



## Taking Boys Seriously: 2018-2023 Report

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# Taking Boys Seriously

## 2018-2023 Report

**TBS** | Taking  
Boys  
Seriously



## Embedding Gender-Conscious Relational Learning to tackle Compounded Educational Disadvantage

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The TBS research team extend a warm thanks to the 442 boys & young men and 120 educators across 22 schools, 10 youth settings, and 4 EOTAS / Alternative Education Provision centres who have participated in TBS over the past 5 years making it an authentic, collaborative, and highly enjoyable research project.

Pivotal to the research has been a highly committed steering group of representatives across formal and informal education. This group have been critical friends, expert consultants, willing advocates, and have opened doors enabling access to boys and young men whose voices are not traditionally heard in research. We have benefitted greatly from their vision towards influencing systemic change in a collaborative, participatory, and evidence-based way. Active members of the steering group over the period 2018-2023 represented a comprehensive cross-section of the education system including Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Controlled School's Support Council (CSSC), YouthAction NI (YANI), Education Authority (EA), Abbey Community College (ACC), Belfast Boys' Model School (BBMS), Blessed Trinity College (BTC), Monkstown Boxing Club (MBC), Black Mountain Action Group (BMAG), Artillery Youth Club (AYC), Community Relations in Schools (CRIS), National Education Union (NEU), and colleagues in Ulster University.

Ulster University have championed and resourced TBS over the past 5 years and subsequently have extended funding until 2028. The institution has acted as a central hub bringing key leaders at all levels of the education system together. The internal investment in the research through the Widening Access and Participation plan is a model that other institutions are endeavouring to replicate.

TBS research is indebted to the late Professor Brian Murphy whom in his role as Director of Academic Business Development at Ulster University, advocated for and funded TBS between 2018-2023 and secured further support for the project from 2023 - 2028. He was immensely proud of this important work and committed to increasing opportunities and removing barriers for working class boys and young men to progress and flourish in their education and learning. TBS continues as one of Professor Murphy's notable legacies from his distinguished career.

## YOUNG MEN TALKING

Through the research we developed a series of video vignettes with adolescent boys. These were developed using appreciative inquiry where the young men highlighted effective practices and approaches taken by teachers and youth workers that motivated them and engaged them in learning.

A huge thank you to these young men whose voices bring the project to life and represent the many authentic voices of adolescent boys who have lots to say and teach us about .

These videos can be accessed via the QR code or link below:

<http://tinyurl.com/UUTBS2>



## Introduction

This report presents key findings, impact and conceptual developments emanating from Ulster University's 'Taking Boys Seriously' (TBS) longitudinal action research initiative spanning 17 years (2006-2023). During this period TBS has worked with over 800 boys and 200 educators in diverse communities and across Northern Ireland in partnership with both the formal education sector and the voluntary and statutory Youth Service sectors.

Specifically, this report focuses on the five-year period 2018-2023. During this time, we have been privileged to work alongside hundreds of adolescent boys and educators, developing new approaches and a research-informed framework for engaging effectively with boys who report feeling overlooked and undervalued in the education system. Extensive data has enabled us to delve deeper into the worlds of these boys and young men to better understand their issues, concerns, behaviour, and perspectives on what motivates and inspires productive learning to happen. While boys hold strong views on what would improve their educational experiences, they report not being consulted by adults and feeling powerless to influence their circumstances or bring about change. The action-oriented nature of TBS places disadvantaged boys and young men at the centre and has been critical in redressing this issue.

Drawing on the voices and experiences of boys and young men, evidence is presented demonstrating how a gender conscious relational learning framework has impacted positively upon attendance, participation, voice, aspirations, confidence, and attainment. The findings show that adolescent boys require increased opportunities to explore masculinities and cultural identities in educational settings. Consistently boys spoke about the importance of educators investing in relational approaches, being attuned to feelings, promoting conversation and dialogue, and demonstrating an interest in their lives as core to enabling emotional openness and discussing sensitive issues.

The research offers an action-based approach to tackling the deep change necessary in education to better support the holistic development of adolescent boys who experience multiple barriers to achieving success. Moving beyond a narrow focus on educational attainment, TBS demonstrates how a broader, collaborative research approach, and vision, that evolved within a localised educational ecosystem, has been highly effective in reengaging boys in their education and learning. This ecosystem approach combines the skills, knowledge, and experience of formal and informal educators, and is constantly informed by the voices of boys classified as *underperforming* in school.

## Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of TBS over the past 5 years has been to use participatory action research in a way that generates positive changes for adolescent boys in their educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes.

This aim is supported by the following objectives:

- Influence education policy, pedagogy, and practice to support adolescent boys achieve success.
- Utilise Participatory Action Research focused on doing research with, rather than on, boys and educators.
- Work collaboratively across the formal and informal education sectors.
- Develop new approaches to working effectively with adolescent boys in education addressing systemic barriers and engaging with masculinities.

## Context

Northern Ireland is marked by decades of political conflict and immersed in an ongoing process of political and civic society peacebuilding. Like many contested societies across the world, this context has had a profound effect upon all aspects of everyday life. The socio-economic and historical context of working-class boy's lives continues to have a strong bearing upon their thoughts, beliefs and attitudes towards education and learning. Many of the boys who have participated in our study grew up in disadvantaged communities that have borne the brunt of political violence and residual paramilitary influence. In these communities' conflict legacies of segregation, poverty, polarisation, and normative masculinities constructed with reference to violence, powerfully shape and influence boy's attitudes towards life and school. It is important to note that many paradoxes exist within this broad continuum for example, there were boys who had completely disengaged from education. Conversely, there were boys who despite living in these same areas, enjoyed school with aspirations to attend Further or Higher Education. The identification of structural barriers has been particularly useful in helping clarify *which boys* should be targeted by our research interventions leading to a more targeted research approach aimed specifically at boys experiencing what TBS has termed *Compounded Educational Disadvantage*.

## Compounded Educational Disadvantage

The concept of compounded educational disadvantage (CED) was coined through the research in 2018 to help shape the research methodology and advance critical thinking about the causes and responses to persistent low educational attainment and progression for some adolescent boys, particularly those entitled to free school meals. CED draws on indicators of deprivation and relative poverty which intersect with contextual issues such as, in Northern Ireland, a selective education system, conflict legacies, and dominant masculinities where violence is normalised and notions of physical and emotional toughness are highly prized.



## Participatory Action Research

From 2018 the research team has utilised a Participatory Action Research approach. We prioritised listening to, learning from, and acting on the actual everyday experiences of adolescent boys. Emphasis was placed on trying to better understand what engages and motivates adolescent boys in their education and learning, as identified by them, and developing practical, research informed ways of supporting boys to feel more connected, valued, and successful. Central to this was the positioning of boys and young men's voices, ideas, beliefs, and opinions at the centre of data collection, findings, and analysis. This process was cultivated in collaboration with a deeply committed steering group who became a gateway for attracting other educators and stakeholders from a wide range of formal and informal educational settings concerned about boys and young men's lower attainment levels. This partnership with professional bodies was fundamental in the evolution of a *localised educational ecosystem* facilitated by Ulster University with the purpose of supporting boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage to thrive and improve holistic educational outcomes.

## Engaging Boys and Educators

In 2020, case studies were carried out in three designated areas of greater Belfast where adolescent boys were faced with compounded educational disadvantage. In these three areas, collaborative case study sites were developed each involving a school representing formal education and a youth centre / project representing informal education. Partnership working between formal education and youth work was reinforced as a core strength through the case studies in sharing resources and spaces, developing informal and non-formal pedagogical approaches, and breaking down the boundary between school and the wider communities boys and young men inhabit. A significant outcome from the case studies was the development and trialling of a set of '*relational principles*' in 2021 that were tested regionally across diverse educational settings.

Research sites participating in the regional trial of the TBS principles of relational education consisted of 22 post-primary schools, 4 EOTAS centres, 10 youth projects, and 1 higher education institution. Overall, 562 participants contributed to at least one element of data collection through this phase of the study. Questionnaires were completed by 442 adolescent boys aged 12-17, 93 professionally qualified educators, and 15 student youth workers and teachers. Data on 'memorable learning experiences' was collected from 145 boys. Eight focus groups were conducted with boys and eight with educators. Over a 12-week period, educators in these research sites intentionally applied some or all the 10 TBS principles in their practice and used the data collection processes as a tool for promoting conversation and dialogue with boys on themes embedded in the principles.

## Relational Principles

The 10 TBS principles were informed directly by adolescent boys and educators. They focused heavily on the centrality of a relational pedagogy that is highly dependent upon the educator's commitment to building intentional relationships with boys and young men. The principles were not intended to instruct educators how to work with boys and young men, rather to encourage educators to reflect critically upon their current practice through a relational pedagogical lens and prompt the development of new practice

strategies. Data gathered from this process comprehensively demonstrated how boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage flourished in an educational ecosystem underpinned by *relational principles, pedagogies, and practices*.

The 10 Principles are presented ‘at a glance’ below and are elaborated on within the report. A full copy of the principles can be accessed at [ulster.ac.uk/tbs](http://ulster.ac.uk/tbs)



## Key Findings

Adolescent boys and educators engaged in the regional trial of the principles and provided rich data highlighting strengths, gaps, and opportunities for further embedding the 10 TBS principles in education.

Of the 442 adolescent boys aged 12-17 from across 37 formal and informal education settings who completed questionnaires, the majority (79%) agreed or strongly agreed that the nature of the relationship with an educator impacts their likelihood of learning. 85% of boys reported that they learn better when they know their voice and views are valued in an educational context. Talking, listening, and being heard was perceived by boys as the most fundamental dynamic in building relationships and establishing mutual trust and respect with educators. Conversational style dialogue facilitated a healthier exchange of views between boys and teachers and created a more productive and collaborative learning environment. Where relationships with teachers were strong, boys spoke of increased motivation, engaging more actively in their learning, and having raised expectations as to how well they would do in those subjects. However, many boys felt

that these relational approaches were only utilised by some teachers and recounted negative impacts of ongoing strained relationships with adults in school.

Of the 108 formal and informal educators who completed the TBS survey, 91% mostly or strongly believed that fostering positive relationships was core to their practice. Despite such acclamation, educators across schools, alternative education centres and youth settings report that relational education is not prioritised and remains underdeveloped. Teachers reported a synergy in the classroom through creative cooperation, shared learning, and high educational expectations. Both teachers and youth workers highlighted the value of exploring issues not traditionally taught in school but were identified as important by these boys and young men. These included examining cultural notions of men and masculinities and boys' experiences of living in a contested society. In discussing these themes educators reported being cognisant of stages of adolescent development including levels of maturity, emotional intelligence, and mental health and wellbeing.

While engaging in the research sparked intentional engagement with masculinities, boys reported a general lack of opportunities to engage with emotions or sensitive topics around masculinities and cultural identities, particularly in formal education. Of the 442 adolescent boys aged 12-17 from across 37 formal and informal education settings who completed questionnaires, 73% reported rarely or never talking to an educator in school about their emotional state when feeling stressed or overwhelmed and 45% felt they rarely or never get the emotional support they need in school when feeling down. 78% of boys felt it is important that educators create opportunities for them to think about what it means to be a man, but had limited opportunities to do so.

39% of educators only somewhat agreed that they can spend time exploring themes of masculinity with the boys they work with. A further 22% somewhat disagreed with this statement. Educators reported feeling unsure as to how to engage boys around masculinities whilst also recognising multiple ways in which culturally embedded masculine expectations influence behaviours, attitudes towards education, and gender relations within educational environments.

## **Recommendations**

All recommendations from TBS emphasise that tackling compounded educational disadvantage at the levels of education policy, pedagogy, and practice should be more directly informed by the everyday lives and experiences of boys and young men. Our recommendations connect with current priorities in education including the [Independent Review of Education's](#) emphasis on tackling disadvantage experienced by working class boys in education (Bloomer, 2023) and the Department of Education's [A Fair Start Report](#) (Purdy et al., 2021) with an emphasis on 'Maximising Boys' Potential' and 'A Whole Community Approach'. Furthermore, the [Education and Training Inspectorate's](#) (ETI, 2023) evaluation of the preventative curriculum highlights gaps in provision for young people around themes of gender, sexuality, and better equipping educators to facilitate discussions on sensitive issues. Key recommendations are presented under four domains of pedagogy, policy, practice, and educational ecosystem.

