

GLOBAL
BOYHOOD
INITIATIVE

The State of UK Boys

Understanding and Transforming Gender in the Lives of UK Boys

A Report for the Global Boyhood Initiative



Acknowledgements

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Introduction

From education and achievement to mental health and well-being to violence and aggression, the 'state of boys' has long been a feature of UK (and global) educational, societal and political debate. Against this backdrop, a raft of evidence-based research has not only contested the notion of a singular 'state' of boys, but also complicated the category of 'boy' and, therefore, what it means to be a boy today.

This literature review aims to capture some of this research in order to provide insight into the complex and ever-changing conditions of UK boys and to inform practice and thinking in this area. Understanding the multiple ways that boys, boyhoods and masculinities are constructed and produced in contemporary societies, and how these relate to other gender formations, is fundamental if we are to support and respond meaningfully to the diverse experiences of boys.

To explore the 'state of UK boys', we used a two-prong approach consisting of a literature review and 15 key informant interviews.


For the literature review, we used 'gender and boys' and 'masculinities' as key variables and search terms in academic databases (e.g., University College London's [UCL's] Explore, Web of Science, Social Sciences Citation Index), seeking out socio-cultural perspectives on gender that locate and contextualise research on masculinities to understand diversity and equity issues in this field (see box). These approaches offer a different take than individualising and essentialising psychological approaches to gender, and they have great potential for helping us think differently about the complexity of masculinities. What follows is based partly on our eventual database of over 430 key sources, although we recognise that a literature review of this length cannot fully do justice to all of the issues upon which it touches.

Using a Sociological Gender Frame

Our search involved a sociological gender frame, which looks at the relationship between the individual and wider social power structures (Connell, 2020). It argues that gender is not tied to sex organs, hormones or biological traits – indeed, many scholars question whether 'biological' attributes exist independently of the society that gives them meaning.


Instead, gender as a concept describes how gender is socially constructed; how societies classify, order and regulate sex categories; the cultural meanings attached to gender roles; how individuals understand their gender identities; and how they can also occupy more than one gender position.

In particular, we explored theorisations of masculinities, boyhood and gender that have implications for how we approach these issues; some of this conceptual literature is international but is relevant to the UK.



We also critically reviewed scholarship that focuses on the experiences of and practices with boys, children and young people aged 4 to 13. Much of this is UK-based, but we also drew on international examples when they contributed to deeper understanding and insight, just as some research with older boys shed light on the contexts in which younger boys are growing up.

We also conducted 15 key informant interviews with experts on gender, masculinities and boyhood through online video calls and email due to pandemic-related precautions. Our key informants' perspectives helped inform the structure and shape of this report, and their insights are also found in selected quotations throughout the paper on the state of research, policy and interventions related to young masculinities. Our contributors were:

- 
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Developing Complex Understandings

Gender, Boyhoods and Masculinities

Gender is a category that is both analytic and everyday, taken for granted and contested, abstract and concrete, extensive and intensive, intimate and institutionalised.

(Thomson, Berriman and Bragg., 2018, p. 113)

Sociological perspectives on gender emphasise that it is not innate, not something that one 'is' or 'has'. Rather, gender is continually socially constructed through everyday interactions, discourse and institutions. Being a boy or a man is a (subject) position into which individuals are 'summoned' and which can be taken up, refused or negotiated in different ways; the same is also true for those gendered as girls and women. There is no one way of 'doing boy' (Renold, 2001; Swain, 2005a; Connell and Pearse, 2015). Multiple possibilities of masculinity can be concurrently produced and navigated within the same institutional, cultural and social setting (Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2006): in school, for example, high achievers, sporty types, nerds and cool/popular boys. Gender comes in and out of visibility: when, how, why and by whom gender is named or identified and when it remains un(re)marked are highly significant for the politics of gender.

Our 'Beyond Male Role Models' study highlighted, as a key finding, the situated and localised nature of young masculinities, which was a surprise to us: We had assumed that, with the growth of mass media, and especially social media, ideas around 'being a man' would be more universal and shared across social and geographical locations.

Martin Robb

The concept of socialisation helps in understanding how children are influenced to develop their gender identities along socially acceptable lines. However, it tends to suggest that children unquestioningly absorb and reproduce gender stereotypes, as well as that they are passive recipients of external gender formations. Scholarship in childhood studies, by contrast, emphasises children as competent, active agents who co-construct their social worlds (Connolly, 2008). Some scholars describe children's accomplishments in enacting gender identities through practices, language, aspirations and politics as their 'gender projects' (Connell, 2005). Recent research also notes that gender diversity is increasingly a condition of children's gender identities (Hines and Taylor, 2018; Bragg *et al.*, 2018; Allen *et al.*, 2022). In the UK and beyond (Peltola and Phoenix, 2022), gender is highly complex, constantly shifting and encompassing many categories beyond a binary boy/girl dichotomy.

