project, and this was compounded after hearing Jean Gross speak at the PiXL National Conference.

Recognising that many parents and carers work, I invited them and the students to an early breakfast meeting at the school, offering pastries, fruit and hot drinks. The meeting was well attended, with 8 out of 12 families participating. I created a parent pack with resources from the PiXL website, including revision timetables, "don't break the chain" charts, and a guide for supporting children through KS4.

For parents who were harder to reach, I made personal phone calls to introduce myself and the project. Personal contact and group emails kept parents updated throughout the project and proved successful.

I set up a 'Future Stars' board in my office and the staff room, featuring pictures of the boys and their career aspirations. Additionally, I sent out weekly online reminders in the bulletin with prompt questions for staff to ask the boys, such as, "What qualities do you have that will best help you achieve your goals?" A laminated photo of the boys was made for each department to pin up. These boys can often be overlooked in schools because they don't have significant behaviour or learning issues. The project aimed to keep them visible to staff.

We hosted a career fair at the school, and I accompanied the boys to ensure they maximised the experience. I also contacted their parents to offer support in arranging their upcoming work experience. At Christmas, I gave each boy a book from a secondhand bookshop related to their career aspirations. I also gave them a selection box of sweet treats to share with their families at home, which was a quick way to everyone's heart!

## MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

I visited each boy in their English and maths classes, setting them individual targets and speaking to their teachers to gain a better insight into how to support them. From this I organised 12 Year 12 academic mentors for the boys to support them in their core subjects.

Several boys showed a keen interest in game design, technology, and science. To foster their enthusiasm, I arranged a trip to an escape room. Additionally, I coordinated a session with the room's creator, who enlightened the boys about the collaborative effort involved in designing a single room, thereby introducing them to potential career paths they might not have considered before.

## "Building relationships with parents has formed a strong link between the school and home, fostering open conversations about parental expectations and mutual understanding of the future envisioned for the boys and how to get there."

# IMPACT

Although data hasn't shown significant results yet, the boys' engagement and awareness of their goals have improved. Student voice showed that:

- **95% of the group felt more motivated at school.**
- **100% were more aware of the pathways open to them and the grades they need to get there.**
- **95% of the group said their confidence had grown in maths and English.**
- **100% said that being part of this group had helped them to understand and work towards their educational goals.**

The project has been impactful, and the school asked me to take on a new group next year as well as continuing to work with my current group. The most successful aspects of the project include the academic and personal mentoring provided by the Year 12 students. Building relationships with parents has formed a strong link between the school and home, fostering open conversations about parental expectations and mutual understanding of the future envisioned for the boys and how to get there. One successful approach was maintaining a small, focused group. This allowed me to handle most tasks independently, reducing the need to heavily rely on other staff members. As a result, when assistance was required, staff were readily available and prepared to help.

# NEXT STEPS

I will be implementing the programme again next year and I hope to have it up and running by the end of the summer term so that we hit the ground running in September. The project works with smaller groups as you can really focus on the individual student and parent needs. However, with more staff on board it would be entirely possible to scale up the project. I would not hesitate to recommend others to undertake a project like this. It has been immensely gratifying to witness the students' growth and empowerment. I feel privileged to have guided these young men in their journey to adulthood. The support from my mentors at PiXL has been invaluable, and despite over 20 years of teaching experience, I learnt so much from this experience.

### SLT COMMENT:

"Whilst it is too early to measure outcomes, we have seen a huge change in the confidence levels of our boys through regular meetings as evidenced in report effort scores and their overall conduct. Parental engagement and support has also been strong thereby increasing the importance of the project for our boys."

### PARENT COMMENTS:

"We are all very busy and constantly working. It's important to step back and think about what we are doing. You helped our son to do this. I have certainly noticed a difference in the way he approaches and thinks about his work."

"Parenting is very stressful and listening to you, it's reassuring to know that I'm not alone."

"It helped us to understand more about his strengths and identify his areas of improvement. I feel as though our son has received support from you that has been instrumental to his growth this year – and for that, I am grateful for your work."

**Donna Glaser**
**MAKING CHANGE LEADER KS3–KS4**
CATERHAM HIGH SCHOOL

Gross, J. (2021) **Reaching the Unseen Children: Practical Strategies for Closing Stubborn Attainment Gaps in Disadvantaged Groups**. London: Routledge. *https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003176442*

Johnson, R. (2024) **PiXL Pearls.** Spotify [podcast]. Available from: *https://open.spotify.com/show/45Nqrj9VkMfRyLJkgf3iJW?si=3256a08d6091433f* [Accessed 15 November 2024].

**ADAPTING THESE IDEAS**

- Donna included boys who had been underachieving for reasons relating to low aspirations in this bespoke mentoring programme for the school. If you are looking for ways to support pupils with similar needs in your setting, also check out PiXL Futures Primary and Secondary strategies and resources including bulletins, lessons and personalised learning checklists (PLCs).

- Building relationships with key groups of parents was crucial to the success of this project. In addition to the successful strategies that Donna has provided, research published by National College/GOV.UK may also be helpful when developing a toolkit of practical strategies and creative ideas for developing greater parental engagement in your context.

- Donna was keen to focus on boys who are underachieving but can be overlooked when it comes to interventions, as their behaviour does not make them especially visible to staff. Who are the students in your school who fly under the radar, and may benefit from having a light shined on them? This project shows how much impact one member of staff, well supported by colleagues and line management, can have on a small group of students. Who would be well-placed in your setting to work with a cohort like this?

# CATERHAM HIGH SCHOOL

**990**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND | HPA |
|--------|----------------|-------------|------|-----|------|-----|
| London | | Years 7–13 | 53% | 36% | 19% | 15% |

**BELFAST BOYS' MODEL SCHOOL**      TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS3, KS4 & KS5

# Unlocking the potential: how peer support is transforming boys' lives

## RATIONALE & CONTEXT

Belfast Boys' Model School is a large secondary school located in North Belfast. There are 1125 pupils on the role, 53% of pupils are entitled to FSM and 35.2% are on the SEN register. 139 pupils are stage 3SpEP which is 12.35%. It is vital as teachers that we work to recognise these challenges and provide support and preventative strategies to help pupils overcome the barriers they may face.

### AIMS
Our project would weave together different strategies including three peer mentoring strands, a numeracy intervention and a renewed approach to revision, but the core aims were:

- **To increase engagement with revision across the whole school to improve attainment;**
- **To empower pupils to become independent learners.**

# REVISION REIMAGINED

## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Revision has always been a challenge for our pupils, as they can be uncertain about what strategies to use that are meaningful and worthwhile. Alongside the SLT teacher responsible for pedagogy, departments began to implement revision and retrieval weeks into their long-term planning. They also worked to develop a range of resources that could be used across the school. In August 2023, we established a Strategic Impact Team who were tasked with developing workshops to deliver effective revision strategies to KS4 and KS5 year groups.

## OBJECTIVES

- **Encourage more pupils to engage in meaningful revision.**
- **Deliver effective revision strategies to key year groups.**
- **Share importance of revision with parents.**

## WHAT WE DID

The first strand was to improve revision and included the Pupil Senior Leadership Team delivering assemblies to discuss successful revision strategies that are proven to benefit pupils. By sharing effective techniques and providing relevant examples, pupils were inspired to improve their study habits to help enhance their academic performance.

The second strand was to conduct intensive revision workshops tailored to our pupils' needs. The Strategic Impact Team's development of a revision carousel, delivered by key staff, ensured that meaningful strategies were discussed prior to the completion of school exams. This approach benefited pupils by providing a structured and focused way to review key materials. The positive feedback received highlighted the effectiveness of this targeted revision method in helping pupils prepare effectively for their exams.

During the third strand, we launched a revision challenge where pupils were motivated to participate with monetary rewards. Key year groups were engaged through assemblies, while subject teachers monitored progress centrally. They were also provided with an individualised revision pack with all necessary resources. This initiative aimed to make a difference in 50 days by encouraging active pupil involvement and providing incentives for academic achievement and progress in a positive and fun way.

In addition to these strategies, a variety of revision resources were made available for Sixth Form pupils to access during private study sessions, and completion of these was closely monitored by the Head of Year. This included online platforms, textbooks, practice exams, blank revision templates and study guides. By utilising these resources, pupils could tailor their revision to their individual needs. The Head of Year's oversight ensured that pupils were using these resources effectively and making progress in their studies. Producing evidence of their revision efforts helped pupils track their progress and identify areas for improvement. Letters were sent home to parents with key information and reward vouchers given to pupils who made the most progress. This structured approach to revision not only enhanced academic performance but also instilled essential study skills that will benefit pupils beyond their time in Sixth Form at Belfast Boys' Model School.

## IMPACT

- **Engagement with Revision Challenge – Year 11: 82/177 pupils (46%), Year 12:118/196 pupils (60%), Year 13: 62/99 pupils (63%), Year 14: 49/68 pupils (72%). Total: 311/540 pupils (58% 11-14 pupils took part)[1]**
- **90% of pupils understand the importance of beginning revision sooner rather than later.**
- **83% of pupils had an environment they could study in that they felt was conducive to learning.**
- **62% of pupils in Y14 improved class test results by at least one grade, in at least one subject, between the school exams in February and final mocks in April.**

Overall, it has been wonderful to see pupils' attitudes towards revision improving, hopefully leading to a boost in their aspirations and a sense of self-worth. Witnessing the growth in confidence among pupils is inspiring. We hope this positive development will not only enhance their academic performance, but will also nurture important life skills and self-belief.

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[1]  In Northern Ireland, year groups are numbered differently to England and Wales, with Sixth Form concluding with Year 14. Year 11 in NI is Year 10 in England and Wales, Year 12 is Year 11 and so on.

# ACADEMIC PEER MENTORING INITIATIVE

## OBJECTIVES

- **Enhance academic performance of GCSE 'borderline' pupils.**
- **Foster independent learning and revision skills in pupils.**
- **Develop leadership skills in Senior pupils for future endeavours.**

## MENTOR RECRUITMENT

The Senior pupils underwent a selection process to become Academic Peer Mentors, initially working with Year 12 pupils. They were required to meet specific criteria, including a minimum of grade 'B' in their chosen subject, and attended an information session outlining expectations and how they could apply. Mentors participated in group interviews and those selected underwent training provided by an external agency with school affiliations. The number of mentees that could be selected for the programme was limited to the number of suitable Sixth Form mentors that were chosen.