## **PEDAGOGY:**

1. Embed critical reflection on masculinities in formal education & youth work curricula with an emphasis on:
  - understanding a gendered society and how this shapes attitudes and behaviours;
  - challenging narrow and normative models of masculinity premised on male dominance, competition, emotional toughness, readiness for violence;
  - considering different expressions and models of masculinity encountered in communities, in schools, on social media etc.;
  - supporting adolescent boys to think about and discuss what it means to be a man;
  - facilitating conversations around male privilege and disadvantage;
  - the role of young men in challenging gender stereotypes and speaking out against gender-based violence.
  
2. Create space for educators to reflect on their own gendered experiences and socialisation and consider, in dialogue with other educators, how to:
  - create opportunities to explore masculinities in their engagement with boys and young men;
  - work more relationally;
  - better understand the social and cultural contexts boys are coming from.
  
3. Apply and build upon the TBS principles and gender-conscious relational learning in educational contexts with boys.

## **POLICY:**

4. Invest in educator training which equips educators to embed gender-conscious relational pedagogy in educational contexts with boys.
  
5. Apply greater emphasis to indicators of success in education beyond GCSE and A-Level results. This is applicable for all students but with a particular focus on boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage e.g:
  - youth participation and youth voice;
  - sense of belonging;
  - educator-student relationships;
  - dialogue & peer learning;
  - strength-based approaches that build confidence, resilience, determination, optimism, and utilisation of support networks;
  - young people talking about feelings and accessing emotional support;
  - young people talking about academic problems and accessing academic support;
  - understanding and managing emotions;
  - critical thinking and reflection on masculinities;

- inclusive and equitable gender relations.
6. TBS-proof policies to embed strengths-based language and screen for deficit narratives in relation to boys and young men.

## **PRACTICE:**

7. Apply TBS principles in context-specific ways.
8. Affirm boys talking about emotions and ‘check-in’ with boys about their feelings and where they get support.
9. Facilitate both planned and ‘unscripted’ conversations around masculinities with boys which are embedded in curriculum as well as responded to in the moment.
10. Employ appreciative inquiry as a way learning from boys through conversations about their motivations, aspirations, interests, and examples of how they have overcome barriers in the past.

## **EDUCATIONAL ECOSYSTEM:**

11. Develop increased collaboration through the educational pipeline across formal and informal education as well as with local businesses and wider community resources to enhance support and outcomes for boys within an active educational ecosystem.
12. Establish a regional hub dedicated to bringing together and developing research, policy, training, resources, and new initiatives to enable a targeted, sustainable, locally embedded, educational ecosystem that supports boys and young men faced with compounded educational disadvantage.

## INTRODUCTION

Taking Boys Seriously (TBS) is a research initiative emanating from Ulster University and collectively owned by schools, youth centres, EOTAS settings, educational bodies, and youth organisations across Northern Ireland. The longitudinal nature of the research situates it as a unique project spanning 17 years to date and will have stretched over two decades upon completion of continual action research until 2028. The longevity of TBS has been crucial to the success of a relational gender conscious action research approach which has gathered quantitative and qualitative data from over 800 boys and 200 educators across 45 formal and informal education settings in Northern Ireland. The reach of TBS extends to hundreds more educators, boys, and policymakers through conferences and summits alongside ongoing application of TBS approaches in formal and informal educational contexts.

Particularly, this interim report provides an overview of the key findings and conceptual developments over the past five years (2018-2023). This period has been funded directly by Ulster University's Widening Access & Participation department who have committed to a 10-year investment from 2018-2028. TBS is committed to reporting back findings and impact to those who have made the research possible - adolescent boys and educators as primary participants; youth organisations and schools who have participated in the study, a dedicated steering group concerned about the educational outcomes of boys, and Ulster University's department of Widening Access & Participation who have funded and supported the research. More broadly, this report is targeted towards all those involved in policy, pedagogy, or practice development aimed at enabling boys and young men to flourish.

## AIM & OBJECTIVES

The overarching aim of TBS is to use participatory action research in a way that generates positive changes for adolescent boys in their educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes.

### OBJECTIVES

- Influence education policy, pedagogy, and practice to support adolescent boys achieve success
- Utilise Participatory Action Research focused on doing research with, rather than on, boys and educators
- Work collaboratively across the formal and informal education sectors
- Develop new approaches to working effectively with adolescent boys in education addressing systemic barriers and engaging with masculinities

### Why boys and which boys

TBS offers critical insights and research informed recommendations pertinent to pressing issues experienced both locally and internationally across the spheres of policy, pedagogy, and practice. While access to education for girls remains an ongoing concern, the UNESCO global report on boys' disengagement from education has found boys are more commonly at risk of 'repeating grades, failing to complete different education levels and having poorer learning outcomes in school' (UNESCO, 2022, p.14).

In many countries across the globe boys from disadvantaged backgrounds appear as one of the most likely demographics to be labelled as '*underachievers*' based on low attainment in nationally standardised exams (Welmond and Gregory, 2018; Leitch et al., 2017; OECD, 2015) and are increasingly under-represented in higher education (Moss, 2023; Tazzyman et al., 2022; Ullah and Ullah, 2019). In Northern Ireland a policy focus on addressing *persistent educational underachievement* (NIO, 2020) and *maximising boys' potential* (Purdy et al., 2021) has kept boys and young men on the agenda.

The inaugural TBS study (2006-2011) focused more generally on adolescent boys' school and life experiences and wider concerns around health and wellbeing in response to a persistent trend of male academic '*underachievement*' highlighted annually in the UK since the mid-1990s (Harland, 2009; Harland & McCready, 2012). From 2018, TBS focused more specifically on engaging boys facing, what the research has termed, compounded educational disadvantage<sup>1</sup>. This more targeted approach included increased emphasis on engaging with educational bodies in areas experiencing high levels of multiple deprivation as measured by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NISRA, 2017). This included engaging schools with over 40% of their pupil population entitled to Free School Meals, working with youth work organisations operating in highly polarised communities along lines of religious and national identity, and the participation of Education Other than at School (EOTAS) centres who work with some of the most marginalised boys and young men in the education system.

### Attainment gap trends in Northern Ireland

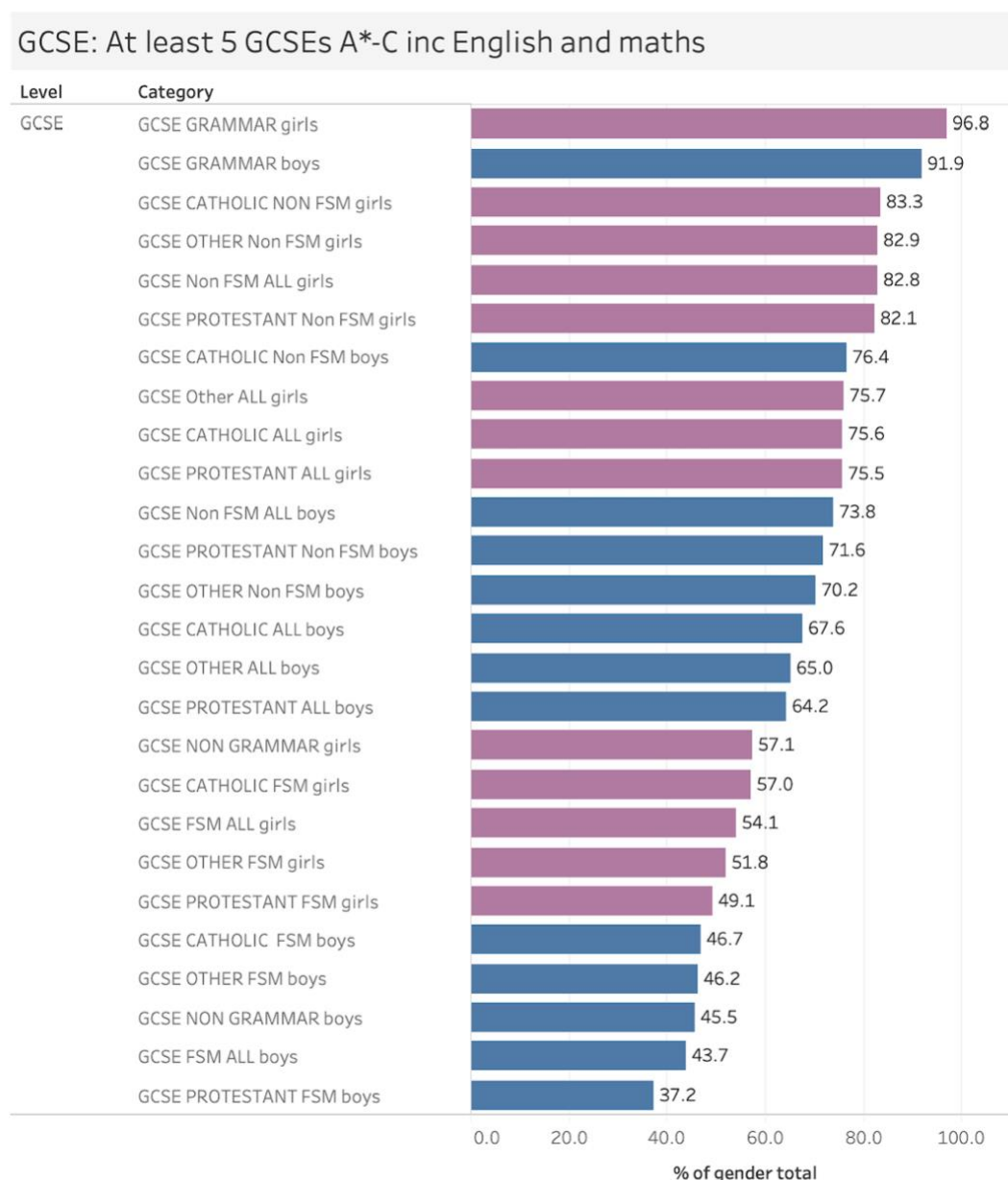
Mirroring global trends where certain boys are consistently falling behind their female counterparts in terms of academic attainment, across the UK girls have outperformed boys every year in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications since exams were first administered in 1988 (Woolcock, 2022; Early, 2023). Figure 1 shows percentages of those attaining 5 A\*-C GCSEs,

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<sup>1</sup> The term compounded educational disadvantage (CED) was coined to highlight systemic issues which create greater barriers for certain boys and young men more than others in achieving educational success and flourishing. Factors contributing to CED are contextual and in Northern Ireland include intersections of relative poverty, a selective education system, conflict legacies, and contextually dominant masculinities.

including maths and English, for the academic year 2017/2018 broken down by attributes which reflect Northern Ireland’s highly stratified education system. The picture depicted in the chart is indicative of trends spanning more than two decades where disadvantaged boys are consistently overrepresented in low attainment statistics<sup>2</sup>. Non-grammar and Free-school meal entitled boys are consistently found on the bottom rungs of attainment charts. The breakdown by religion has been followed carefully in a religiously divided context. We acknowledge these differences but emphasise the shared experience of systemic inequalities encountered by working-class boys from Protestant, Catholic, and ‘Other’ religious backgrounds.

**Figure 1 Ranked GCSE attainment for academic year 2017/18**



<sup>2</sup> Additional figures, showing similar trends, are presented in Appendix 1 depicting both A-Level attainment and progression to higher education for the academic year 2017/18



## Cross-sectoral engagement

In Northern Ireland, religious traditions of Catholicism and Protestantism are infused with historical connections to competing political ethnic identities of Irish nationalism and British unionism, with enduring structural influences on education (NIH, 2022). This has resulted in a complex and stratified system with distinctive sectors overseen by the Department of Education, outlined in table 1.

**Table 1 Overview of formal education sectors in Northern Ireland**

SECTOR	REPRESENTATIVE BODY	PRE-DOMINANT COMMUNITY BACKGROUND
Controlled	Controlled Schools' Support Council ( <a href="#">CSSC</a> )	Protestant / Unionist
Catholic Maintained	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools ( <a href="#">CCMS</a> )	Catholic / Nationalist
Integrated	Council for Integrated Education ( <a href="#">NICIE</a> )	Striving for 'reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons'
Irish Medium	Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta ( <a href="#">CnaG</a> )	Catholic / Nationalist

Approximately 93% of pupils attend either a predominantly Catholic or predominantly Protestant school (Hughes and Loader, 2021). Across the Controlled and Maintained sectors are grammar streams which typically use admissions tests compared with secondary schools which are open to all (Milliken et al., 2021). A substantial network of more autonomous Voluntary Grammar Schools also exists (GBA, ca.2023). Consistently studies have found that academic selection favours families with a tradition of academic success and the financial means to pay for private tuition and test preparation which reinforces and reproduces educational privilege and disadvantage (Gardner & Cowan, 2005; Connolly et al., 2013; Leitch et al., 2017). Non-grammar schools tend to have more pupils from families reliant on income support. In the academic year 2022/23, 12.7% of pupils in Grammar schools were entitled to Free School Meals compared with 34.9% in secondary non-grammar schools (DE, 2023).