For instance, Bragg et al. (2018) found young people aged 12 to 14 using 'expanded vocabularies of gender identity/expression'; in a survey by Renold et al. (2017), 69 per cent of 13- to 18-year-olds disagreed or strongly disagreed that 'there are only two genders', and 85 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'people should be free to choose their genders'. Other research notes confusion and resistance among some young people (Allen *et al.*, 2022) and the classed nature of some young people's self-consciously 'gender-fluid' identifications (Thomson *et al.*, 2018).

Gender is not a static thing that belongs to an individual human subject. It's constantly shifting, moving, mutating, [which is] why you see hypermasculinity at some moments and then very feminine displays of behaviour in the next by the same child.

Jayne Osgood

We should consider and understand how specific contexts and relationships, including with adults and institutions, shape the possibilities for gender. As an example, Archer's (2001) research with Muslim teenage boys in the UK emphasises how their gendered 'performances' varied according to the interviewer: for instance, sometimes being more resistant to and less loquacious with her as a white woman, and sometimes exerting their Muslim masculinity more strongly with her British Pakistani woman co-researcher. Pascoe (2011) notes similar processes in her work, with group and individual interviews with boys generating very different conversations. All this troubles the idea of masculinity as inherent, fixed or singular. Research itself can perpetuate particular ideas of masculinity: for instance, by 'finding' behaviours that align with gendered norms and expectations when the researchers have not, in fact, looked for behaviours out of sync with these norms.

Researchers are also increasingly identifying the multi-sensory dimensions of resources, people, contexts and materials that all help shape and mould the gendered practices and processes of children 'doing' their gender (Spyrou, Rosen and Cook., 2018; Renold and Mellor, 2013; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019). For instance, scholars have noted that spatial arrangements like changing rooms, locker rooms and sporting dynamics (Kehler, Messner and Hartman, 2016), as well as the soundscapes of how different formations of masculinities play out in the classroom (Dernikos, 2020), and many more elements, can help us understand how gendered subjects, knowledges, truths and literacies emerge in interaction or 'intra-action' with these (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019; Dernikos, 2020).

A nuanced perspective on gendering processes in society and for individuals also shows how masculinity is about more than individual boys or men. Spaces, for instance, can and do become gendered: Toilets are one obvious example (Browne, 2004; Slater, Jones and Procter, 2018), and one can visualise a school playground where some or most boys occupy most of the space for football and most girls are pushed to the margins – and also of how this can change with appropriate awareness, support and resourcing.

Other examples include science being understood in school as a 'masculinised' practice even if it involves girls and/or women teachers, or how we might understand women as engaging in practices of masculinity. This broader perspective on gender is also why it is inadequate to see 'problems' like sexism or racism as inherent to specific individuals who, therefore, just need to be 'fixed'. This 'deficit' approach does nothing to address the context that encourages, sustains and reproduces such issues.

The issue is as much the way knowledge is gendered and produced, how boys can be aligned with science, defend it and exclude girls – how masculinity is a seductive form of power, which interventions need to recognise.

Louise Archer

Our approach is intersectional: That is, it attempts to specify which boys are being considered or placed in the foreground rather than treating 'boys' as an undifferentiated category. Multiple, intersecting factors related to race, age, social class, geographical location/space, sexuality, ethnicity, (dis)ability, nationality, looked-after status (that is, children who are in foster or institutional care) and so on shape gender experiences, definitions, norms and ideals in different ways. It is critical to see these factors as interconnected to account for different 'constellations' of experience (Youdell, 2005a, 2005b). Thomsson, Bragg and Kehily's (2018) research shows the complexities of growing up in London for a Black boy, around whom a nexus (or 'assemblage') of housing policy, state policing, school and parental-choice policies, religion, post-colonialism and migrations, family structures and histories of Black populations in the UK shape his life and his family's ambitions and fears for him:

As part of her 'day in the life' study of eight-year-old Nkosi, researcher Sue walks for half an hour with him, his sister and his mother Lorraine through the rain and London housing estates to reach his Catholic primary school. On the way, Sue and Lorraine chat about Nkosi's recent, costly, birthday party, and how his father is returning to the Caribbean soon. They pass the local, more convenient, primary school that his cousins attend, and a police stop-and-search, which Lorraine comments has been happening regularly for months. Before entering the school, Nkosi changes his rain boots for shiny black shoes.

Research shows how it can be problematic to emphasise one aspect of identity over another: for instance, in educational debates, prioritising class over ethnicity privileges white interests (Gillborn, 2008). Without acknowledging the diversity of boys' experiences, we risk centring white, middle-class notions of boyhood as a norm against which others may be measured and deemed failing.

Don't discuss differences in pockets; discuss all bodies as different or all experiences of gender as different. Centre diversity across all these intersections and all these characteristics of marginalisation. We need to talk about not just differences but markers of hierarchy that can be the basis of discrimination.

Vanita Sundaram

Of particular note is the 'adultification' of Black children, when they are perceived as 'adult-like', less innocent and less vulnerable than their white peers – a notion that has deep historical roots in slavery and colonialism (Bernstein, 2011; Walton, 2021). Services may overlook their needs and disregard their legal rights to be supported and safeguarded. Subsequently, Black children may not be afforded the same protection as their non-Black peers: for instance, from being strip-searched in schools or stopped and searched in their communities by police (Davis and Marsh, 2020).