**Mentor training from the external organisation included:**

- safeguarding
- mentoring strategies
- building trust.

**Mentor training provided internally included:**

- planning an effective mentor session
- revision strategies and retrieval practice.

## IDENTIFYING THE MENTEES

The mentees were identified by subject teachers and Curriculum Leaders based on academic performance data and we had a focus on C/D 'borderline' pupils. Subjects covered in the mentoring sessions included History, Geography, Politics, Mathematics, Science, and Physical Education. This selection of subjects was determined by those studied by the mentors. The mentees were invited to an information session to inform them about the programme. Initially, there was some scepticism about the programme, with some pupils not wanting to engage or participate. However, once the benefits were clearly explained, they were willing to 'give it a go'.

An introductory session with breakfast and a table quiz was held in December to facilitate rapport-building among mentors and mentees, which was very positive and the pupils engaged well. The sessions were due to start in January. Unfortunately, due to scheduling conflicts with revision carousels and ongoing exam preparations, the programme was redirected to Year 11 pupils. Before the sessions began, mentors received guidance from subject teachers and Curriculum Leaders on topics like retrieval practice, past paper questions, and essay writing. Despite some challenges with attendance, the mentoring sessions were initiated. 16 mentees were identified overall to work with 9 mentors. The pupils attended one 40-minute session per week with their mentor. Attendance was variable as there were absences and pupils forgot to attend some of the sessions. Additionally, exams during May and June further impacted attendance. We found that pupils who had originally been very negative about being chosen and about their subject became much more engaged with the mentor and the subject content as the sessions progressed. Particularly in geography, they became more enthusiastic about their case studies and strategies that could help with retrieval practice, which was fantastic to see.

Despite initial hesitations, the pupils embraced the programme, and the outcomes were very positive. The pupils expressed their enthusiasm for the sessions and eagerly anticipated their next meetings with their mentors. The mentors themselves were often seen talking in the corridors between sessions, demonstrating the connections they had forged during their time together. It was fantastic to see the genuine impact and positive transformation that occurred as a result of this programme.

**POSITIVE FEEDBACK WAS RECEIVED FROM PARTICIPANTS:**

100% of participating pupils reported increased subject knowledge.

78% found the experience beneficial and noted improvements in confidence and work ethic.

100% expressed enjoyment of the mentoring programme.

56% expressed interest in continuing the programme into Year 12.

5 pupils showed improvement in predicted grades in Politics, Geography, PE and English Literature.

7 pupils maintained their predicted grades.

4 pupils experienced a decline in predicted grades.

**MENTOR FEEDBACK**

100% enjoyed the mentoring experience.

100% noted development in communication and listening skills.

87% reported an increase in confidence through the programme.

100% found the experience valuable and would recommend participation to other sixth form pupils.

"To me, the best part of mentoring is the possibility that I made a difference to the educational attainment of those I mentored."
Y13 MENTOR

"I found that mentoring was a great experience to learn and develop different skills and qualities to help not only others but also myself." Y13 MENTOR

"A Learning Mentor can impact your life." Y12 MENTEE

# PEER READING PROGRAMME - READING MENTORS

### OBJECTIVES

- **To improve pupils' reading comprehension skills.**
- **To improve pupils' confidence.**

In order to address the ongoing challenges with literacy standards across Key Stage 3, a programme was implemented to introduce Reading Mentors, with the aim of enhancing reading comprehension. Pupils were identified through PTE testing. The pupils who had lower reading comprehension stanines were identified. Pupils from Year 14 were invited to volunteer as Reading Mentors to assist younger pupils with their reading comprehension skills. 5 pupils in total volunteered to become a Reading Mentor. Unfortunately, one pupil decided not to take part shortly after the first session. The mentors received training sessions focused on reading comprehension and fluency strategies, both internally and externally through a four-week training programme.

Mentors and mentees met on a weekly basis for 30 minutes to read a book selected by the mentee. It was an important part of the process to allow the mentees to choose the book they read that week. Pupils chose from a range of fiction and non-fiction books, with Guinness World Records 2023 being a popular choice! Both parties maintained records of their sessions in order to track progress and improvements. The mentees diligently completed a Reading Record Book on a weekly basis, documenting the title of the book, the number of pages read, and any new vocabulary acquired. In addition, mentors maintained written documentation on the pupils' participation in comprehension strategies and fluency with the selected texts.

### IMPACT

In the same manner, it was noted that pupils initially showed resistance and hesitation in fully participating with their mentors in the learning programme. However, the extended duration of the reading programme over the academic year proved to be highly beneficial for the pupils, resulting in a significant impact. A Year 9 pupil conveyed their appreciation by stating, **"My mentor is doing a great job and has boosted my confidence a lot."** The pupils eagerly anticipated their weekly reading sessions with the Year 14 mentors and showed increased engagement as the programme progressed.

All pupils increased their Standard Age Score (SAS) by a minimum of 2 points. Additionally, two pupils saw significant gains of 15 and 19 points. Furthermore, all pupils improved their reading comprehension stanines by at least 1 stanine, with 3 pupils making significant progress of 3 stanines.

### READING MENTEE PUPIL VOICE:

## 100% believe their reading ability has improved.
## 100% believe they have more confidence reading aloud.
## 67% always enjoy reading with their mentor every week.

### READING MENTOR PUPIL VOICE:

## 100% enjoyed the Reading Mentor experience and would encourage other sixth formers to take part.

# BIG BROTHER PROGRAMME

### OBJECTIVES

- **To enhance academic performance at Key Stage Three.**

### SELECTION PROCESS

To be selected as a Senior Prefect and take on the role of 'Big Brother', Year 13 pupils had to go through an intense and rigorous selection process at the end of the academic year. This process involved pupils having to complete and submit an application form, partake in group presentations and complete an interview in front of a panel of staff. If successful at each stage, they were awarded this position at the beginning of Year 14.

## PROGRAMME

To improve attainment levels at Key Stage Three, Year 14 pupils who had achieved the position of Senior Prefect were given the role of a 'Big Brother'. This role would entail them being allocated to a form class from Years 8 to 10 which they would visit once a week. This initially focused on the 'Big Brother' being a Pastoral Peer Mentor. The focus was to foster relationships which was achieved by leading the weekly pupil quiz. Alongside this, the Year 14 pupil could mentor the younger pupil with any appropriate pastoral issue they were facing. In our context, many of our boys do not embrace the idea of confiding and being vulnerable in front of a member of staff. Therefore, having this 'Big Brother' act as a mentor became the bridge between pupils and staff.

The rationale behind the establishment of a Pastoral Mentor was that if relationships build and flourish, so does the gaining of trust and respect between both the class and the Year 14 pupil. This in turn allowed the purpose of the programme to shift to focus on revision. The 'Big Brothers' were tasked with having weekly learning conversations with their junior form classes regarding the topic of revision. This made revision more relatable and showed the synergy between revising and achieving remarkable results within the school, as it was coming from the perspective of an older pupil. The Senior Prefects were talking from current experience of revising for their A-Levels and brought examples of their revision to their Key Stage Three form class. They also helped the younger pupils revise for their upcoming tests.

## IMPACT

The programme was welcomed by all groups involved – staff, Senior Prefects and Key Stage 3 pupils. At the beginning, the Senior Prefects were nervous and sceptical about this programme, as there was a level of vulnerability they had to show to the younger pupils and overcome their own personal barriers for a rapport to be built up to allow success. Despite this, each 'Big Brother' never lacked enthusiasm and eagerness when interacting with the younger pupils, both inside and outside of the classroom. This programme gave the 'Big Brothers' many opportunities to develop future-proof skills and to inspire the younger pupils to reach the levels of attainment and success that they have reached. One 'Big Brother' said, **"Leadership is to inspire younger pupils to do better"**. One Year 8 pupil liked how "they look after and help their little brothers" and one Year 10 could not fault the programme, saying **"My Big Brother is perfect"**.

Overall, there was relatively positive feedback from across Years 8 to 10 and extremely positive feedback from the 'Big Brothers'. We are hoping this is just the beginning of this programme and that it grows in future years with the 'Big Brothers' having more scope of interacting and acting as both an academic and pastoral mentor for our younger pupils.

## BIG BROTHER FEEDBACK

100% enjoyed the experience of being a 'Big Brother'.

100% further developed their communication skills.

50% further developed their listening, leadership and time management skills.

100% reported improved confidence.

## KEY STAGE THREE PUPIL FEEDBACK

78% of pupils enjoyed having a Senior Prefect in their class this year as a 'Big Brother'.

51% of pupils reported that if they had a problem in school, they would feel comfortable speaking to their 'Big Brother'.

63% of pupils think having a 'Big Brother' in their form class this year has had a positive impact.

57% of pupils state that it has been beneficial for their 'Big Brother' to talk about revision strategies.

# NUMERACY INTERVENTION

### OBJECTIVES

- **To improve pupils' numeracy skills.**
- **To improve pupils' confidence.**

To combat the challenges in numeracy within Key Stage 3, the initiative of 'Numeracy Mentors' was established. Before this intervention began, there was an appeal to pupils in Years 13 and 14 to take on this role, whereby they would meet with a small group of pupils from Years 8 to 10 and work on their numeracy skills.

The mentors received external mentor training which included safeguarding, mentoring strategies and building trust. As well as this, internal training was provided. Throughout the intervention, the mentor checked in regularly and was in constant communication with the Numeracy Coordinator on the progress of the pupils in their group.

Mentees were identified and targeted if they had a stanine of 1 or 2. This intervention would happen in groups throughout the year – Year 10 intervention would happen from September to December, Year 9 intervention would happen from January to April, and Year 8 intervention from April to June. Mentors and mentees met on a weekly basis for 40 minutes to complete work which varied from worksheets and work on whiteboards to IXL which targeted the areas of weakness in the assigned mentees. After the intervention, the mentee completed a test to see if there were any improvements.