Since 2018, engagement with Education other than at school (EOTAS) settings has been a crucial development of TBS. These centres provide 'children who have been expelled from, suspended from, or have otherwise disengaged from their registered school to participate in education until they achieve a new school place, or prepared for re-entry to an existing school, or to maintain their education until compulsory school leaving age'

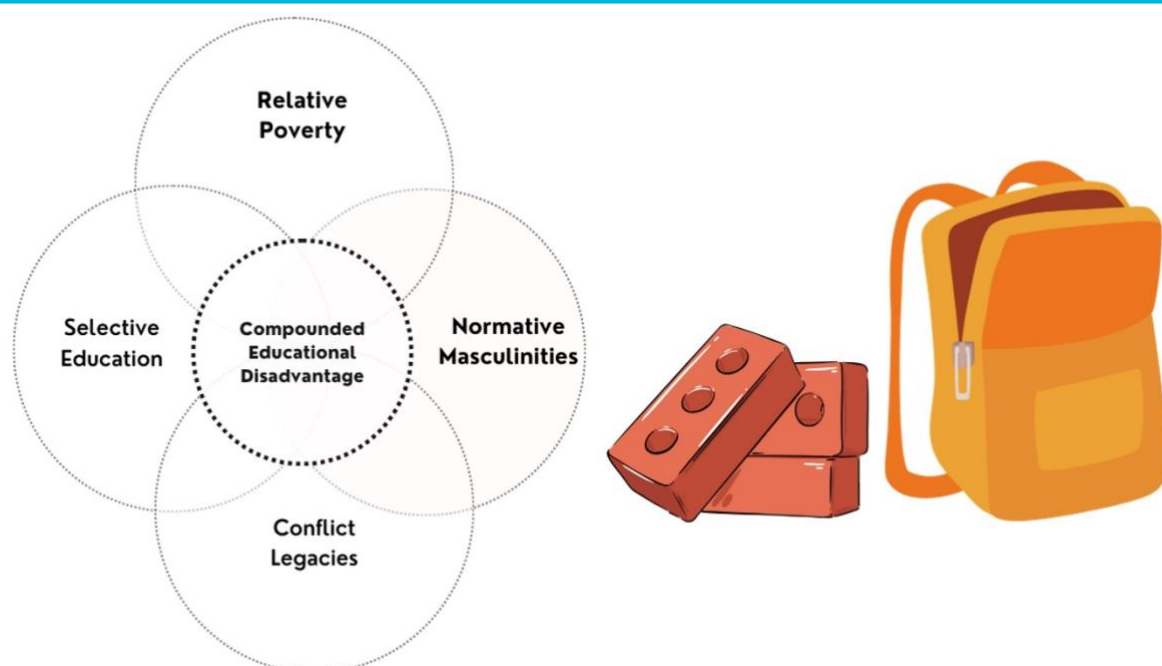
(DE, ca.2023). Adolescent boys make up a significant majority of the pupil population in EOTAS centres and specialised alternative education programmes.

TBS has intentionally sought to connect and increase shared learning across formal and informal education settings and to highlight the transformative impact of relational, dialogical, and experiential methodologies particularly with disadvantaged boys and young men who are disengaging from formal education (Harland and McCready, 2012; 2015).

### Compounded Educational Disadvantage

Consistently TBS and wider local and international research has identified that multiple structural factors impact upon educational engagement, attainment, and outcomes for working class boys and young men (Harland and McCready, 2012; Stahl, 2015; Leitch, 2017; Ingram, 2018). The concept of compounded educational disadvantage was coined through the research in 2018 to help shape the research methodology and advance critical thinking about the causes and responses to persistent low educational attainment and progression for some adolescent boys, particularly those entitled to free school meals. Compounded educational disadvantage draws on indicators of deprivation and relative poverty which intersect with contextual issues such as, in Northern Ireland, a selective education system and contextually dominant cultural norms and masculinities constructed with reference to legacies of violent conflict. Other countries and regions will have their own specific contextual factors that feed into compounded educational disadvantage. Each contributor to educational disadvantage, as outlined in figure 4, is like another brick being added to a boy’s backpack, making it harder for them to succeed. These boys are, as one educator in our study put it, *‘constantly having to work twice as hard to catch up with their more affluent peers’*.

Figure 2 Four salient features of compounded educational disadvantage in Northern Ireland



## Relative Poverty

Two key measures of relative poverty have been drawn upon to inform TBS. Firstly, the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure which ranks 890 ‘super output areas’, covering all of Northern Ireland, from most to least deprived. Seven domains of deprivation are measured including income deprivation, employment deprivation, and education, skills & training deprivation (NISRA, 2017). Young men from decile 1 and 2 communities, representing the top 20% of most deprived super output areas, are found to be under-represented in higher education and there are significant issues with retention of young men from these communities who do enrol in university (Tazzyman et al., 2023). This trajectory of under-representation in higher education points to correlations between poverty and educational low attainment found earlier in the education pipeline. At post-primary level, Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) is a key indicator of relative poverty. As already demonstrated through figure 1 (on page 16) males entitled to free school meals are on the bottom rungs of GCSE outcomes a trend replicated over the past two decades (Statista, 2023).

## Selective Education

In contrast with many other parts of the UK, academic selection, in the form of a primary to post-primary ‘Transfer Test’ is used in NI to categorise pupils into selective (grammar school) or non-selective (secondary school) cohorts. This academic selection at age 11 dates to the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act. Despite various policy changes, academic selection persists. The Dickson Plan was introduced within the Craigavon area in 1969, establishing a network of junior and senior high schools, deferring the issue of selection to age 14 (Roulston and Milliken, 2021). Under Sinn Féin Education Minister Catriona Ruane (2007-2011), a state endorsed transfer test at age 11 was abolished with the last tests administered in 2008. This led to separate entrance exams being devised by Grammar schools, unwilling to pursue alternatives to academic selection (Roulston and Milliken, 2021). The appropriateness of this system for all pupils is questionable; however, those most exposed to poverty are most likely to be disadvantaged. Connolly et al. (2013) found that ‘the odds of a child securing a place at grammar school [are] five times less if they are entitled to free school meals compared to all other children.’ Evidence continues to suggest that academic selection contributes to the reproduction of educational privilege and disadvantage (Leitch et al., 2017); has a net negative impact on children’s mental health (McMurray, 2020); and exacerbates social segregation along religious and class lines (Hughes and Loader, 2022).

## Conflict Legacies

Much has been written about the political situation in Northern Ireland and the *fragile peace* (Cochrane, 2021). Twenty-five years post the landmark Belfast Good Friday peace agreement competing nationalisms continue to breed intermittent political impasses (Kelly and Tannam, 2023). Residual paramilitarism and transgenerational trauma are palpable in many of the most disadvantaged communities (Gallagher et al., 2012). While a minority of boys and young men are susceptible to exploitation by residual

paramilitarism (Morrow and Byrne, 2020) it appears many more boys and young men have re-directed violence inwards (Gallagher and Hamber, 2015), which is particularly evident in working-class communities that brunt some of the highest male suicide rates across the UK (NISRA, 2022). Segregated social housing and a divided education system continue to embed parochialism (Gray et al., 2018).

This socio-political and cultural context is a key dimension of compounded educational disadvantage for boys and young men from marginalised communities. As boys grapple with questions of identity and belonging through the period of adolescent development their behaviours are shaped by exposure to symbols and practices of segregation and experiences and expectations of violence (Harland and McCready, 2012; 2015). The normalisation of violent and polarising cultural symbols coupled with ongoing paramilitary influence bolsters and reinforces narrow constructions of masculinity (Ashe and Harland, 2014; Holland and Rabrenovic, 2018; Messerschmidt, 2019).

## **Working with Masculinities**

Working intentionally with multiple masculinities has been a fundamental feature of the TBS research. Throughout the past 17 years our research has illuminated an overwhelming sense of difficulty with understanding and navigating constructions and expressions of localised masculinities. During early adolescence, we have found boys are particularly attuned to contextually dominant masculinities modelled on heteronormativity, male strength, and emotional toughness (Harland and McCready, 2012). Boys report rarely being provided with opportunities in school to explore or consider alternative masculinities. In the context of a contested society continuing to deal with the ramifications of a violent past, culturally ingrained depictions of threatening, intimidating, and violent masculinities remain prominent (Ashe and Harland, 2014).

Engaging with and managing emotions has been a prominent expressed and felt need of adolescent boys throughout the study. Our longitudinal data not only reiterates a well-rehearsed concern regarding how certain conceptions of masculinities can lead boys to suppress emotions and refrain from openly sharing their true feelings (Randell et al., 2016), but also emphasises the need for talk-based strategies and more productive ways of supporting boys to reconnect with and regulate emotions. These pedagogical approaches have been core to our research methodology and have been a crucial ingredient in enabling reflective and potentially 'discomforting' conversations around 'masculine entitlement' (Keddie, 2022) but also provided opportunities to explore the positive role adolescent boys can play in fostering more equitable gender relations (Keddie and Bartel, 2021).

The absence of gender-critical approaches in education has been a key, yet surprising finding throughout the TBS study reflecting wider concerns on the 'de-prioritisation' of gender issues in Northern Ireland's conflict transformation process (Pierson, 2018).

# A METHODOLOGY FOR ENGAGING BOYS

## Holistic Education

From 2018-2023 TBS intentionally focused on strengthening a holistic and increasingly participatory research methodology. This was underpinned by a deep appreciation of the context's boys are coming from and creating opportunities to engage meaningfully with themes of identity, culture, violence, masculinities, emotions, relationships, motivations, and aspirations. The participatory and action-oriented nature of the research placed emphasis on cultivating learning encounters that respond to the emotional, developmental, psychological, and intellectual needs of adolescent boys. Our approach contrasts with the central concern on performance gaps between girls and boys that has dominated the debate around gender in the field of education. This rather narrow and competing focus has tended to de-value holistic educational outcomes (Willis, 2022, p.5).

## Participatory Action Research

From the outset TBS has focused on action-oriented research, gathering views and perspectives from adolescent boys and educators and testing new ways of working in educational settings. A focus on participatory action research (PAR) has helped generate increased shared ownership and elevated the voices of boys and young men experiencing educational disadvantage in the context of systemic inequalities where such voices have not been sufficiently heard and tacit knowledge of boys and educators has often been overlooked (Jordan and Kapoor, 2016; Wood and McAteer 2023). PAR is 'based on principles of collaborative culture and democratic participation and social transformation' (Sales et al., 2021, p.706) and is concerned with doing 'research *with* people and communities rather than doing research *to* or *for* people and communities, with a practical intent for the transformation of lives and communities' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 37). Throughout the study the experiences and collective capacities of boys and young men in collaboration with professional educators have been the forefront of a developmental research process applied in local educational contexts. The TBS steering group have been instrumental in continuously addressing gaps in the research approach, co-theorising as part of the research team, and making connections with local schools and youth organisations on a regional scale.

## Appreciative Inquiry

A core commitment of the research has been to challenge and change deficit narratives surrounding boys and young men from poorer communities who frequently hear negative messages about themselves (Morgan et al., 2022). The language of '*underachievement*', '*anti-social behaviour*', and '*toxic masculinity*' used repeatedly in the media and policy creates disconnects for boys and young men within their schools and communities. In contrast, appreciative inquiry has enabled a strengths-based focus, facilitating the 'discovery of those things which are positive and life-giving, rather than deficit and

problem oriented’ (Duncan, 2015, p.56). This fresh approach ensures boys and educators feel good about participating in the process and has energised the research with an exploration of the enriching aspects, new possibilities, and improved outcomes of collaboration between community youth work settings and schools. Boys and young men have been affirmed as experts alongside teachers, youth workers, and researchers in a collective process of ‘co-constructing knowledge together’ (Lykes and Crosby 2014, p.146).