### IMPACT

Due to the nature of the intervention, the mentees were already lacking in confidence and were sceptical of receiving help from an older pupil which resulted in them not being fully receptive in the initial sessions of the intervention. However, a bond was quickly formed between the mentor and mentee, leading to each session going from strength to strength. It was rewarding not only to see the meaningful relationships being built between older and younger pupils, but also to see the benefits of progress from many mentees regarding their attainment levels.

Overall, this intervention had mixed results, with the majority improving on their previous results. 61% improved upon their previous results, 21% remained the same and 18% declined in their result. Some improvements worth noting are two boys whose score increased by 90 and 70 points – an improvement which happened over 10 weeks of intervention but, in theory, should take over 6 months to happen.

### MENTOR FEEDBACK

**100% enjoyed the mentor experience.**
**100% stated that their confidence has improved.**
**100% reported improvements in their communication skills.**

## GOING FORWARD

To ensure we maintain momentum, we have started to plan for 2024/25 by developing comprehensive revision timelines to be implemented across the school. Building on these strategies will continue to build pupils' confidence and outcomes, ensuring we can build on pupil progress. Due to the positive outcomes observed, we are committed to continuing the mentoring programme initiated in the 2023-2024 academic year. Our plan is to sustain the existing mentor-mentee relationships as they progress into their final year of school, with the goal of further enhancing their skills, confidence and academic achievements. We will soon initiate a new recruitment process for a fresh group of Year 11 mentees and Year 13 mentors. This process will also apply to our Reading Mentors, as we aim to increase the number of pupils volunteering for this role. Additionally, we aspire to see these individuals taking on a more active role within the school by leading reading assemblies, engaging in reading sessions within form classes, and promoting a culture of reading across different subjects and areas of the school.

It is hoped that the 'Big Brothers' can be utilised more in their roles due to the success of the programme this year so far. We want to provide many more opportunities for the 'Big Brother' and their Key Stage 3 form class to interact more to build stronger relationships and provide more guidance when it comes to revision. Due to the success of the first year of numeracy intervention being led by Senior pupils, we hope that the uptake of mentors will be more next year and therefore support can be given to more mentees.

**Lisa Higgins**
**LITERACY CO-ORDINATOR**
BELFAST BOYS' MODEL SCHOOL

**Emma McGibbon**
**HEAD OF SENIOR SCHOOL**
BELFAST BOYS' MODEL SCHOOL

**Jordan Shearer**
**PREFECT & PUPIL VOICE CO-ORDINATOR**
BELFAST BOYS' MODEL SCHOOL

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Belfast Boys' Model School appointed senior pupils to become Academic Peer Mentors - 78% of younger pupils reported that they enjoyed having a more senior mentor as their 'Big Brother'. When implementing peer mentoring or tutoring approaches in your setting, how would you create high quality, purposeful interactions between pupils? How might student mentors and mentees be paired, and what specific guidance would be mentors need to be successful in their role?

- The team at Belfast Boys' Model School have undertaken a number of similar and overlapping strategies based on peer mentoring. If you were to pick just one group of students who would benefit from a mentoring relationship, who would you pick and in what curriculum areas? Remember that, according to colleagues at Belfast Boys', the mentors gained as much from the relationship as the mentees.

- A targeted strategy was also implemented to develop pupils' revision skills. If there are priorities to develop revision skills for pupils in your school, in addition to the strategies provided above, EEF's guide for 'Supporting revision and the Seven Step Model' provides further ideas and guidance that may be helpful in your setting.

## BELFAST BOYS' MODEL SCHOOL

**1125**

| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Belfast | | Years 7–13 | 100% | 53% | 35% |

# TIME TO THINK: ARTICLES TO SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE THINKING

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

# Getting upstream on underachievement: meeting emotional needs in balance

## MEET CALLUM

Since the advent of puberty, the free-range opportunities afforded him by online learning throughout the Covid-19 lockdowns, and the unearned gift of an Xbox, ("Mum bought it for me to help me 'cos I'm anxious now'"), 'Callum' has morphed to become a pale, almost nocturnal 'half man, half mattress', and is now rarely in school. On a good day, Callum saunters in at around break time, flanked by his devoted parents who endeavour to pave his blame-free passage with a plethora of excuses that could be accurately summed up in two words: flaccid parenting. Callum's parents are not 'bad' parents; Callum is not a demon child. Callum is just a boy; he is what is euphemistically termed, a 'typical teenager'.

Callum's parents look at each other defeated. Today was going to be the day they made Callum get up in time for school. Today was going to be the first day of the 'fresh start', carefully and caringly crafted by an army of school staff dedicated to the Callums of this world. But instead, Callum has brazenly defied everyone…again! "Well at least he's here!" his father barks with feigned triumph.

In my work as an independent Behaviour and Emotional Health Consultant, I meet 'Callums' and their female counterparts every day.

Callum behaves the way he does because it works for him and it works for him because his bewildered, exhausted parents have no idea how he became so disaffected, angry and powerful, or how to begin to take the power back. It works for Callum because over-stretched school staff don't know how to support the parents in a way that will secure some steel in them. It works for Callum because, despite a merry-go-round of strategies, staff have been unable to hit on a magic formula (that doesn't entail Callum being in the classroom!), that will entice him back into the educational fold. Can that utopian goal be achieved? Well, at this stage, it will be tricky for sure.

# GETTING UPSTREAM

In 2005 I was invited by the British Council to speak at a conference in Paris dedicated to the topic of closing the gender achievement gap. I proposed that a good deal of what ultimately deteriorates to become underachievement, disaffection, school-based anxiety, poor behaviour etc., can be ameliorated far further 'upstream'. I suggested that instead of treating boys as though they are a different species, we should pay less heed to socially constructed models designed to identify what it is to be male and instead, we should focus on what it is to be human. I proposed that all children would thrive if educators at the rock-face paid closer heed to the emotional climate of their classrooms so that within them, innate emotional needs are met, and children can thrive, learn and achieve. Nineteen years later, educators are recycling the same debates that are yet to secure the answers they seek: my views have not changed.

A full and academic treatment of this subject is significantly beyond the scope of this article. (I am aware that I have already brushed past weighty topics such as masculinity as a social construct!) My aim is simply to highlight the fact that high emotional arousal underpins most poor behaviour/absenteeism, and to provoke interest in exploring the notion that classrooms should be hot houses of low arousal, emotional equilibrium before they can truly become hot houses of high-performance learning.

Innate human needs are not unique to children. We cannot meet the emotional needs of others adequately if we are struggling in our own lives; there is no spare emotional capacity. Sometimes things unravel in classrooms, not because the children are causing difficulties but because the adult/s in the room lack the spare emotional capacity to respond adaptively and to meet the demands of the day at that time.

**The Human Givens Institute and other mental health organisations state that our innate emotional needs are as follows:**

- **Security** – a safe territory and an environment which allows us to develop
- **Attention** – to give and receive attention in balance
- **Autonomy and control** – volition to make responsible choices
- **Being emotionally connected to others** – to feel that we belong both within our close relationships and as part of a wider community
- **Friendship/intimacy** – to know that at least one person accepts us totally for who we are, 'warts 'n all!'
- **Privacy** – the opportunity to reflect and consolidate experience
- **Sense of status** – to feel valued for the contributions we make in our lives, be they large or small!
- **Stretch** – a sense of competence and achievement are essential (from which comes self-esteem)
- **Meaning and purpose** – which come from being stretched in what we do and think

When I provide training to schools (and indeed equally, when I provide training to GPs) there is a general understanding that, 'of course' those are our needs and, 'of course' we should strive to get those needs met. However, when I drill folk down, there exists for many a rhetoric provision gap and there are few or no concrete strategies that translate apparent understanding to action. In short, it's no good just sitting in meetings talking about it!

## IN WHAT WAYS DOES EMOTION IMPACT LEARNING?

When innate needs are not met in balance, emotional arousal in the brain quickly becomes elevated. Most are familiar with the knowledge that the amygdala within the emotion centre (often referred to as the reptilian part of the brain) drives a freeze/fight/flight decision. It is the security guard of the brain. When we register high risk, arousal in the brain is elevated suddenly and we can quickly tip into emotional hijack. Systems that require high energy levels to function are shut down, including the neo-cortex; we quickly become emotional idiots!

The picture is slightly different at times of chronic pressure and stress. The higher order operations are available but can be significantly impaired, we find ourselves unable to plan, think, organise, memorise, problem solve etc. as well as we might otherwise. **We also find it difficult to learn.** It is as if the brain space taken up by the internal noise (stress) is no longer available for perception/thinking/learning tasks. The more brain we divert to trying to filter out worries, anxiety, internal noise etc., the less 'brain stuff' there is available for perception and subsequent action; performance is seriously impaired.

Classrooms around the country have students within them who are 'overspending' on emotional angst. They are present in body, but absent in focus; they are what I call 'psychologically truant'.

Utopia would be moulding classroom environments so that all innate needs are always met, providing an antidote to external stressors. But of course, there exists this thing called reality! In well over two decades supporting schools and intently listening to what children tell me, it has become apparent that failure to meet some needs has a greater impact than failing to meet others; it is these needs that I highlight here.

## CONNECTIVITY

Social isolation is highly corrosive. It is important that teachers identify isolated youngsters and refer them to designated pastoral staff for bespoke support. Students are particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated post-exclusion or after absence through illness. Few students have the skills and emotional resilience to re-integrate themselves. Investment in making the child feel welcomed back, not just in tutor time but in each lesson, pays dividends. Support to catch up on missed learning reconnects the child to staff and to education. Long-term absentees were once short-term absentees who were allowed to become disconnected from the learning community of their school. A sense of alienation also underpins a great deal of poor behaviour in schools.

## STATUS

It is essential that all children feel valued in the classroom for any positive contribution they make. (A sense of low status drives a good deal of status grabbing poor behaviour!). Years of government-imposed narrow thinking has driven some schools to over-focus on learning outcomes at the expense of the learning journey. In addition, some children's strengths lie outside the school experience. In schools where it is part of the culture for staff to take an interest in students more holistically, students have reported to me that not only do they feel more valued by staff and peers, but they also feel that they have a place; they belong. Both behaviour and attendance are better in these circumstances.