### **Mixed Methods**

A combination of questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, collaborative inquiry discussions, and video vignettes have been utilised. This mixed-methods approach facilitates large scale responses alongside more in-depth discussions and reflection, contributing to ‘a more complete picture’ (Cohen et al., 2018, p.33). It also enables the triangulation of data drawing on different sources to inform the development of new ideas and concepts. TBS has focused on integrating the strengths of descriptive statistics with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis has been used inductively, generating themes through the interpretation of empirical data. These themes are ‘patterns of shared meaning, united by a central concept or idea’ (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p.14) and led to the development of the TBS principles and new concepts of compounded educational disadvantage, educational ecosystem, and gender-conscious relational pedagogy.

### **Case Studies (2018-2020)**

A primary recommendation from the 2012 TBS report (Harland and McCready, 2012) was that collaborations between formal and informal education could play a vital role in building a support system for educationally disengaged boys. Bringing this recommendation forward, in 2018 three collaborative case studies were established in Greater North Belfast over two academic years, each comprising a secondary school and a local youth project. The three schools all had more than 45% of their school population entitled to free school meals. Individual interviews were carried out with fifteen senior managers in schools and youth clubs. This was followed by seven focus groups held with post-primary boys affiliated with the case study sites, and four one-to-one interviews with wider stakeholders, parents, and school alumni. Interviews were semi structured and sought to examine educational aspiration, attitudes to learning, expressions of masculinity, and the importance of community-school links. Interviews were audio-recorded and key qualitative themes were identified as salient using both manual techniques and NVIVO qualitative software determining themes most frequently referenced.

### **Regional Participation (2021-2022)**

New ideas, concepts, and methodological approaches developed through the case studies were rolled out on a regional basis across Northern Ireland. 37 research sites participated with representation across the 11 district council areas in Northern Ireland.

Schools, youth projects, and EOTAS centres and educators practising in these settings self-selected to be involved in the research over a 12-week period. They identified a cohort of adolescent boys in their setting who were invited to participate in the research, bearing in mind that the emphasis was on those facing barriers to educational flourishing. Overall, 562 participants contributed to at least one element of data collection through this phase of the study. The research sites consisted of 22 post-primary schools, 4 EOTAS centres, 10 youth projects, and 1 higher education institution. Questionnaires were completed by 442 adolescent boys aged 12-17, 93 professionally qualified educators, and 15 student youth workers and teachers. Data on ‘memorable learning experiences’ was collected from 145 boys. Eight focus groups were facilitated with boys and eight with educators. Several of these were collaborative focus groups involving more than one setting and in total 18 of the research sites participated in a boys or educator focus group, or both.

Just over half (19) of the 37 research sites were in the lowest four deciles as measured by the Multiple Deprivation Measure which assigns scores across seven domains including income deprivation and education, skills & training (NISRA, 2017). 12 of the participating schools had over 40% of their pupil population with Free School Meal Entitlement. The range of participation across different education providers is detailed in table 2.

**Table 2 Participation in trial of TBS principles across education management type**

<b>Educational Setting</b>	<b>No. in TBS study</b>
Catholic Maintained Post-Primary School <i>(Catholic Church has significant representation on Board of Governors).</i>	9
Controlled Post-Primary School <i>(Protestant Churches have significant representation on Board of Governors).</i>	8
Voluntary Post-Primary School <i>(Self-governing schools originally established on fee paying basis)</i>	3
Integrated Post-Primary School <i>(With ‘reasonable’ numbers of pupils from the minority religious Catholic or Protestant tradition within the school, usually minimum of 30%).</i>	2
Education other than at school centres (EOTAS)	4
Voluntary Youth Organisation	10
University	1

## **Ethics**

An established ethical approval process was followed and ethics for the project were granted through Ulster University’s Research Ethics Committee (REC/18/0095).

## Recognition

Recognition of participants was a significant consideration and each adolescent boy who participated in the research received an Ulster University certificate and TBS pin badge. Through a partnership with Four Star Pizza, several of their stores across Belfast displayed TBS posters and committed to giving 20% off orders to boys who showed their TBS pin badge. Participants were invited to a Boys and Young Men's Summit at Ulster University in September 2022, which was attended by 200 adolescent boys. This focused on recognising their contribution to the research and providing a positive experience on Ulster University's new Belfast campus with a range of creative workshops facilitated by youth organisations and the university's schools' outreach team. Schools, EOTAS centres, and youth organisations who participated in the research were provided with a digital banner that could be displayed on webpages and social media platforms acknowledging their status as a TBS institution.



The TBS project was shortlisted for the 2022 Times Higher Education Awards in the category of *Outstanding Contribution to the Local Community*. As a collectively owned research initiative this recognition reflected the contribution of all participants and the awards



ceremony in London was attended by representatives across the TBS steering group.



### 2018-2020 Case Studies

Three collaborative case studies (Abbey Community College & Monkstown Boxing Club; Belfast Boys' Model School & Black Mountain Action Group; Blessed Trinity College & Ashton Trust) each developed unique programmes using school and community resources to support boys achieve educational success. The 10 TBS principles of relational education were generated primarily through data collected from the case studies. In this section we highlight the success of the *In Your Corner* project as an illustration of an effective school-youth centre collaboration followed by an outline of the TBS principles and an overview of key findings from the regional trial of these principles.

#### In Your Corner (IYC)

Abbey Community College (ACC) and Monkstown Boxing Club (MBC) established the *In Your Corner* (IYC) project which enables a cohort of 10 young men aged 15-16 each year to undertake a split timetable between their school and neighbouring boxing club. During their hours at the boxing club the young men are supported by qualified youth workers and can use the gym facilities as well as being taught in the more informal environment with teachers coming across from the school to the boxing club.

The pupil profile of IYC regularly comprise those with special education needs (SEN), Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME), and educational welfare officer (EWO) involvement due to low school attendance. In the 2019-2020 cohort 7/10 were described as SEN stage 2<sup>3</sup> or above; 9/10 had FSME; and 8/10 had EWO involvement.

In Your Corner has demonstrated considerable success with each cohort in the areas of attendance, behaviour, and academic achievement (Cownie et al., 2023). Qualitatively these young men emphasised increased levels of participation, confidence, support, and belonging in their education. The most recent IYC cohort (2022-23) all achieved five GCSEs graded A\*-C including English and Maths accompanied with a high record of attendance.

Each of the case study sites rank highly on the Northern Ireland [Multiple Deprivation Measure](#) (NISRA, 2017). Adolescent boys growing up in these wards are disproportionately impacted and exposed to conflict legacies such as transgenerational trauma, social segregation, and continued paramilitary-linked exposure to violence. Educators working in these settings described a contextual mix of poverty, violence, and

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<sup>3</sup> The [independent review of education](#) helpfully summarise the three stages as: '• Stage 1 is intended to ensure that the learner will be assisted using the resources and expertise of the school. • Stage 2 involves intervention using additional resources brought in from outside the school. • Stage 3 requires the drawing up of a legally enforceable document (a statement) stating what support the learner is entitled to receive' (Bloomer et al., 2023, p.33).

conflict. These environmental and contextual factors valorise particular expressions of masculinity linked to militancy, violence, and conflict identities. Furthermore, ongoing paramilitary-style assaults and shootings in these communities cast violence as a persistent threat.

Working with adolescent boys and educators in this context emphasised the vital role of *relational education* drawing attention to the nature of relationships between adolescent boys and educators as well as the importance of relationships that bridge formal and informal education settings. Such relationships are the foundation of a gender-conscious relational pedagogy that supports boys to make sense of cultural contexts and engage in learning processes that address holistic needs. Analysis of the case study data alongside accumulative TBS findings (Harland and McCready, 2012) led to the development of 10 TBS principles of relational education (Morgan et al., 2021) as a research informed framework for working effectively with adolescent boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage.

### **Defining relational education**

The concept of relational education, as developed over the past five years of TBS research (Hamilton et al., 2024a), resonates with wider empirical and theoretical work on relational pedagogies. It positions relationships at the heart of learning (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004) and is highly interpersonal, focusing on an educator's skills and competencies in building trust and empathy and ensuring boys voices are heard and valued (Aspelin and Jonsson, 2019). Emphasis is placed on balancing power relations in educational settings and developing a culture of participative democracy achieved through shared learning, conversation, reflective dialogue, discovery, informed thinking and action, and involving young people in decision making processes (Hickey and Riddle, 2022; Charteris and Smardon, 2019). Significantly, relational education challenges an over-reliance on exam results as the predominant measure of success in formal education and seeks to re-centre the social, emotional, physical, mental, and intellectual growth of each learner (Owens and de St Croix, 2020).

### **10 TBS Principles of Relational Education**

Purposeful boy-educator relationships were found to be a crucial mediating factor in a holistic approach to education which keeps boys facing compounded educational disadvantage engaged and building towards success. These principles start by emphasising the primacy of relationships and from there elaborate on key features of a relational approach that is strengths-based and enables meaningful engagement around masculinities, the contexts boys and young men are coming from, working with emotions, and promoting participation and agency. A brief overview of these is presented below and the full set of principles can be accessed by scanning the QR code or at <http://tinyurl.com/TBSPrinciples>.





These TBS principles were trialled with regional participation in the research from 2021-22. The trial was launched at a conference with over 450 educators (UU, 2021) with key inputs from Education Minister Michelle McIlveen, MLA and Chair of Pearson UK Dr Mary Curnock Cook, CBE. The purpose of this trial was to create an opportunity for educators to apply the 10 principles in their practice and explore how relevant and effective the principles were for adolescent boys and educators. Educators were not instructed how to deliver sessions with boys, rather they were encouraged to be reflexive and creative in applying the TBS principles with boys in their own context over a 3-month period with an emphasis on appreciative inquiry.

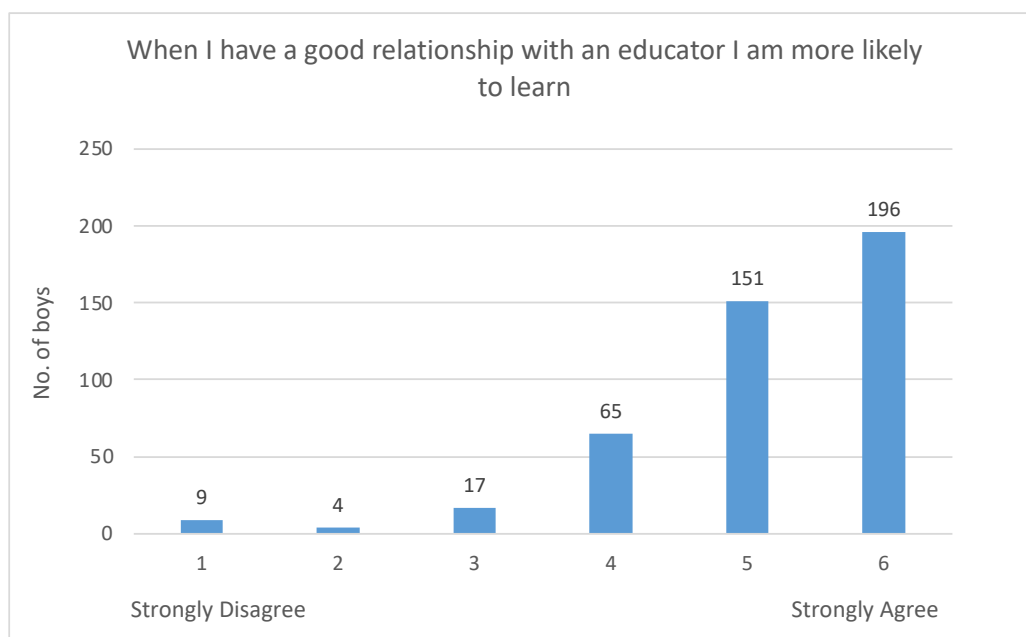
The trial overwhelmingly demonstrated enthusiastic support for the TBS principles as affirming existing effective practice with adolescent boys and catalysing critical reflection informing school development plans and organisational priorities alongside the development of new practice strategies. Emphasis was placed on educators and adolescent boys acting as co-investigators and co-creators of putting the principles into practice in their setting. The following themes were prevalent across the data.