## SECURITY

Feeling safe in school is every child's right. Physical safety is a given. Emotional safety is not as straightforward or easy to achieve, however. Students need to feel safe to make errors, safe to express novel thoughts and safe to be creative. Children also need to be safe from ridicule. Banter is only banter if everyone is enjoying it. Sometimes unkindness goes unchecked in some schools. Respect and kindness are entitlements and should be modelled and insisted upon by all adults. To feel safe, young people also need rational, clear, non-negotiable boundaries. Paradoxically, in their determination to secure this ideal, some schools have embraced an inflexibility and almost illogical austerity that lacks kindness and nurture and corrodes student/teacher relationships. At both primary and secondary levels, school refusal continues to increase and certainly at secondary level, many students I work with are citing what feels to them like a toxic emotional environment as the reason for their school-based anxiety/school refusal.

I argue that meeting innate emotional needs in the classroom impacts on learning, attendance and behaviour. Perhaps addressing this has become a greater imperative post-Covid-19. I invite schools to tend their own and others' emotional gardens with great care and to regularly water their seedlings. To do so yields a good harvest!

**Di Lobbett**
**BEHAVIOUR AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH CONSULTANT, SPEAKER AND TRAINER**

*"Classrooms around the country have students within them who are 'overspending' on emotional angst. They are present in body, but absent in focus; they are what I call 'psychologically truant'."*

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- It is worth noting that the implementation of strategies to meet the emotional needs highlighted within the article will likely differ between primary and secondary setting. Irrespective of setting, attention could usefully be given to becoming accustomed to individual students' presentations in class. Are they quieter than usual? Are they exhibiting attention seeking behaviours perhaps?

- Of equal importance are strategies for ensuring that the needs of staff are met, so that they have the spare emotional capacity to meet the needs of students. What processes do you have in place to quality assure the ways in which students' emotional needs are met whilst in your care?

- This article highlights the impact that getting basic needs met can have on attendance, behaviour and performance. What strategies might you employ or adapt to support a student to reintegrate after an absence for whatever reason? Do you have clearly understood systems that enable staff to identify and support students who are finding it difficult to make and maintain friendships?

# The importance of developing self-efficacy in our boys

Although the gap between boys and girls has narrowed slightly in this year's GCSE results, the gap still exists, and achieving parity in attainment remains a key focus for schools this year. The Education Committee has launched a new inquiry into why boys consistently underperform compared with girls in educational attainment across all age groups and nearly all ethnicities. This is telling as it means that in spite of our awareness of this gap and our efforts, we are still not having the significant impact that is needed for boys in education. Apart from the attainment gap at primary, GCSE and A Level, the article also cites that boys in 2023 *'were nearly twice as likely as girls to be suspended and more than twice as likely as girls to be permanently excluded'.* It also goes on to say *'men are less likely to progress to higher education – in 2021/22, 54% of women were in higher education by 19, compared to only 40% of men. Men are also more likely to drop out of university courses'.*[1]

There is a plethora of theories about why boys aren't doing as well in education as girls, including lack of male role-models, lower expectations placed on boys, and that the education process itself is not conducive to boys' academic success. Many schools have had success with targeted interventions such as all-male tutor groups, mentoring and team building to create a sense of belonging and to combat disaffection. However, the fact that these interventions need to happen at all is indicative that something is not working in our education system for boys, and perhaps a national approach is needed to address boys' underachievement which starts way before Key Stage 3 or 4.

One important emerging factor in raising attainment is self-efficacy. Thinking for a moment about the qualities of a successful learner, it is easy to come up with a list very quickly, probably including things such as resilience, tenacity, self-belief and the ability to self–motivate. You might also bring to mind those students who can work independently, are willing to take risks, and are up for new challenges. All of these positive learning traits are possessed by people who have what is called high self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to complete a task or achieve a goal, and psychologists argue that our sense of self-efficacy can have a big influence on whether we actually succeed at a task or in exams. Self-efficacy is a term that was first coined by Albert Bandura, a Canadian-American psychologist, and today is something which research shows is an important factor in ensuring attainment: **"Research has shown it to be almost as predictive of achieving good educational qualifications by the age of 26 as cognitive skills."** JEAN GROSS [1]

People with high self-efficacy see challenges as things they can overcome, and they develop an interest in the activities they participate in. They are persistent and resilient in overcoming difficulties and recover quickly from setbacks.

*"People's beliefs about their abilities have a profound effect on those abilities. Ability is not a fixed property; there is a huge variability in how you perform. People who have a sense of self-efficacy bounce back from failure; they approach things in terms of how to handle them rather than worrying about what can go wrong."* ALBERT BANDURA [2]

However, people with **low self-efficacy** are the exact opposite. They **avoid challenging tasks** as they believe that these are beyond their capabilities. They **lose confidence quickly** if they have setbacks, and not getting things right quickly further **cements their belief that they won't succeed**. Unfortunately we all know, too well, the students in our classes who fit the latter description and many of them are boys. No matter how hard we try to encourage them, their defeatist attitudes can be so deeply entrenched it is almost impossible for us to convince them that they can do it. What is really concerning is that it is our disadvantaged students who are more at risk of having poor self-efficacy, adding to the list of the barriers and inequalities they already have to deal with. Jean Gross, a leading advocate for disadvantaged and special needs children, works hard to highlight the need to develop self-efficacy in our children but especially in our children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In her blog she advises schools to teach students about self-efficacy so that they are aware that it is something that can be developed.

*"Disadvantaged children are more at risk of low self-efficacy than their peers. Often, many see their families powerless in the face of events. Your dad is in a low-skilled job that gives him little autonomy, your mum loses her job, then the gas gets cut off, then you get evicted. Your life is driven by other people's decisions."* JEAN GROSS [3]

## POSSIBLE CAUSES OF LOW SELF-EFFICACY

The causes of poor self-efficacy are not limited to any group of people, but if we look at the list of common causes below, we can see why some of our boys from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly may be at risk of being affected:

- **Children who grow up in a family where adults did not do well at school are likely to view education less favourably and lack the belief in their ability to make progress through their own efforts.**
- **Children who have limited role models of people who have overcome challenges and been successful are less likely to be able to imagine this for themselves.**
- **Children who have experienced negative life events or stress beyond their control (e.g. trauma, divorce, harsh or emotionally distant parenting, criticism, abuse et cetera) can struggle to feel they have control over their lives.**
- **Children who have struggled academically or felt less capable than others, or who have had negative feedback or criticism, may be less likely to 'put themselves out there' for fear of being criticised.**
- **Children's self-perception can be negatively impacted by ableist narratives surrounding their physical, learning or mental disability.**
- **Children who have experienced repeated failures and have had other people have low expectations of them can be more likely to have low expectations of themselves.**
- **Children who set impossibly high standards for themselves can be scared of making mistakes (something that can be exacerbated by social media that encourages young people to compare themselves to unrealistic or impossible ideals).**

Jean Gross also contends that: *"Schools, too, play their part in cementing low self-efficacy. We often inadvertently strip lower-achieving disadvantaged children of their sense of independence and capability through grouping practices and offering too much 'help'. I have never forgotten the boy who told me: 'I'm in the bottom table group and we can't do anything by ourselves, so we always have to have an adult working with us'."* JEAN GROSS [3]

## GOOD NEWS

The good news is that there are practical things we can start doing in our everyday practice to help develop self-efficacy, and this could be part of the solution for raising boys' achievement. Bandura noted four sources which affect the development of self-efficacy beliefs:

**MASTERY EXPERIENCE   VICARIOUS EXPERIENCE   SOCIAL PERSUASION   PHYSIOLOGICAL STATES**

### MASTERY EXPERIENCE

The first source of self-efficacy is through mastery experiences. When students see themselves as successful, this can significantly improve their self-efficacy. When students master a task and overcome challenges through perseverance and effort, they build their self-belief. Most of us start our lessons revisiting prior learning which can be a great way of building self-efficacy as we are giving students tasks or activities that they will have a good chance of success with. Not for the entire lesson though – once they've succeeded, up the challenge!

> *"Performance accomplishment is a key factor for developing self-efficacy. Learners who have repeated experiences of success have higher self-efficacy than those who experience repeated failure. Teachers should give learners some tasks that they can perform (Dörnyei, 2001), hence learners can build successful experiences."*

It is important to point out here that mastery is not about making tasks so easy that students succeed, but we do need to give students the time to learn, embed and practise new knowledge so that when they do effortful tasks, they have a chance of success.

> *"If individuals only experience easy successes, they may develop unrealistic expectations and become easily discouraged by failure. To develop a resilient sense of self-efficacy, individuals need to experience setbacks and overcome obstacles through persistent effort. These challenges can teach individuals that success often requires sustained effort. Once individuals are confident in their abilities to succeed, they can persevere through adversity and quickly recover from setbacks. By persevering through tough times, individuals can emerge even stronger than before."* [4]

Engage all students regularly in tasks that require thinking hard. Reframing obstacles as positive learning opportunities can help to create a culture where challenge is a good thing, and this is particularly powerful for boys. Warn students that tasks will take sustained effort and there may be setbacks. Celebrate when students overcome obstacles. For students with particularly low self-belief, get them to do activities and exercises repeatedly and give them tasks they will succeed at, at the start of a lesson. Allow students frequent attempts and encourage them to redraft work. It can build confidence when they re-do a task they have encountered before or sit a past paper multiple times.

## VICARIOUS EXPERIENCE

Self-efficacy can also be developed through vicarious experience. Vicarious experience is when students see their friends and classmates do tasks successfully. One could argue that this is even more important for boys, especially as they approach the teenage years and become susceptible to negative peer pressure, where doing well in school is 'uncool.' These opportunities help boys to foster positive beliefs about themselves. Seeing their male peers successfully engaging in the following can help boys believe that they can be successful learners too.

- **Question and answer sessions**
- **Show and tell**
- **Pair work activities (role plays, working on tasks together)**
- **Getting students to demonstrate, model, perform activities or present their work**
- **Students teaching their peers and even delivering part of the lesson**
- **Classroom critique – sharing the thought process and metacognitive thinking (How did you work that out? What is the process for? What helped you to memorise?)**
- **Games, especially where some students come out to the front.**

## SOCIAL PERSUASION

Positive feedback and encouragement can really help build self-efficacy in boys. We have always known this, but can we do better? It is so important that we communicate our belief in our male students. We do this by having high expectations of them and through the level of challenge we give them. We can promote independence by giving students less help. Giving too much support can make students over-reliant and reinforce their belief that they can't accomplish things on their own. Giving too much help to boys may also give them a false impression of their ability as research shows that boys over-estimate their ability and therefore put in less effort. Allowing boys to face the struggle is important for developing their resilience and to appreciate the level of effort required when doing tasks independently. When we give male students the responsibility of helping other students, we are again communicating our belief in them, and this helps them to see that they are capable.