### **Primacy of Relationships**

Boys consistently reported that when they get on well with an educator, they are more likely to enjoy and actively participate in learning as well as having more confidence in their ability to succeed. Figure 5 shows that 79% of the 442 young men from across 37 formal and informal education settings agreed or strongly agreed that 'When I have a

good relationship with an educator, I am more likely to learn'. Only 7% were more likely to disagree than agree with this statement.

Figure 3 Relationships & learning



Educators placed considerable emphasis on relationships. Of the 108 formal and informal educators who completed the TBS survey, 91% mostly or strongly believed that fostering positive relationships was core to their practice. Despite such acclamation, educators across schools, alternative education centres and youth settings, report that relational education is not prioritised and remains underdeveloped. A teacher with experience in both mainstream and alternative education, expressed:



*The skill of building relationships is not valued enough in formal education. Developing and maintaining relationships is a very skilled job, yet there is little emphasis or appreciation of the need for relational training.*



Boys also reported frustration that some relationships with educators were strained and often broke down completely, particularly when an issue was not quickly resolved which negatively influenced their attitudes towards that educator, the subject, or their entire experience of school.

Educators consistently identified many benefits of working relationally with boys leading to improved attendance levels and increased self-confidence, knowledge, interpersonal skills, and levels of participation. An experienced EOTAS educator attributed these improvements in her setting to an overarching sense of belonging where, by participating in the research, ‘boys saw themselves as a valued part of a wider cohort going through education system, not misfits’.

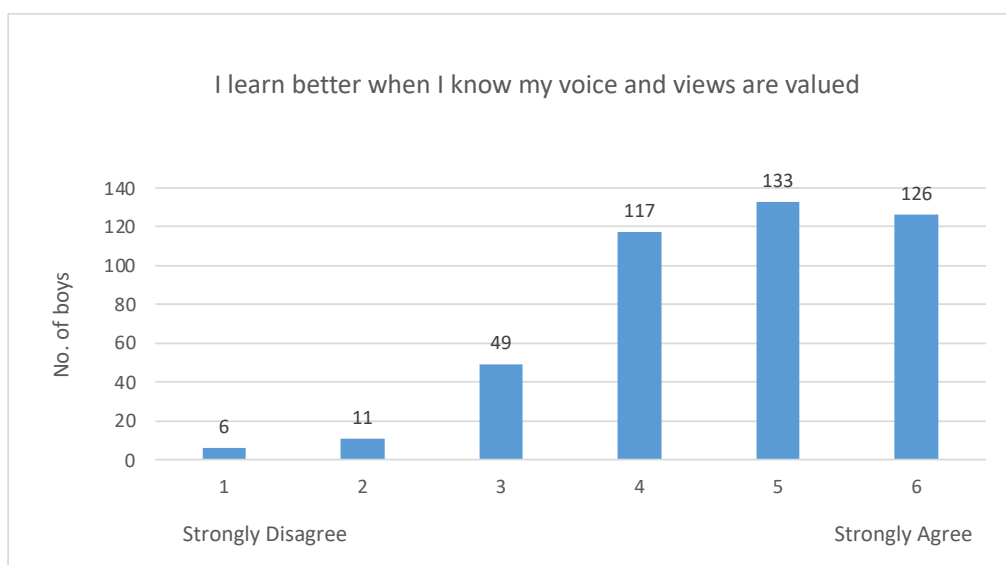
### Seen, Known, and Heard

Fourteen-year-old Colin captured a collective sentiment in a succinct way commenting, ‘I learn better if I’m seen and heard’. Boys facing compounded educational disadvantage expressed the importance of feeling valued and prized by educators, which was significant as many felt the very opposite. For instance, Joshua (15) explained:

*In the youth centre I feel cared for, the staff know who I am and care about my wellbeing and what goes on in my life in and out of school, but in school I feel like teachers don't really care.*

Boys appreciated when educators took time to get to know them as individuals, were interested in their lives outside of school, believed in them, gave them encouragement, and treated them with respect, particularly as they matured through adolescence. Central to feeling seen, known, and heard is valuing the voice of boys and promoting agency. Figure 6 indicates that 376 of the 442 survey respondents (85%) tended to agree that they are learn better when they know their voice and views are valued in an educational context.

**Figure 4 Valuing young men's voices**



Qualitatively, many young men reported a perception that their voices are not valued in formal education. Locating the voices of disenfranchised boys at the heart of TBS as a participatory action research project and at the forefront of the trialling process was found to be a key factor at re-engaging and empowering boys and young men experiencing compounded educational disadvantage. The vice-principal of an integrated school highlighted the significance of intentionally making time to ask boys about their experiences and use this to inform teaching practice within the school, reflecting *'it's empowerment for boys and that feeling of I have a role, and I'm important because you're really interested in my views'*.

## Working with Emotions

Adolescent boys in the study spoke of social pressures to conform with expected emotional response patterns, reflecting a well-rehearsed concern regarding how certain conceptions of masculinities can lead boys and young men to suppress emotions and refrain from openly sharing their true feelings. Ideas such as *'you have to be strong mentally'* (David, aged 13) and *'no crying or showing emotional weakness'* (Josh, aged 16) remain culturally ingrained. Ryan (15) concluded, *'it's so expected that men don't talk about their emotions, and you see it really puts pressure on some people'*. Questionnaire responses from boys starkly evidenced how little emotional support boys received within formal education.

Figure 7 highlights that 323 of the 442 (73%) boys aged 12-17 reported rarely or never talking to an educator in school about their emotional state when feeling stressed or overwhelmed. Figure 7 further indicates that 45% of respondents feel they rarely or never get the emotional support they need in school when feeling down.

**Figure 5 Boys talking about emotions**

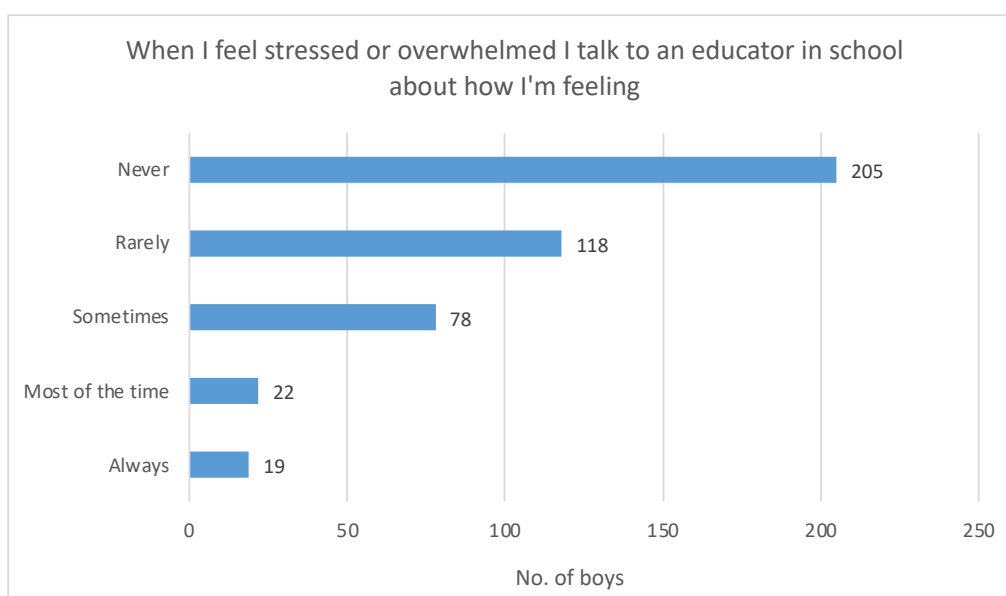
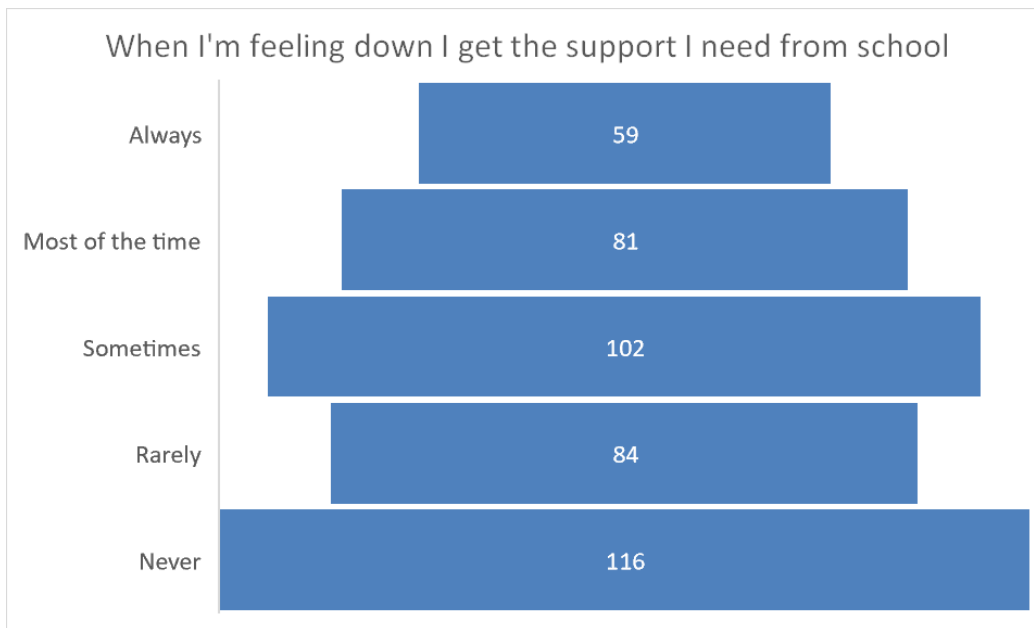


Figure 6 Levels of emotional support reported by boys



By listening to young men’s thoughts and concerns educators developed strategies to address the major disconnect for adolescent boys who experience internal conflicts and pressures yet feel an absence of opportunities to express these in educational settings. Boys reported greater emotional openness when educators applied the TBS principles. Jack (14) for instance, noted:

*I can talk to my teacher without feeling unsafe and know they listen to my feelings.*

The TBS relational approach does not negate the role of the educator in managing behaviours and holding high expectations. Rather, the TBS principles provided a framework for educators to support boys to better understand and manage their emotions. These relational and co-learning encounters encouraged adolescent boys to share more personal and potentially controversial issues such as their experiences of living in a contested society, experiences of male violence, paramilitary influence and threat, identity, and sectarianism. A youth worker based in one of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland reflected:



*I can't emphasize enough how massive it was for our group to sit in the room and have conversations about mental health, being a young man in their community, and challenging sexism*



The relational approach increased the participation of boys in their education and provided opportunities for boys to reflect upon and disrupt dominant masculine norms and cultural traditions including, but not limited to, working effectively with emotions. It was evident that many boys struggled to articulate their feelings and found it difficult to identify mental health systems within school that would support them to better manage their emotions and cope with stress triggers.

### **Embedding Masculinities in Education**

TBS research has consistently found that an intentional pedagogical process of engaging with masculinities is not sufficiently embedded in formal education curricula. As boys transition through adolescence, they encounter many masculine contradictions that emanate from experiences of contextually dominant masculinities. Qualitatively, boys in the study spoke to salient features of this predominant understanding of masculinity including expectations of male strength, emotional toughness, readiness to be aggressive and use violence, not backing down, not 'touting', brushing off bullying, and an acceptance of the privileged position of heteronormativity. While very few boys actively identify with such a model of masculinity, almost all feel constrained by constructing a masculine identity that conforms with or is in oppositional relationship with this contextually dominant collective masculine reference point.