Praise is powerful when done right! Mark Roberts, the author of *The Boy Question*, recommends that praising boys should be done privately, and Dweck, who is renowned for her work on *Growth Mindset*, says that we should praise the learning process not the outcome. We should praise boys when they show resilience and effort rather than just praising the outcome as this helps show them that how they approach learning and the tenacity they show is an important factor in success. Draw male students' attention to when they have overcome difficulties through perseverance. Encourage them to explain how they managed to succeed so that they can see that effort yields positive results, but this also helps develop their awareness of how they learn. Creating this kind of culture means we need to normalise error and show boys that not getting it right first time is part of learning. Embrace uncertainty to encourage contributions to demonstrate that getting things right first time doesn't usually happen.

### PHYSIOLOGICAL STATES

**"…physiological and affective states, positive and constructive self-efficacy beliefs can be fostered by ensuring that learners' emotions are considered …(Miyahara 2015)[7], and that efforts are taken to detect and minimise the discomforts and anxieties that have long been recognised as potential barriers to learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986)[8]."[9]**

Changing our lessons to ensure we get the best out of our students depending on their physiological state is so important if we are going to have effective lessons. If an unusual or unexpected situation has caused students to have a heightened state of emotion, we might adapt our lesson to include a 'settler', a task that will be calming, quiet and focused. Equally, if we sense that students are feeling sluggish, bored and unmotivated, we might inject some fun by doing a more active task involving movement or discussion, for example. These tasks are known as 'stirrers'.  Let's also not forget the power of praise or social persuasion to encourage and inspire our students to engage in learning, especially those with low self-efficacy.

### IMAGINAL EXPERIENCES

Psychologist James Maddux suggests a fifth route to self-efficacy through 'imaginal experiences' which is the art of visualising yourself behaving effectively or successfully in a given situation. This reminds me of David Beckham who, used visualisation before a football match and even just before he was about to shot. He visualised himself being successful and then he was. This can easily be incorporated into our lessons by engaging students in metacognitive discussion before they do a task. Ask questions like:

- **What will an excellent answer to this question include?**
- **How are you going to make a really good job of this task?**
- **What prior knowledge do we need to draw on?**
- **What resources might you need?**
- **How might you overcome difficulties?**

## NEXT STEPS

- Review your school/department/classroom practice and how well boys' self-efficacy is developed across the curriculum and through pastoral systems. Identify areas of strength and areas for improvement.
- Consider training some key staff on self-efficacy and then trialling some of the strategies suggested before rolling out a whole-school strategy.
- Give careful thought and planning to how you will monitor the impact of your interventions. What evidence will help you measure success? For example: improved work completion, reward points, improved attitude to learning or using The General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) which was developed by Matthias Jerusalem and Ralf Schwarzer to measure a person's self-efficacy.
- You may wish to get involved in our next Insights projects to formalise your implementation strategy.

**Eve Hedley**
### EDUCATION LEADERSHIP CONSULTANT

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TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

# Embracing the arts

## ARTS IN SCHOOLS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN SHAPING SOCIETY: WE MUST LEARN TO BE CREATIVE

The arts in schools play a multifaceted role in enhancing wellbeing and cultural enrichment – they contribute to health, social cohesion and personal growth. Arts are also one of the most visible and impactful applications of creativity, and creativity is central to producing meaningful and innovative works of art. Understanding their connection enriches our appreciation of both.

In the 21st century, as humanity confronts some of its most formidable challenges, our greatest asset lies in nurturing our unique capacities for imagination, creativity, and innovation. Schools that promote the arts cultivate mindsets and create environments necessary for imagination and creativity to flourish. These enable children to visualise new possibilities and innovate in meaningful ways.

### HANDS ON

The importance of arts education and traditional skills in a computer-driven world cannot be overstated. Children and young adults are spending more and more time experiencing a virtual world as opposed to a three-dimensional real world during key years of their cognitive development. Advances in neuroscience and related fields have also shed light on the broader benefits of a practical curriculum and importance of craft activities as 'a critical mechanism for the cultural transmission of skills'.

Even in a computer-driven world, three-dimensional practical skills are an integral part of many professions, and employers – for example mechanics or jewellery makers – increasingly seek individuals who can demonstrate these abilities.

Whilst creativity and critical thinking skills developed through arts education are highly valued in creative professions, the remnants of practical hands-on craft subjects are in serious decline. Arguably the most compelling argument for the value of craft skills in the digital age is that they are profoundly human activities, offering a meaningful contrast to the highly digitalised world we inhabit.

Encouraging boys from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in the arts has been shown to help in dismantling stereotypes and promote an inclusive environment that supports their academic and personal growth. The misconception that the creativity and self-expression that can be developed through participation in the arts are 'optional extras', or that they detract from proper disciplined learning, is refuted by all available data and research. Compelling examples are to be found in the *Being a Boy* project initiated by Arts University Bournemouth. By engaging in creative processes (e.g. storytelling, music, drama, or visual arts), boys developed increased confidence and critical reflection skills: challenging traditional notions of masculinity and enabling boys to articulate their experiences and emotions in healthier ways.

## THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Our creative industries generate over £120 billion to the UK economy. The sector employs 2.5 million people across the UK. £46 billion worth of goods and services are exported, and 100,000 new jobs are created by our creative industries annually.

The significance of these industries – of which the arts are an important subset – extends far beyond their economic contributions. They deliver the news and media that inform our daily lives and democracy, invent and craft the designs that shape our cities, and produce content and performances that enhance our lives. This sector has consistently demonstrated its vital role as a positive force in society, offering joy, inspiration and opportunity.

Having a degree has for some time been the strongest single predictor of entering creative work. As many as 69% of people in key creative occupations including actors, dancers, artists, and writers have a degree, compared to 26% of the entire workforce. Approximately half of older men, and the vast majority of older women, in creative work are graduates. This trend is even more pronounced among younger male and female professionals and those from working-class backgrounds, where having a degree has become almost essential for entering creative fields.

## OUT OF REACH FOR MANY

Achieving success in the creative industries, whether by working on stage, starring in an award-winning film or as an equally crucial but less visible talent behind the scenes, is an aspiration for many young people. The reality for children in our schools is that access to these careers remains unequal. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds face significant hurdles in entering creative fields. Social mobility within the creative sector has stagnated since the 1970s: between 1953 and 1962, 16.4% of creative professionals came from working-class origins, this figure has dropped to just 7.9% for individuals born four decades later.

White males eligible for free school meals are less likely to go into Higher Education (HE) than any other group when analysed by gender, free school meal eligibility, and ethnicity. A combination of economic, cultural, and educational barriers disproportionately affect this group. If we accept the undoubted fact that being creative and coming from a working-class background are not mutually exclusive, we must wonder where those 'working-class' creative talents go. I suggest that, not only are working-class children excluded from employment in creative industries but, as a direct result of socially constructed opportunities and values, their creativity is stifled and ultimately silenced as they grow and develop. This is a travesty.

Creativity is innate in all of us, it is a universal human trait. The arts play a crucial role in shaping society, reflecting and influencing culture, and it matters greatly who gets to participate in creative careers. It is their stories and ideas that are portrayed through TV shows, films, plays, music, or dance. Through their perspective, the world is reflected back to us, influencing the cultural and social fabric of the nation.

**"In the 21st century, as humanity confronts some of its most formidable challenges, our greatest asset lies in nurturing our unique capacities for imagination, creativity, and innovation."**

## OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

Degrees are central to the creative workforce, as we have already seen. More females than males study creatives arts subjects at Higher Education, more males go into creative jobs after graduation. This has been a consistent trend for many years. Approximately 40% of male creative arts graduates who were in work six months after graduation are employed in the creative industries, compared to approximately 30% of their female counterparts.

The Sutton Trust has examined social mobility within creative Higher Education courses and the educational backgrounds of prominent figures in television, film, and music. Significant class disparities are highlighted in access to creative professions, noting that individuals from upper-middle-class backgrounds and those who were privately educated are disproportionately represented in these fields.

There are low proportions of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds on a range of creative degrees. As a result, younger adults from working-class backgrounds are four times less likely to work in the creative industries compared to their middle-class peers. There are also stark overrepresentations in Higher Education for those from the most affluent backgrounds, and those who were privately educated also disproportionally occupy top roles in the creative sector. Fee-paying or independent schools are hugely overrepresented in the highest profile areas of artistic and cultural success. For young people from less privileged households, the dominance of the better-off in these industries can make them feel exclusive and unattainable. Is it not a misconception that only certain people from more affluent backgrounds are creative?

Perceptions of the arts as feminine and financially unstable potentially creates a double barrier for boys. Societal expectations of men as wage earners may also discourage young men from entering fields viewed as both feminine and economically precarious. Challenging these stereotypes through education, parental guidance, and public discourse is crucial to reshaping attitudes toward the arts. All children and young people have creative capacities – the challenge for schools and educators is to develop them.

## OUT OF PRACTICE

Countless creative teachers in our schools pursue innovative approaches. In many cases, these innovations occur not because of the prevailing educational cultures but in defiance of them.

In February 2013, then-Education Secretary Michael Gove announced a significant policy reversal regarding the English Baccalaureate Certificate (EBC). Initially, the EBC was intended to replace GCSEs in core subjects, aiming to enhance academic rigor. However, Gove acknowledged that this reform was "a bridge too far," leading to its abandonment.[4] Despite this setback, Gove continued to advocate for the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) as a performance measure. This measure was designed to encourage a broad and balanced curriculum, ensuring students engage with essential academic disciplines.

We know well in schools that expressive and creative arts form essential components of a comprehensive and balanced curriculum. They enable children and young people to work independently and collaboratively to explore, develop, interpret, and express their ideas and understandings and create educational pathways that can lead to further study and career opportunities.

The previous government's reforms to the school curriculum and the associated decline of school funding now plays a significant role in the dominance of private schools and upper- middle-class students on arts courses at HE. The Sutton Trust has called for a range of measures that include an 'arts premium' to tackle this inequity at HE.

Whilst there are schools and authorities across the country doing great things, connecting artists and cultural organisations with schools across their regions, arts education in schools is at best patchy. We must work together to reverse this decline. The lack of access to high-quality arts education disproportionately affects certain children and communities, particularly those in economically disadvantaged areas. Families experiencing financial hardships rely heavily on schools to offer the cultural learning opportunities that independent schools and more affluent families can easily provide.

The 2024 DfE consultations and review for the curriculum has provided a rare opportunity for the education sector to contribute both evidence and advice. The flourishing of arts in schools is a dynamic process influenced by policy decisions, cultural values, and educational priorities. Schools have become 'out of practice in the arts', ongoing efforts and new 'pledges' are necessary to ensure that the arts are reinstated as an integral part of the school curriculum.

Perhaps we waste much of what people have to offer because we do not all see the value of it. We must ensure that all children have equitable opportunities to explore, enjoy and benefit from the full range of expressive arts subjects. Ensuring equity for the arts and cultural education, from the earliest years through Higher Education, is crucial to ensuring that every child benefits and learns to be creative, not only a select few.

# "The misconception that the creativity and self-expression that can be developed through arts participation are 'optional extras', or that they detract from proper disciplined learning, is refuted by all available data and research."

## A FINAL THOUGHT

Pathways into the creative industries are less clear than for other sectors. Hiring is often managed via small contractors; work can be project based and involves a large freelance and self-employed workforce. There are needs for education, HE and the creative sector to be better aligned, more strategic and coordinated.

The long-term benefits of a creative education are wide ranging and cross-sectoral. A systems approach is required to bring stakeholders together and develop more bespoke and impactful programmes and opportunities for young people.

### TOP TIPS FOR LEARNING TO BE CREATIVE INCLUDE:

- **Access to a broad range of arts subjects in schools across all key stages: enabling all students to access creative subjects and wider creative enrichment activities**
- **Ensuring that creativity is a pillar of the curriculum**
- **Aligned teaching of creativity with digital and entrepreneurial skills, the skills required by the creative sector and many other industries**
- **Careers advice and early intervention in schools that includes clear signposting of pathways to the creative industries**
- **Flexible and diverse routes into HE, e.g. apprenticeships and part-time study options, to accommodate different circumstances and resonate with working-class identities**
- **Partnerships between schools, local and national practitioners and organisations that support children to participate in arts and cultural activities, particularly in the poorest areas where children may have fewer creative and cultural opportunities**
- **Genuine industry engagement in education and schools, outreach and mentorship programmes aimed at raising aspirations and academic achievement**
- **Guidance and financial support for new entrants to the creative industries during their early career stages; transparent mechanisms for recruitment in the creative industries with schemes that focus on retention and progression.**

**Gary Lobbett**
**PiXL INSIGHTS PROJECT MENTOR**

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AN ARTICLE BY KAREN COLLINS

# Empowering girls in STEM

Whilst the number of STEM A level entries from girls increased by 35% between 2010 and 2022 (Parliament, House of Commons, 2023), diversity and inclusion in STEM subjects remains an issue. For example, the Limit Less Report from the Institute of Physics found that too many young people's opportunities are being limited, and *'too many young people are made to feel that they can't do physics, or they just don't fit in'* (IOP, 2020).

The Government has acknowledged the importance of encouraging young people to pursue a STEM career, to further improve the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disadvantaged pupils in STEM pathways (Parliament, House of Commons, 2023). There should also be a greater representation of men and boys in traditionally female dominated subjects such as health and social care, English, teaching and the arts. So, what is the current picture in terms of representation in subjects across the curriculum and what can we do as teachers to change this?

## A LEVEL CHOICES

In the summer 2024 entries, girls were less likely to choose A levels in mathematics (37% of entries), physics (23%) and computing (17%), whereas boys were less likely to choose biology (37% of entries), English (Language 29%, Literature 21%) and health and social care (9%). If we look at the most popular A level subjects for male and female students we can see some significant differences.

Subjects appearing in only one column are highlighted. The figure in brackets shows the difference from 2021.

| FEMALE STUDENTS | | MALE STUDENTS | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Subject | Rank | Subject | Rank |
| Psychology | 1 (=) | Mathematics | 1 (=) |
| Biology | 2 (=) | Physics | 2 (=) |
| Mathematics | 3 (=) | Economics | 3 (+2) |
| Chemistry | 4 (+1) | Chemistry | 4 (-1) |
| Sociology | 5 (-1) | Biology | 5 (-1) |
| Art & Design | 6 (=) | Business Studies | 6 (=) |
| English Literature | 7 (=) | History | 7 (=) |
| History | 8 (=) | Psychology | 8 (=) |
| Business Studies | 9 (+1) | Geography | 9 (=) |
| Geography | 10 (-1) | Computing | 10 (=) |

STEM subjects are very popular for male students. Although mathematics, biology, psychology and chemistry are also popular with female students, physics does not feature at all. In contrast, the arts are more popular with female students than male. In terms of social sciences, males are more likely to choose economics and females sociology. Although there is a stark difference between the proportion of male and female students in computing, this has improved from 9% of female entries in 2017, to 17% in 2024.

## 'I wouldn't know how to engage my son. It's a big barrier, because if I'm not inspired, I can't inspire him!'

## WHY DO THESE DIFFERENCES OCCUR?

Many of these choices will be influenced by GCSE outcomes, for example girls outperform boys in biology, chemistry and combined science but not in physics. This may contribute to the differences in choices for science A levels, with physics not appearing in the top ten for female students, despite the popularity of biology and chemistry. Similarly, girls outperform boys in English Literature at GCSE, with a gap of 10% at grade 7/A+, which may lead to fewer boys choosing the subject at A level.

Some students will be put off either by misconceptions of what a subject is or be influenced by the perceptions of those around them, including family members and teachers. *'Young people are unlikely to make these decisions without first discussing them with people whose opinions and advice they trust'* (IOP, 2020), with parents and other family members playing a crucial role in promoting a positive, or negative, image of these subjects. The quotes around this article have been taken from the Limit Less campaign (IOP, 2020). They highlight some students' experiences when talking to adults about studying physics and demonstrate the impact that teachers and family members can have on student life choices.

This influence can also come from the community outside their home, as well as the media they are exposed to. An individual with an anti-maths mindset or maths anxiety, for example, can impact children's attitudes towards mathematics, which can lead to a lack of confidence and a self-fulfilling cycle of poor achievement. Some teachers can fall into this category: by talking about their own lack of confidence in maths, they may inadvertently be influencing student attitudes and future choices. An anti-maths mindset is one where an individual not only dislikes maths but feels they are no good at it, actively avoiding engaging with numbers and data (National Numeracy, 2024a). Maths anxiety is when the person has feelings of anxiety, apprehension, tension or stress when confronted by a maths problem (National Numeracy, 2024b).

## 'I was told I was not smart enough for physics and that if I didn't want to be an engineer there was no point.'

**'I was told by my family that I wasn't going to be good at maths, because none of them were, and I should study English or history or take up a trade.'**

## WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE THIS?

- Take care with the use of language about subject areas, particularly English, maths and physics. Try to use positive language about subject areas around children of all ages to ensure any perceptions and anxieties are not passed on. **"Often maths has a lot of negative language around it: 'I hate maths,' 'Maths is my worst subject,' 'Maths is for boys not girls.' But those negative connotations reinforce themselves, and have a ripple effect."** (National Numeracy, 2024a).

- Research shows that girls tend to have a more negative attitude towards maths than boys which can play a critical role in performance, and that this is influenced by gender-biased parents' and teachers' expectations for competence (Gunderson et al., 2012). Engage with parents and carers to identify and discuss any negative attitudes towards subject areas, particularly boys with writing or English, and girls with maths or physics.

- Provide role models and career guidance that emphasises inclusivity in subject areas with a large gender split.

- There are many organisations which can provide support for increasing participation of girls in STEM including:
  - **Girls who code** a 100% virtual organisation that has summer programmes, clubs and challenges to help girls get into computing
    *https://girlswhocode.com/*
  - **Advanced Mathematics Support Programme** has strategies and resources to help encourage girls' participation in advanced mathematics
    *https://amsp.org.uk/teachers/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/encouraging-girls-participation/*
  - **Institute of Physics** Improving the gender balance report reflects on the impact of school interventions designed to improve the gender balance
    *https://www.iop.org/about/publications/improving-gender-balance*

- Consider looking at PiXL's Building Maths Confidence package, which supports teachers (from across the curriculum) in relieving maths anxiety experienced by students.

**Karen Collins**
**PiXL HEAD OF CURRICULUM FOR SCIENCE, ASSESSMENT AND RESEARCH**

**'My A level teacher told me that girls didn't tend to be very good at physics, so I might struggle at uni. He said there was only one girl on his undergraduate course and that she wasn't very good.'**

Gunderson, E., Ramirez, G., Levine, S. and Beilock, S. (2012) **The role of parents and teachers in the development of gender-related math attitudes.** Sex roles. 66, pp.153-166.