It is evident that many adolescent boys would benefit from increased support from educators in understanding masculinities. Overall, those who completed the survey tended to feel it is important that they get opportunities to explore notions of what it means to be a man with figure 9 showing 78% positioned themselves on the agree side of this particular statement. However, many young men felt this was not always prioritised in education. Conor (15) commented:



*It is important to have conversations with educators about what it means to be a man, but it doesn't really happen, it should definitely be done more often.*





**Figure 7 Thinking about being a man**

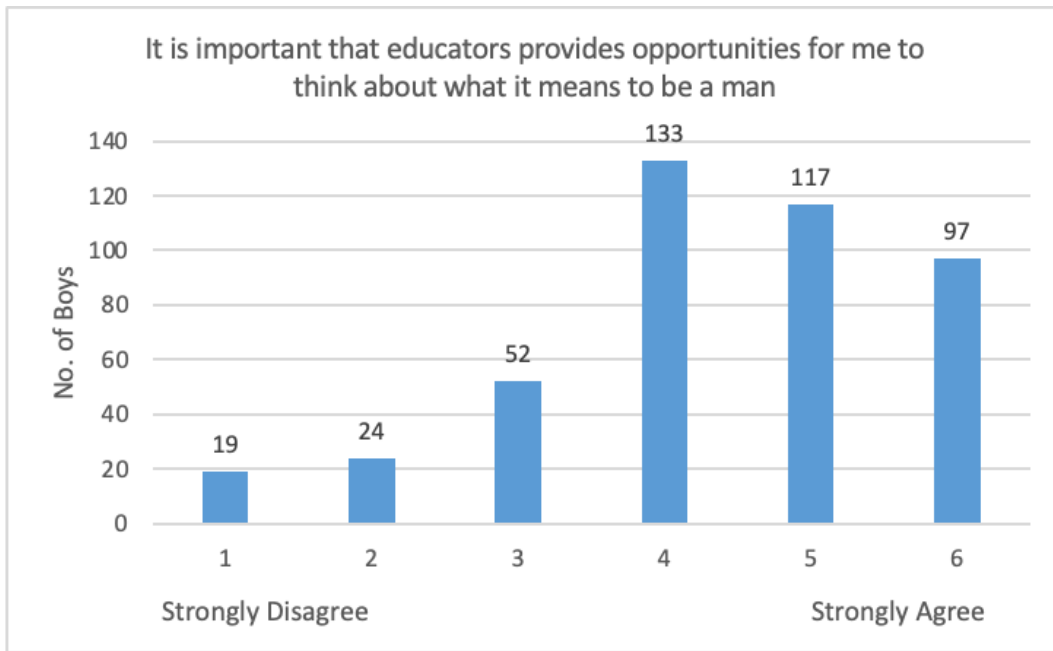
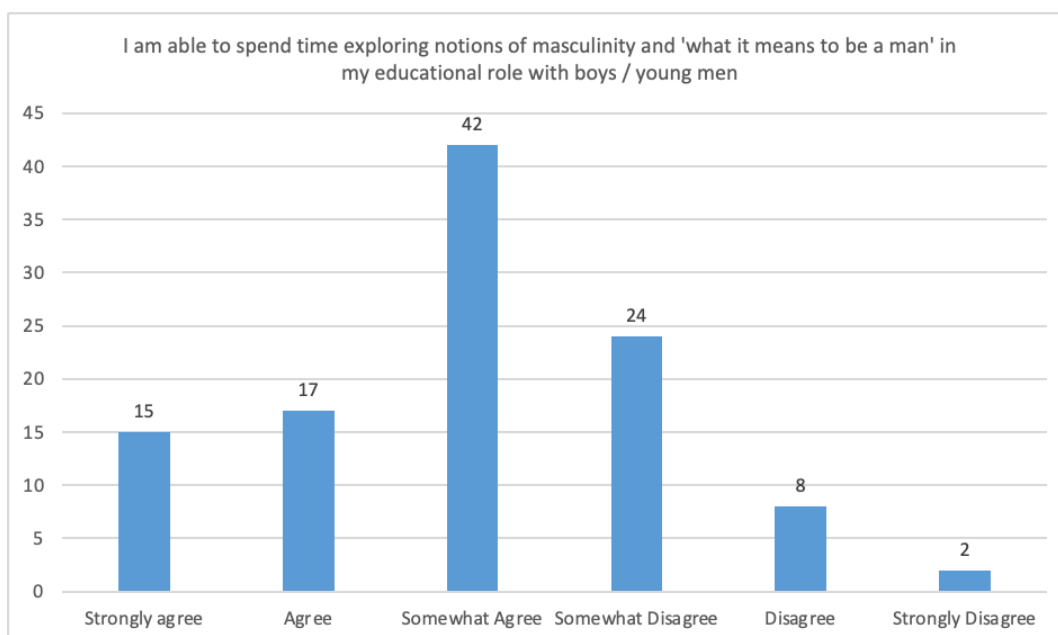


Figure 9 indicates relatively high levels of support from adolescent boys for engaging in conversations about being a man and masculinities. This contrasts with the limited opportunities reported by educators to facilitate such learning opportunities. Figure 10 shows that 42 of 108 educators (39%) surveyed in 2022 only somewhat agreed that they can spend time exploring themes of masculinity with the boys they work with. A further 22% somewhat disagreed with this statement. Together, these middling responses make up 61% of educators who can be interpreted as indicating a certain ambivalence when it comes to engaging with masculinities in their educational practice, or indeed a sense of frustration that they do not have more opportunities to do so.

**Figure 8 Exploring masculinities in educational settings**



While it is encouraging that 32 educators (30%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in figure 10, there remains work to be done, especially when considering a potential self-selection bias in the sample where educators volunteered to be involved in the TBS research and many reported from the outset a particular motivation for working more effectively with disengaged boys. It could be hypothesised that amongst the wider population of educators there would be less attentiveness or opportunities created for learning about masculinities and exploring what it means to be a man with adolescent boys.

## Learning Masculinities

Learning masculinities transpired through the research as a vital developmental process in engaging boys and young men. This process between educators and adolescent boys focuses on developing a deeper appreciation of masculinities and contextual realities that perpetuate compounded educational disadvantage. Educators reported that the 10 TBS principles prompted them to engage more critically and intentionally with adolescent boys as they navigate multiple models of masculinities enacted in families, communities, schools, and youth settings. Boys welcomed new opportunities to discuss masculinities, particularly in a conversational way with educators they had positive relationships with. An educator in an EOTAS setting explained:



*Understanding masculinities is inextricably linked to the communities some of the boys and young men come from and the male role models that they see in those communities. It's trying to dismantle that concept of what it means to be a man in their local community.*



Learning from boys and young men about their understandings of masculinities and how it is shaped by their community and cultural contexts builds a pedagogical approach to embedding masculinities in education. An emphasis on appreciative inquiry and what one youth worker described as 'curiosity' enabled educators to facilitate difficult conversations that challenge domineering or discriminatory attitudes and behaviours linked to contextually dominant masculinities. The youth worker explained:



*It's about getting curious. Asking the boys "what does that mean to you? Why do you feel the need to say that?" Asking them "does it make you feel more of a man to say that and act like that?" But to do it with empathy and understanding and curiosity because we don't always know a young man's external experiences or taught behaviours.*



While educators identified the importance and value of engaging with masculinities, many felt ill equipped and expressed uncertainty about how to do this effectively. A teacher in a grammar school admitted, *‘sometimes it’s easier to pretend you don’t hear the innuendos and banter amongst the boys’* but through engaging with the TBS principles became *‘more conscious and intentional in taking time to address these issues’*. Engaging with boys and addressing masculinities requires educators to first enter into a reflexive process of understanding their own gendered experiences and reflecting on how living in a gendered society influences their own personal and professional values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices.

## Re-balancing systems of power

The TBS principles frame a pedagogical approach that supports educators to respond more intentionally to enactments of contextually dominant masculinities and promote positive masculinities that support equity, equality, and inclusion. Demonstrating dignity and respect, utilising a strengths-based approach, valuing the voice of boys, connecting learning with boys’ community contexts are effective ways of re-balancing systems of power in educational settings with boys who often feel overlooked, falling behind, struggling with issues of identity, and disempowered in their schools and communities. This is a challenging concept in a hierarchical education system and involves educators using their power and authority in new ways to promote voice, agency, connectedness, and collective decision making.

Educators spoke of working intentionally to remove barriers that are socially and educationally embedded in power dynamics between adults and young people. Boys reported this was primarily achieved when educators were conversational, displayed humour, avoided labelling them as troublesome, and demonstrated a genuine care and interest in their everyday lives. Aoife, an informal educator working in partnership with a local school, reflected on her approach of intentionally subverting traditional power dynamics:



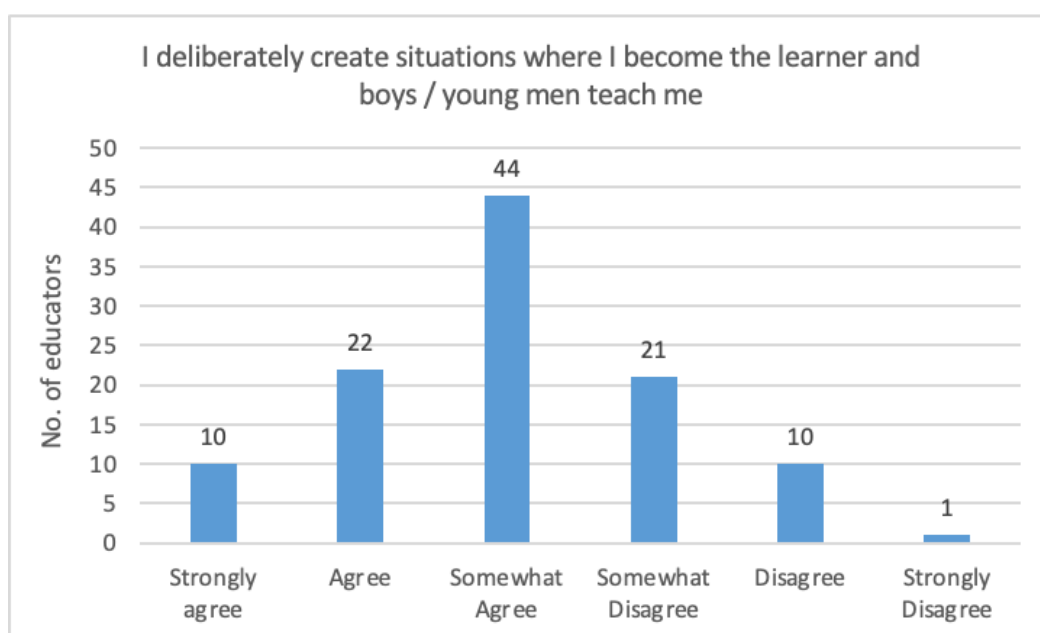
*Creating an equal playing field is really powerful because boys are so used to a power dynamic where educators have all the control in the classroom. It took us three months to break that cycle. We reinforced to boys this is your space as much as ours, and we have as much to learn from you as you have from us.*



Educators also noted that a key aspect of challenging how authority is exercised involves negotiating more productive forms of co-learning. Approaches that involve prizing the knowledge, experiences, competencies, and skills that each boy brings into a shared learning space were emphasised. This creates a network of horizontal relationships where educators learn from boys, boys learn from educators, and boys learn from each other. Boys indicated peer learning was not prioritised in formal education and in some cases was actively discouraged.

Figure 11 suggests that educators tend to be cautious about flipping traditional student-teacher learning hierarchies by putting themselves in the position of learner. While 32 of the 108 educators (30%) agreed, or strongly agreed, that they were deliberate about creating situations where they learn from boys and young men, 30% were more likely to disagree.

**Figure 9 Learning from boys**



The TBS principles offer a framework for developing a critical pedagogy with boys that encourages educators to consider how they re-balance power dynamics in ways which support democratic participation particularly of boys and young men experiencing compounded educational disadvantage. Such democratic practices safeguard against a single or small group of voices overriding, demeaning, or diminishing others but instead seek to invite everyone to play their part in establishing and maintaining equitable gender and power relations in educational settings.

### **Improving educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes**

Adolescent boys reported that when educators implemented the TBS relational approach, they felt more engaged with their learning and were more inclined to seek out academic as well as emotional support. A young man from a youth setting reflected ‘*staff take me seriously here*’. This sense of being valued alongside the youth workers’

commitments to appreciative inquiry guided by the 10 TBS principles led to more meaningful engagement around themes of masculinity, culture, education, personal relationships, and social change. Involving boys and young men experiencing compounded educational disadvantage in participatory action research focused on changing pedagogy, practice, and policy has been highly significant in enhancing relationships between boys and educators and building sense of purpose, belonging, and agency for these young men.

Educators across youth settings, schools, and EOTAS centres consistently identified the benefits of working relationally with boys and young men as leading to improved attendance levels, reduced behavioural issues, increased self-confidence, knowledge, interpersonal skills, and levels of participation. A senior teacher in a grammar school explained:



*Embedding the TBS relational approach started to change the overall atmosphere and ethos of the school. When the boys are happy in school attendance improves, and when attendance improves, outcomes improve.*



Educators focused more explicitly on specific principles in response to what they observed, and boys expressed as the most pressing needs. For some promoting positive mental health was prioritised leading to a new shared understanding between young men and educators of *'not only high expectations academically but also high expectations if there is a problem they can talk to us.'* For others valuing the voice of boys was most prominent and one group of teachers recognised that through participating in the research:



*The concept of student voice became real. Through research their voice is being heard and influencing how we change our approach to teaching and learning for the next generation coming through.*



An emphasis on enabling creative learning environments was reflected on as poignant in facilitating new and unplanned learning encounters. The vice principal of a secondary school recounted a trip to Belfast where one young man went out of his way to give a spare cup of tea to a man who appeared homeless. She noted that this small act was a

transformative moment for the young person, *‘seeing how he could effect change beyond his normal circumstances’*. Sharing the story with other staff was significant in changing the dominant narrative and reframing the image of boys who *‘traditionally in school have not been seen to be kind or generous’*.

Challenging and affirming masculine identities was deemed particularly important in the context of *‘polarising individuals in the media like Andrew Tate who get a lot of airtime and publicity’*. Many educators drew on these cultural divisive expressions of masculinity as a starting point for exploring masculinities with young men. A youth worker identified a need to *‘front load exploring masculinities with young men’* and reported the young men enjoyed sessions challenging *‘outdated notions of what it means to be male’* and gained a better understanding of how culturally ingrained ideas around masculinity *‘impacts their lives, the decisions they make, and their behaviours’*. Rather than distracting from an academic curriculum in schools, educators expressed how the TBS principles stimulated *‘reflection on how to teach topics with reference to masculinities’*. Affirming adolescent boys and intentionally fostering emotional learning spaces enabled them to *‘engage freely and openly without anxiety in discussing emotions’*.

Through the trial educators in different settings used the TBS principles as a framework to guide intentional, reflective, creative, and developmental practice with reference to local contexts, involving adolescent boys and educators as co-learners. As such, the principles are not intended to be applied prescriptively or dogmatically. The following summary from a senior teacher in an integrated school highlights the contextual usefulness of the principles in a formal education setting, with resonance for informal settings also:



*A lot of teachers were already using some of the principles but taking time to be reflective, it creates an opportunity to evaluate the language you use, how you interact with boys and consider multiple factors. The principles are a good map to inform practice and think about how to engage with boys and what works with boys.*



These findings speak to strength of the TBS research approach underpinned by the 10 principles of relational education and appreciative inquiry as a practical framework for engaging effectively with adolescent boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage. The next section of the report highlights key learning from engaging boys and the development of a research-generated gender-conscious relational learning approach. The strengthening of a localised educational ecosystem to support boys and young men is discussed as crucial to the ongoing success of TBS.

## LEARNING FROM RESEARCH WITH BOYS

The longevity of TBS has generated rich quantitative and qualitative data with adolescent boys and educators. When given the opportunity to express their views on education, relationships with educators, how they learn, masculinities, emotions, community contexts, and their everyday lives, boys have plenty to say. The insights these boys and young men have provided on issues that directly affect them, along with perspectives from educators, has led to the maturing of ideas and concepts informing new and productive ways of working with boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage. Synthesising this learning, two prominent concepts come to the fore. Firstly, the development of a new *gender-conscious relational pedagogy* underpinned by an appreciation of compounded educational disadvantage, contextually dominant masculinities, and relational education. Secondly is the concept of a *localised educational ecosystem* that supports adolescent boys to thrive in their education, learning, and wellbeing.

### **A gender-conscious relational pedagogy**

TBS research points to the efficacy of a gender-conscious relational pedagogy offering a response to the lack of engagement with masculinities in educational settings and a practical framework for re-connecting disengaged boys with their learning and education (Hamilton et al., 2024b). We have found that a deep appreciation of boys and young men's social and cultural contexts enriches educational encounters. Our research suggests this is most powerful when it comes directly from engagement with adolescent boys where educators position themselves as co-learners who are curious and interested in understandings boys' inner and social worlds.

TBS empirical data consistently evidences that relational ways of working are central to a critical gender pedagogy which seeks to re-balance systems of power in educational settings (Hamilton et al., 2024c). It focuses on positioning educators and boys as co-learners in a dialogical process (Freire, 1972) that empowers boys to embrace successful learner identities (Stahl, 2015), connect with emotions (Randell et al., 2016), and appreciate multiple and maturing expressions of masculinities. Our research driven definition of relational education maintains that learning encounters are enriched through opportunities for conversational, experiential, and participatory learning (Hammond and McArdle, 2023; Hickey and Riddle, 2022; Biesta, 2004). Such relational education with boys, informed through a lens of masculinities, enables educators to recognise and explore the importance of cultural histories and masculine identities embodied and expressed or repressed in educational settings (Pearson, 2021; De Boise and Hearn, 2017). The TBS principles provide a framework for embedding empowering

systemic practices that re-centre the emotional, social, cultural, interpersonal, developmental, and political dimensions of learning.

Many hundreds of adolescent boys and educators participating in TBS have demonstrated that as trust develops in relationships between educators and boys, opportunities for critical and reflective conversations arise. Such intentional conversations creates spaces for examining masculine hierarchies in community and school settings (Messerschmidt, 2019); reflecting on experiences of privilege, power, and powerlessness (Reichert and Keddie, 2019); exploring complicity and resistance to restrictive culturally embedded masculine expectations (Nielson et al., 2023; Way et al., 2014); and challenging notions of ‘masculine entitlement’ (Keddie, 2022, p.404).

Educators have found that developing a gender-conscious relational pedagogy requires first engaging reflexively with their own socially and cultural gendered experiences (Harland and Morgan, 2009). While *reflective* practice is encouraged as a process of deliberating on and developing personal and professional practices, the notion of *reflexivity* ‘extends beyond concepts of self-reference and self-awareness’ (Costa et al., 2019, p.21) and incorporates exploring our own positionality, power, and biases within specific social spaces. Individual and collective reflexivity is a practice capable of ‘returning to people the meaning of their actions’ involving ‘learning to know oneself, to situate oneself, to reflect upon one’s position’ (De Saint Martin 2003, p.331 cited Susen, 2016, p.22). Through the research teachers and youth workers have sought to facilitate this reflexive process on gendered relations and masculinities in a sensitive and responsive way with boys, recognising that attitudes and behaviours change as boys mature.

The TBS principles provide a framework for building, strengthening, and embedding a gender-conscious relational pedagogy that is not static but constantly evolving through a process of appreciative inquiry. It involves collaboration between teachers, youth workers, and boys and young men as co-learners, as well as support from all those feeding into the resourcing and implementation of curriculum, wellbeing, and holistic outcomes for young people in educational settings.

### **Localised educational ecosystem**

Over the past five years the TBS research at Ulster University (UU) has facilitated the active engagement of schools, youth services, EOTAS centres, communities, a range of educational bodies including Education Authority, CCMS, CSSC, and the Department of Education, as well as local business in what we have described as a *localised educational ecosystem* (Hamilton et al., 2024c). This ecosystem is dedicated to listening and responding to the needs and issues faced by adolescent boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage. Ulster University has been a major catalyst in activating a localised educational ecosystem and has played an instrumental role



through setting up and directly investing in the TBS research; employing a full time researcher over a 10 year period (2018-2028); establishing an innovative partnership between the widening access and participation department and the community youth work team at UU; resourcing the research team to develop strategic relationships with stakeholders across the education system locally and further afield; facilitating regular meetings with an active cross-sectoral steering group; providing a hub that brings interested parties together through, for example, educator conferences, events with boys and young men, and meetings with leaders in education, communities, and local business; and creating a dedicated space and platform for boys and young men's voices to be heard in efforts to effect change in educational policy, pedagogy, and practice.

The ecosystem lens emphasises the distinctive yet complementary roles that a broad range of actors and organisations can contribute to help remove barriers and promote pathways to success with adolescent boys who have been disenfranchised through compounded educational disadvantage. It encourages focusing on how each person and institution can offer their 'gift' in supporting these boys to thrive. Connecting educators across the boundaries of mainstream schools, alternative education centres, and youth work settings has supported the development of an ecosystem that appreciates, learns from, and innovates together in supporting the holistic growth of boys. The TBS principles have provided a blueprint for the educational ecosystem to generate a change in culture that affirms gender-conscious relational pedagogies. The development of this localised educational ecosystem and development of a relational gender critical pedagogy has proved integral to supporting and re-engaging these boys and young men in their education and learning. This ecosystem approach continues to grow, drawing upon the collective capacities of policymakers, practitioners, parents, politicians, leaders in education and communities, local businesses, media, researchers, and the wider educational infrastructure that surrounds boys. As part of this ecosystem, TBS invites each organisation, group, and individual to contribute what is within their gift to enable boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage to flourish. The process of strengthening a localised educational ecosystem has gained traction in other contexts with a network of universities across England adopting and applying the TBS principles and research approach and establishing a regional Boys' Impact Hub (Blower, 2022).

### **An ecosystem of systemic change**

Having established an evidence base of the benefits of the educational ecosystem approach applied in diverse educational settings, we advocate for an ecosystem approach to tackling compounded educational disadvantage across the domains of policy, pedagogy, and practice. There is no single solution to tackling the stubborn issue of low-level academic attainment and progression that disproportionately impacts certain boys. Rather, a current of new approaches and collaborative actions are required to create meaningful and sustainable change for these boys and young men, which places their voices and experiences at the centre of the change agenda. To date our

primary emphasis has been on collaborating with and developing pedagogy and practice within and across post-primary schools, youth organisations, EOTAS centres, and higher education. However, the ecosystem concept is much broader and our findings capturing the perspectives of adolescent boys and their educators have implications for other sectors. The ecosystem approach places adolescent boys impacted by compounded educational disadvantage at the centre of the policy-practice nexus. In so doing it calls for all those who have a responsibility for removing barriers and improving holistic outcomes for these boys to identify, evaluate, and strengthen their distinctive contributions to the ecosystem. The TBS principles provide a common framework and language for reorienting and reshaping how institutions and adults relate to adolescent boys across a range of institutions including education, justice, healthcare, and employment. Indeed, the everyday lives of adolescent boys have touchpoints with all of these sectors as they variously talked in the research about relationships with teachers, experiences of violence, their mental health, and thoughts about their future education and job prospects. Encapsulated in the TBS principles and gender-conscious relational pedagogy are three key messages from adolescent boys that are relevant across all domains of the ecosystem:

1. Start by listening to adolescent boys through the lens of appreciative inquiry
2. Embed relational approaches that re-balance traditional power dynamics
3. Provide opportunities to explore, unpack, question, and affirm masculinities

These messages are further developed in the recommendations section. This is preceded by four brief testimonials from educators who have embedded TBS in their setting.

### **Olwen Black and Mary Montgomery Belfast Boys' Model School**

Belfast Boys' Model School holds the 'Taking Boys' Seriously' research project of Ulster University in high regard for its longitudinal examination of ongoing, complex problems which result in educational underachievement by boys. This issue has often been associated with poverty, class, ethnicity, and social disadvantage that can impact the life opportunities of those affected.

The school's leadership regarded the findings of the University's first era of TBS research (Harland and McCready, 2012) as a ground-breaking voice in the local education landscape of its time. The recommendations from that research were informed by the school's work in developing new approaches to building positive relationships within a male learning environment. The aim being to help boys to remove barriers to their learning. Fortunately, the outworking of those strategies did bring about significant improvement in outcomes for the next generation of pupils at the school and raised the regard of others for the focus on relationships.

The school continues to value the developmental work of the Taking Boys' Seriously research project (TBS 2) with the highly regarded work of the recent period. This research has proposed and trialled a key list of inter-linked principles that easily inhabits a new culture of personal, respectful, and responsive care that permeates the life of the school. These principles inform solution-orientated, proactive strategies which can help the school to develop and educate young men to become successful citizens in society.

This 'Taking Boys Seriously 2' phase of the research (2018-2023) has been valued by the school's pupils, staff and local community for its work in collecting the 'unheard voices' and endorses the project's creation of a new platform for the development of supportive ecosystems. These have the potential to influence educational policy makers and play a more central role in the next phase of educating boys.