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# "My dad told me not to study physics because it wasn't for women and the maths was too hard."
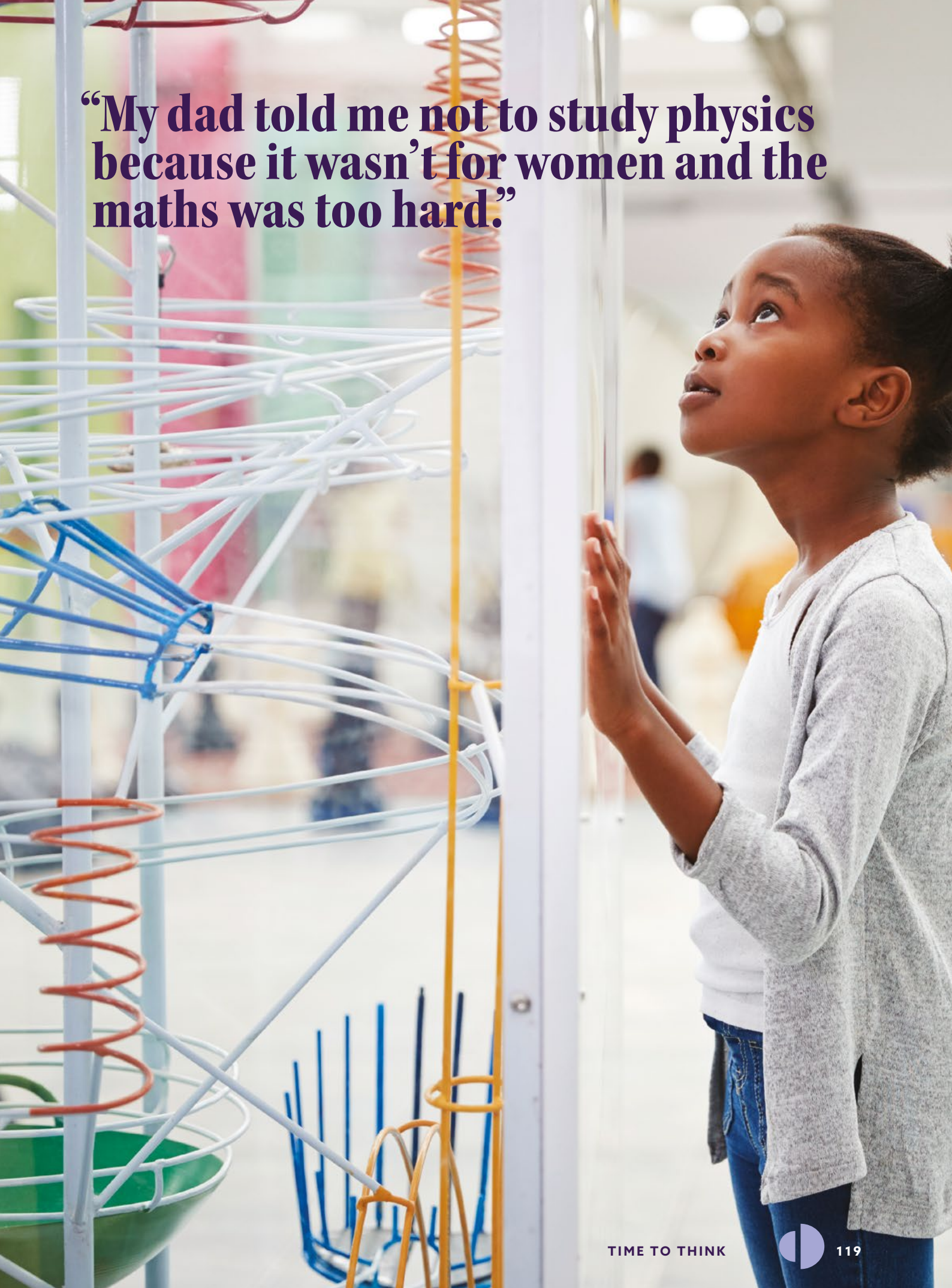
**OPEN ACADEMY**　　　TARGET YEAR GROUP: KEY STAGE 4

# Enhancing girls interest and advancement in mathematics

## INTENT

Our GCSE results in 2023 highlighted a gender attainment gap for maths. Outcomes for girls were a significant half-grade in Average Point Scores (APS) below the outcome for boys. Girls achieved a negative Progress 8 (P8) of -0.21 for maths compared with a positive P8 for males.

At the beginning of the 2023/24 academic year, we implemented a student survey for Year 10 to gain insights into students' perceived confidence levels for maths. The survey findings indicated that more than half of female students lacked confidence or felt insecure in relation to mathematics, compared with two-fifths of girls who lacked confidence in the field of science. These results highlight a quantifiable gender disparity in confidence to be addressed.

Research conducted by the education charity Teach First[1] supports these findings, revealing that 54% of girls lack confidence in maths, compared to 41% of boys. The gender disparity nationally becomes even more evident in the field of science, with 43% of girls lacking confidence compared to only 26% of boys. These statistics were derived from a YouGov poll of 1,000 young people aged 11 to 16.

# "Research conducted by the education charity Teach First [reveals] that 54% of girls lack confidence in maths, compared to 41% of boys."

## TARGETING KEY GROUPS

Proactive measures were implemented in response to these concerning findings. Specific improvement strategies and targets were identified in the curriculum plan for maths, and the project to bridge the gender gap within the faculty was coordinated by our Head of Maths.

### TWO KEY GROUPS OF GIRLS WERE IDENTIFIED

#### GROUP 1

This group included girls with High Prior Attainment at KS2. Girls included in this group were invited to join after-school 'Hubs' and were also given opportunities to study for the Further Maths qualification. These girls were also studying the separate sciences. A top set science group was established whilst other science groups remained mixed ability.

#### GROUP 2

Girls in Group 2 were selected based on FFT estimates that predicted their achievement at Grades 4-5. Many of the girls included in this group had relatively low aspirations and exhibited lower confidence in maths compared to their peers. External bodies including health professionals were engaged to support girls included in Group 2, and targeted careers advice and guidance also proved to be beneficial.

### FEEDBACK

All subject areas follow an agreed approach to providing feedback to students, which includes giving each student a Progress Folder incorporating the 'DNA' process: Date, Next Steps, and Actions. Students are given time to respond to the actions specified in the feedback.

**In addition to reviewing the quality of feedback, a range of strategies were implemented to support girls in maths:**

- Target setting reflected students' prior attainment and potential, coupled with discreet tracking and monitoring for the performance and engagement of girls.
- The work and achievements of successful women in STEM fields were actively promoted to provide positive role models for our girls.
- Teaching strategies were reviewed to develop students' problem-solving and critical thinking skills.
- More personalised feedback strategies were implemented, focused on building self-efficacy, challenging stereotypes and promoting a growth mindset.

### QUALITY ASSURANCE

A robust quality assurance process was implemented to monitor impact and ensure that initiatives did not lose momentum. The process began at the start of the year with a planning day for Middle Leaders. The outcomes in 2023 were analysed by each curriculum area and provisional plans were developed to reflect priorities for the year ahead.

**The quality assurance framework included:**

- Faculty Heads conducted academic reviews twice during the year and were joined by School Governors for these meetings. Weekly focus areas were scheduled to include lesson observations, progress folder reviews, and meetings with students to gather their views and feelings.
- Fortnightly monitoring of students' progress folders by Heads of Faculty. This included details of homework completions and student voice which were documented using templates provided on the school's Management Information System (MIS).
- 'Investigations' were documented by Faculty Leads and presented at Senior Leadership Team meetings. Actions were agreed and then monitored robustly via line management meetings.

We provided Faculty Heads with template documents to complete for a number of these elements, to ensure there was consistency.

## IMPACT

Highly positive outcomes were secured thanks to the collective commitment of faculty teams and staff. Year 11 girls made significant progress during the year: the gender gap narrowed to just -0.09 in 2024 compared to a gap of almost half a grade in 2023. Furthermore, the percentage of students achieving grades 7+ was the same for both girls and boys, i.e. 10% for both groups in 2024 compared with just 2% for girls in 2023. It was also notable that students included in the top set for science also achieved improved outcomes, qualified by a significant increase in the percentage of grades 8/9.

Girls' confidence and motivation for learning in maths improved significantly across the year. By underpinning the implementation plan with robust quality assurance strategies, we were able to ensure that development priorities remained targeted at meeting the needs of key groups and individual students. Continuous feedback provided by members of the school community also proved to be invaluable.

**Ian Fisher**
**ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL**
OPEN ACADEMY

*"Year 11 girls made significant progress during the year: the gender gap narrowed to just -0.09 in 2024 compared to a gap of almost half a grade in 2023."*

[1] **Teach First (2024) Girls' low confidence in science and maths is threat to STEM workforce, says education charity.** Teach First [online]. 8 February. Available from: *https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/girls-low-confidence-science-and-maths-threat-stem-workforce* [Accessed 23 December 2024].

## ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- The team at Open Academy collated student voice with attainment data to identify target groups of girls who were underachieving in maths and science. There is also a message here about putting student voice and experience at the heart of 'intervention'. How is student voice gathered to identify specific needs for students or key groups in your setting? Are there opportunities to involve students more deeply in quality assurance processes?

- Ian has also described how all subject areas follow an agreed approach to providing feedback to students. Could the quality or consistency of feedback be more impactful in your setting? For further ideas and recommendations, consult the EEF guidance on Teacher Feedback to Improve Pupil Learning.

- We recognise that maths anxiety can be a contributing factor to students of any gender not engaging or progressing in mathematics. PiXL's Maths Confidence strategy would be a good place to start if you wanted to think about a whole-school strategy for tackling this.

## OPEN ACADEMY
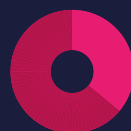


| REGION | NUMBER ON ROLL | YEAR GROUPS | BOYS | PP | SEND |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Norfolk** | **667** | **Years 7–13** | **52%** | **48%** | **35%** |

"Girls' confidence and motivation for learning maths improved significantly across the year."

# NEXT STEPS

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS TO **RAISE BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT**

# PiXL STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES THAT MAY HELP

We have a wide range of strategies and resources to support staff and students, from classroom resource to Leadership Thinking Guides. On the following pages are listed a few things that particularly resonate with the ideas explored in this publication. All our members have a PiXL Specialist who has a comprehensive understanding of the full PiXL offer and will be able to support you in identifying strategies and resources to meet your needs and goals.

If you have any questions about PiXL resources, contact our team on **admin@pixl.org.uk**.

## Sharing Ideas

### PiXL in Action

Our documentary series on PiXL TV is a great way of seeing a variety of practice from schools and colleges across the PiXL network. The episodes cover a range of educational issues – from curriculum development to student wellbeing, transition to staff CPD. We'd recommend starting with our most recent series on 'Stretch and challenge for all'. Each episode of PiXL in Action is accompanied by a short Leadership Thinking Guide that poses questions to scaffold your reflections on the content and make it relevant to your setting. They also include links to any relevant PiXL resources.