## **Paul Johnston, OBE Monkstown Boxing Club**

Engaging in the Ulster University TBS research project has proven immensely beneficial for our staff, leading to heightened awareness and expanded skill sets. Through active participation, staff members have gained valuable insights into relational principles, receiving specialized training that directly enhances the delivery of our education programmes. The integration of practice-based and evidence-based learning methodologies has equipped our team with a diverse toolkit, enabling them to foster an enriched educational environment. This collaboration with Ulster University has not only elevated our staff's expertise but has also contributed significantly to the overall effectiveness of our organisation.

The collaboration between Monkstown Boxing Club (MBC), Abbey Community College (ACC), and Ulster University (UU) forms a robust foundation for our programme development and delivery. Rooted in a strong evidence base, our partnership thrives on the principles of relational learning, fostering an exchange of knowledge and expertise through steering group membership and various knowledge dissemination events. This alliance not only enhances the effectiveness of our programmes but also cultivates a rich environment that nurtures continuous growth and innovation in education.

The partnership between MBC, local schools, and Ulster University has ushered in transformative changes for young men, instilling a heightened awareness of masculinity principles. Through the implementation of the relational learning approach championed by TBS, these individuals have experienced a positive shift in their personal development. This collaborative effort not only enriches their understanding of masculinity but also empowers them with valuable skills and perspectives, creating a supportive environment conducive to their holistic growth.

The impact of the Ulster University research project on young men in the community is evident in their empowerment to comprehend the changes inherent in adolescence. Equipped with enhanced coping skills, particularly in navigating risk-taking behaviour, young men have heightened their self-awareness and also equipped them with knowledge about the support services available within the local community. This comprehensive understanding fosters a resilient and informed youth population, positively shaping their journey through adolescence.

## Ann McCann Loughshore EOTAS

As a result of participating in the TBS research we at Loughshore refocused our efforts on Relational Learning, Restorative Practice, Nurture Based provision and strengthening Student Voice in the planning, delivery and evaluation of our daily EOTAS provision. The TBS Programme facilitated us understanding the complex challenging world of our students better and made us as a staff even more determined to be both the courageous Professional Advocates for our young people, by engaging in further CPD that would assist us in this and to be reflective about our own education journeys and the vital role we play in not just nurturing our students but also indirectly helping the communities from which they come from by validating their experience/identity and nurturing ambition and strong self-esteem/self-care.

We have established a protected Form Tutor Period at the start of each day to provide one to one opportunity for our student - teacher relational learning to flourish as well as the student voice as individual daily auditing of provision to embed in our reflective professional practice of providing the best possible personalised learning we can. These daily relational conversations help the student and staff member address SEN, pastoral, wellbeing/mental health, and academic needs as well as any possible safeguarding needs before the day even really begins. This maximises the opportunity for a positive productive day for both as well as further support if needed. In short, we are actively creating a bespoke *relational learning* culture in our setting as a long-term consequence of TBS.

Also, as a consequence of TBS we have successfully achieved sought after places on the Restorative Schools Project as the only EOTAS, Nurture Schools, as well as more recently the DE /EA *Being Well Doing Well* project with an emphasis on relational learning, strengthening positive relationships, and making trauma informed practice and mental health support a priority. We are also on track for AwareNI Mental Health Accreditation, with staff trained as Mental Health First Aiders and student voice strengthened through student-based mental health workshops, with the potential to become Mental Health Buddies for other students / friends in their communities. All these developments have been sparked from our engagement with TBS which has helped to affirm and realign our ethos and has been a catalyst for staff and students to be more reflective and engaged.

## FUTURE VISION

Influencing systemic change to bring about improved educational experiences and outcomes for adolescent boys impacted by compounded educational disadvantage is the guiding vision of TBS. It is a vision that resonates with the educators, community leaders, parents, policymakers, and local business leaders we have engaged with to date.

The education system in Northern Ireland is at a critical juncture. The [Independent Review of Education](#), building on [A Fair Start Report](#) and the directives outlined in the [New Decade New Approach Deal](#), explicitly calls for systemic changes to tackle disadvantage and dismantle barriers to educational achievement and progress for, amongst other groups, males from low-income households and those with special educational needs, a large proportion of whom are male.

The TBS research, and specifically the TBS principles, educational ecosystem, and gender-conscious relational pedagogy, provide an evidence-based, locally developed, assets-oriented framework for tackling compounded educational disadvantage with adolescent boys. This approach is ripe for embedding in educational policy and scaling up through initial and post-qualifying teacher and youth worker training. Significantly, the developments from the research reflect the views and voices of adolescent boys as well as the perspectives of indigenous educators across both formal and informal education. Together, these educators and the young men they work with are experts on the issues at hand and our research is focused on elevating their voices, drawing out lessons from effective practice, and collaborating to develop new insights and strategies for change.

The next phase of TBS (2024-2028) aims to map and strengthen the ecosystem that enables adolescent boys and young men to thrive and will continue to utilise a blend of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, guided by the principles of participatory action research. The research team are encouraged by existing and new partnerships with educational bodies, schools, youth organisations, and local communities and will continue inviting individuals and groups to apply their gift as part of the educational ecosystem that enables boys to thrive.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations stem from a central concern that education pedagogy, policy and practice should be more directly informed by the everyday lives and experiences of boys and young men's lives who are faced with compounded educational disadvantage. The insights from these adolescent boys point to wider systemic issues and opportunities for change that have the potential to positively impact upon all learners and educators within the ecosystem.

### **EDUCATIONAL ECOSYSTEM:**

1. Develop increased collaboration through the educational pipeline across formal and informal education as well as with local businesses and wider community resources to enhance support and outcomes for boys within an active educational ecosystem.
2. Establish a regional hub dedicated to bringing together and developing research, policy, training, resources, and new initiatives to enable a targeted, sustainable, locally embedded, educational ecosystem focused on improving holistic outcomes for boys and young men faced with compounded educational disadvantage.

### **POLICY:**

3. Invest in educator training which equips educators to embed gender-conscious relational pedagogy in educational contexts with boys.
4. Apply greater emphasis to indicators of success in education beyond GCSE and A-Level results. This is applicable for all students but with a particular focus on boys experiencing compounded educational disadvantage e.g:
  - youth participation and youth voice;
  - sense of belonging;
  - educator-student relationships;
  - dialogue & peer learning;
  - strength-based approaches that build confidence, resilience, determination, optimism, and utilisation of support networks;
  - young people talking about feelings and accessing emotional support;
  - young people talking about academic problems and accessing academic support;
  - understanding and managing emotions;

- critical thinking and reflection on masculinities;
  - inclusive and equitable gender relations.
5. TBS-proof policies to embed strengths-based language and screen for deficit narratives in relation to boys and young men.

### **PEDAGOGY:**

6. Embed critical reflection on masculinities in formal education & youth work curricula with an emphasis on:
- understanding a gendered society and how this shapes attitudes and behaviours;
  - challenging narrow and normative models of masculinity premised on male dominance, competition, emotional toughness, readiness for violence;
  - considering different expressions and models of masculinity encountered in communities, in schools, on social media etc.;
  - supporting adolescent boys to think about and discuss what it means to be a man;
  - facilitating conversations around male privilege and disadvantage;
  - the role of young men in challenging gender stereotypes and speaking out against gender-based violence.
7. Create space for educators to reflect on their own gendered experiences and socialisation and consider, in dialogue with other educators, how to:
- create opportunities to explore masculinities in their engagement with boys and young men;
  - work more relationally;
  - better understand the social and cultural contexts boys are coming from.
8. Apply and build upon the TBS principles and gender-conscious relational learning in educational contexts with boys.

### **PRACTICE:**

9. Apply TBS principles in context-specific ways.
10. Affirm boys talking about emotions and ‘check-in’ with boys about their feelings and where they get support.



11. Facilitate both planned and 'unscripted' conversations around masculinities with boys which are embedded in curriculum as well as responded to in the moment.
12. Employ appreciative inquiry as a way learning from boys through conversations about their motivations, aspirations, interests, and examples of how they have overcome barriers in the past.

# APPENDICES

Further material can be found on the TBS webpage: [ulster.ac.uk/tbs](http://ulster.ac.uk/tbs) including a range of recent publications.

## APPENDIX 1

Figure 2 Ranked A-Level attainment for academic year 2017/18

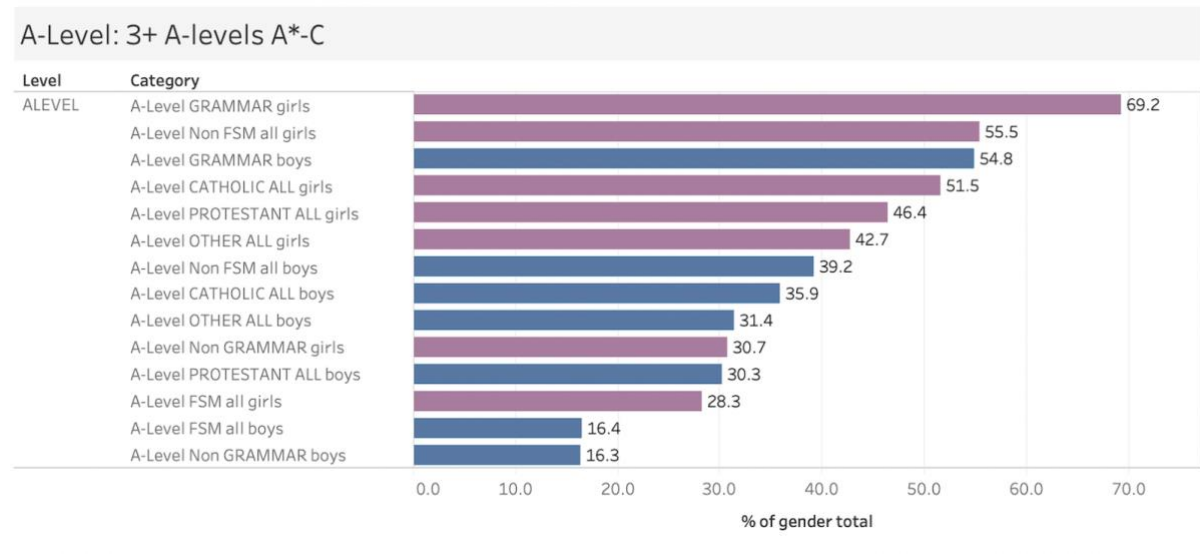
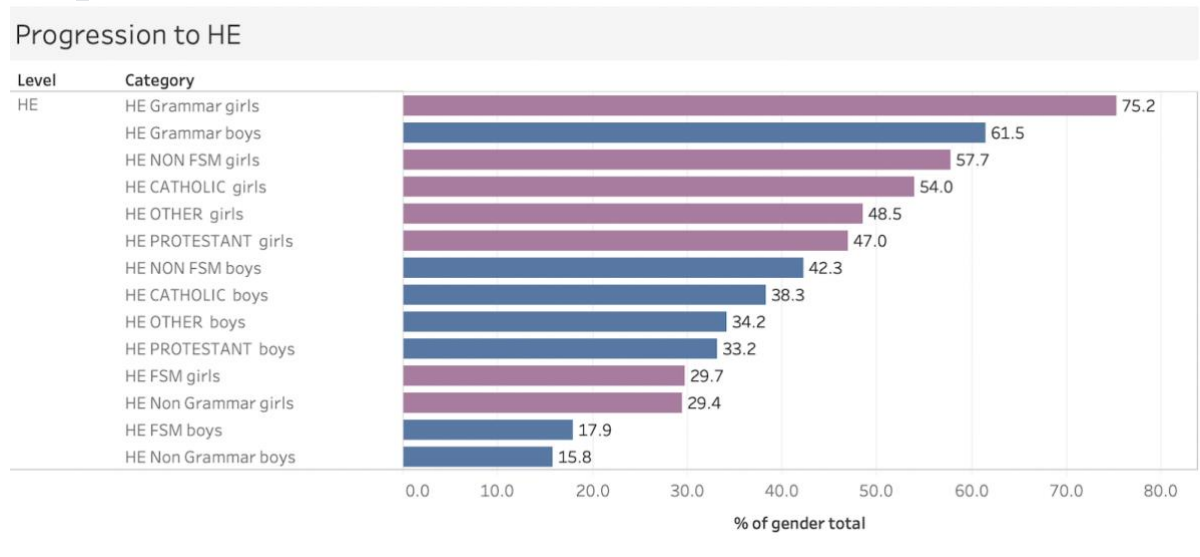


Figure 3 Ranked Progression to Higher Education for academic year 2017/18



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# STEERING GROUP





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