**PiXL**
*in Action*

**STRETCH AND CHALLENGE FOR ALL**

**SUPPORTING APPLICATIONS TO OXBRIDGE AND MEDICINE**

### PiXL in Conversation

Also available on PiXL TV, these hour-long conversations between PiXL CEO, Rachel Johnson, and invited experts in their fields provide leaders with some much needed thinking time. We particularly recommend the following episodes as having a lot of resonance with this publication:

- **CLOSING THE GENDER ACHIEVEMENT GAP**
  with Mark Roberts
- **MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE**
  with Alex Wheatle
- **UNPACKING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**
  with Daniel Sobel
- **REACHING THE UNSEEN CHILDREN**
  with Jean Gross



**Closing the gender achievement gap**

**PiXL** *in Conversation* ...with Mark Roberts

# Coming Together

## National Conferences

As part of PiXL membership, schools are invited to three National Conferences per academic year per sector. These are brilliant opportunities to have time to think away from the busyness of school life, and we always share the latest research, thinking and data across a whole range of educational issues. Check out our Events Calendar for when our next conferences are, as well as further details.

## Networks and Surgeries

As part of our offer to support schools, you can choose to join a wide range of sector-specific networks across the year. These are online events that bring together colleagues who want to discuss ideas relating to specific issues – whether that be persistent absence, revision, or staff wellbeing. The networks are exercises in crowd-sourced problem-solving and platforms for sharing ideas. You can also book online 15-, 30- or 45-minute surgeries with a whole range of PiXL experts via our new platform, including on a number of the resources and strategies mentioned in this article such as the Horsforth Quadrant, PiXL Change, and PiXL Reading.

From Spring 2025, members across the network will also be hosting open days, where you can visit schools to explore practice in person. Details for these, as well as what surgeries and networks are available for your sector, can be found by logging into the Members Area and selecting Specialist and Networking Platform.

# Tools for Change

## The Horsforth Quadrant

Originally developed by Horsforth School in Leeds, the Horsforth Quadrant is a simple and powerful tool for identifying barriers to student progress. It simply asks you to map students' progress and effort on a quadrant, allowing you to tailor support for specific groups. We have advice and guidance available for how this can be used most effectively.

PROGRESS

Low Effort & High Progress

High Effort & High Progress

EFFORT

Low Effort & Low Progress

High Effort & Low Progress
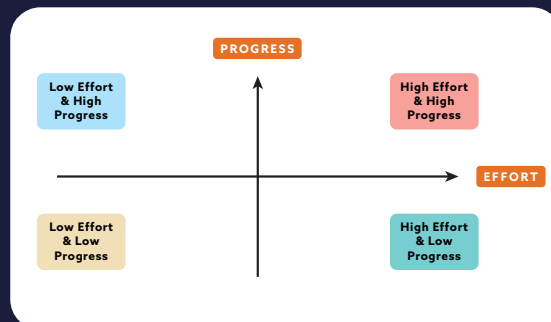
## PiXL Change

This is a powerful and precise pastoral strategy for behaviour change, rooted in psychology. PiXL Change has three strands: Change in Me, Change in Us, Change in Them – recognising that staff behaviour change can have a profound impact on students.

# Tackling Reading

We know that the gender gap in reading can be one of the most stubborn to close, so our teams work hard on developing resource to support across all phases.

## At Primary

Our comprehensive reading package includes newsletters on promoting whole-school reading and reading for pleasure, parent reading guides and author podcasts. In addition, there is CPD to support with decoding and prosody, echo reading and performance reading, and embedding oracy and debate. There are also resources to support the development of emotional literacy.

## At Secondary and Post 16

We have Leadership Thinking Guides and CPD available for embedding a whole-school/college reading culture, including resources to help you plan a diverse and inspiring reading canon (complete with PiXL-exclusive discounts on books). Our termly leadership of reading bulletins share the latest research and practice from schools and colleges to ensure you have continued up-to-date support. There is also a Reading Fluency package to support you in helping students with this key skill.

# Assessing Gaps

## Primary Assessment

PiXL Primary Members can make use of our PiXL Assessment cycle to compare their student data with the PiXL partnership data. Every term the PiXL team summarise their findings and highlight the implications for teaching based on data uploaded from across the PiXL partnership.

### Gender analysis

| | Paper 1 (%) | Paper 2 (%) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Girls | 53 (56) | 55 (53) | Girls currently outperform boys across both papers by 3 percentage points. |
| Boys | 49 (51) | 54 (50) | |
| Difference | 4 (5) | 1 (3) | The gap was greatest in G7 (Standard English and formality) and least in G4 (Verb forms, tense and consistency). |

**Implications for Teaching report: Year 6 GPS November 2024** (2023 National papers)
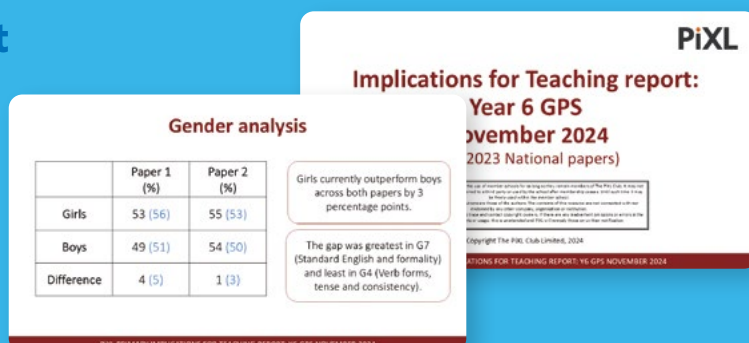
## At KS4 and KS5

The PiXL Waves powered by Pupil Progress can similarly be used to analyse students' gaps in real time. All PiXL members get access to Pupil Progress for English and Maths as part of their membership.

**PiXL WAVES** powered by pupil progress

Every year PiXL subject specialists read the examiners' reports for all boards for each subject and produce a Feed Forward document per subject. This summarises the findings across those exam boards – often highlighting notable gender disparities – and provides ideas for strategies and resource to overcome issues identified in the reports. These are available for GCSE and A Levels. We also produce summary documents for Raising Standards Leaders that identify common issues and misconceptions across the subjects, which can be used to inform departmental conversations.

# Planning for their futures

We have a range of PiXL Futures materials available across all sectors. In Primary, the focus is on widening pupils' aspirations and challenging stereotypes through early career-related learning, linked to character development. As we move through the key stages, we have a stronger focus on supporting students' post-18 steps – with a wide range of resources to support with university applications and apprenticeships. We know that boys, particularly white boys from disadvantaged backgrounds, are less likely to attend university than their peers – so our Thinking Like an Undergraduate package for Sixth Form students may be of particular interest.

**THINKING LIKE AN UNDERGRADUATE**

## JOIN US FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

Any of the resources or strategies mentioned here could be the basis of a future PiXL Insights project. We are always on hand to speak to schools interested in running a project on raising boys' achievement, or our other three Insights cohorts: learners with SEND, more able learners, and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.
Email **insights@pixl.org.uk** to find out more.

# FURTHER READING

## On boys' achievement

1. Pinkett, M. & Roberts, M. (2019) *Boys Don't Try: Rethinking Masculinity in Schools.* **Oxon: Routledge.**
2. Roberts, M. (2021) *The Boy Question: How to Teach Boys to Succeed in School.* **Oxon: Routledge.**
3. Wilson, G. (2013) *Breaking Through Barriers in Boys' Achievement: Developing a Caring Masculinity.* **London: Bloomsbury Education.**
4. Wilson, G. (2021) *Let's Hear It For the Boys: What Boys Really Think About School and How to Help Them Succeed.* **London: Bloomsbury Education.**

## On masculinity beyond education

1. Bola, JJ. (2019) *Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined.* **London: Pluto Press.**
2. hooks, b. (2004) *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love.* **New York: Washington Square Press.**
3. Way, N. (2011) *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection.* **Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.**
4. Way, N. (2024) *Rebels With a Cause: Reimagining Boys, Ourselves and Our Culture.* **New York: Dutton.**
5. Webb, R. (2017) *How Not To Be A Boy.* **Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd.**

## On classroom pedagogy and curriculum

1. Alexander, R. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion.* **Oxon: Routledge.**
2. Claxon, G. (2002) *Building Learning Power: Helping Young People Become Better Learners.* **Bristol: TLO Limited.**
3. Knight, B. (ed) (2022) *On the Subject of Values…and the Value of Subjects.* **Woodbridge: John Catt.**
4. Major, L. E. & Higgins, S. (2019) *What Works? Research and Evidence for Successful Teaching.* **London: Bloomsbury Education.**
5. Roberts, M. (2024) *The Behaviour Whisperer: 100 Ways Teachers Can Communicate to Improve Their Students' Focus in the Classroom.* **Oxon: Routledge.**

## On supporting learners from disadvantaged backgrounds

1. Gross, J. (2022) *Reaching the Unseen Children: Practical Strategies for Closing Stubborn Achievement Gaps in Disadvantaged Groups.* **Oxon: Routledge.**
2. Major, L. E. & Briant, R. (2023) *Equity in Education: Levelling the Playing Field of Learning.* **Woodbridge: John Catt.**
3. O'Brien, J. (2016) *Don't Send Him In Tomorrow: Shining a Light on Marginalised, Disenfranchised and Forgotten Children in Today's Schools.* **Wales: Crown House Publishing.**
4. Sobel, D. (2018) *Narrowing the Attainment Gap: A Handbook for Schools.* **London: Bloomsbury Education.**

## On mindset and psychology

1. Clear, J. (2018) *Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones.* **London: Penguin Random House.**
2. Czikszentmihalyi, M. (2008) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* **New York: Harper Perennial.**
3. Willingham, D. T. (2021) *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom.* Second Edition. **New Jersey: Jossey-Bass.**

## PiXL also have a series of books published by John Catt and written by our CEO, Rachel Johnson.

These are short, practical books aimed at supporting leaders of all levels.

## We have three other PiXL Insights publications that may be of interest to you and your colleagues.

As well as our first edition of Raising Boys' Achievement, you will find publications on closing the disadvantage gap, stretching more able learners, and supporting learners with SEND (ALN).

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**HANNAH COSTANZO**
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# INDEX

# HOW ARE YOU GOING TO RAISE THE ACHIEVEMENT OF BOYS IN YOUR CONTEXT?

# PiXL
# INSIGHTS