Young men [in some parts of London] are routinely strip-searched, and it's never understood as sexual, as humiliation, as a form of non-consensual sexual violence. So, what do we need to do to change the narrative for boys and young men in that traumatic space?

Katherine Gilmour

Our approach is also 'post-developmental'. Traditionally, childhood has been understood through developmental approaches that depict children as moving through a series of predetermined, universal, biological stages in the passage to (heterosexual, procreative) adulthood – or as growing 'up' and, thus, always in a state of 'becoming' something else in the future. Increasingly, however, these accounts have been eclipsed in favour of identifying how childhood is both culturally and temporally specific and considering the agency of children themselves. Scholar Kathryn Bond Stockton's (2009) work on the 'queer child' and her metaphor of 'growing sideways' enables us to attend to the complexity and possibility of children's lives, to see their rich 'being' in the present. Her work has been taken up by researchers to highlight the many non-normative ways children perform gender, resisting the desire to fix gender as singular and disrupting simplistic associations between sexed and gendered bodies.

Early childhoods are generative, 'queer' spaces to do research about gender and how gender gets produced. The limitations and the binaries around gender do not appear to be as rigid in early childhood as in later age groups, and although there is some regulation of gender that happens within nursery settings, there's a greater openness because children are positioned as being innocent and so non-normative gender behaviour is not seen as too problematic.

Jayne Osgood

We can distinguish how gender is *lived* (e.g., as identity, as expression, through social interaction) from how it is *regulated* (e.g., legally and by socio-cultural norms for men and women's behaviour) and *represented* (e.g., in language, media, popular culture) (Renold *et al.*, 2017). We can understand these as operating on different scales, and we need an account that embraces the nuance, contradictions and contestations of lived gender while also highlighting enduring social patterns and hierarchies.

Studies of how gender is experienced, enacted and embodied in everyday lives, particularly drawing on the perspectives of children themselves, show how boys and girls participate, negotiate, contest, subvert and comply in the construction of their gender and in the regulation of their peers' and others' gender identities (MacNaughton, 2000; Osgood and Robinson, 2017).

It needs to be emphasised how nuanced performances of masculinities are and how it's very much contextualised to time and place. Boys can practise dominant, subordinate, personalised, caring masculinities all in one day, in different places at different times.

Jon Swain

Psychoanalytically informed perspectives add to this complex picture that masculinities are always in process, never fully achieved or secure. This can help account for the anxieties and rage sometimes provoked in the struggle to be a 'proper' boy or by those who refuse this position (Rose, 2016; Walkerdine, 2007; Hickey-Moody, 2019).

But gender is not just an identity category that makes itself felt in interactions between groups and between individuals. *It is also an organising principle of society.* All elements of society are gendered, and the dominant patterns of that organisation are the society's normative 'gender order' (Connell, 2005) or 'gender regime'.

Hence, gender is regulated, collective, institutional and governed – for instance, by laws, medical classifications, statistics, educational and religious practices, the built environment and assumed norms (particularly of whiteness and heterosexuality). The term ‘heteronormative’ refers to the privileging of heterosexual relationships – and associated distinct gender roles – as the ‘normal’, ‘natural’ expression of sexuality. More recently, the term ‘cisnormative’ has been used to describe when sex and gender match and to question this as the only possible route for gender expression. Normative gender expectations function as tools to classify and police gendered behaviours, and a significant body of research discusses how these expectations are used to target those who do not conform to what is ‘ideal’ or ‘appropriate’ for their gender.

Public *representations* of boys and boyhood, by contrast, often present simpler, more linear narratives. They tend to position boys as in opposition to and distinct from girls and as naturally predisposed to behave in particular ways: ‘Boys will be boys’. This fixed conception is particularly problematic when it implies that male violence or harassment of women springs from innate impulses. This naturalised and essentialised idea of boyhood neglects how masculinity and ideals of what it means to be a man or boy are situation-specific and change – with these changes being something we can all likely identify as occurring in our own lives.

The research and our informants also identified the popular pseudoscience of brain-based, essential and natural gender differences as unhelpful in exploring young masculinities, with these differences not being upheld by academic research (Fine, 2010; Rippon, 2020). Scholars have commented on how stubbornly some ‘common sense’ notions persist, seemingly immune to evidence: for instance, when individuals rather than systems and structures are held responsible for poverty and school failure (O’Hara, 2020) or Black boys are blamed for their higher rates of school exclusion (Gillborn 2008). This review hopes to contribute to questioning some of the certainties in public discourses.

Notably, all of the topics considered in this paper must be read in light of the structural difficulties created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns from March 2020 into late 2021 in the UK. Disadvantaged and vulnerable children had less access to resources at home, including for learning; were less likely to receive resources such as online classes during lockdown; and were more likely to be absent from school (more frequently and for longer) than their better-off peers. Some young people witnessed or were subject to more violence within the home, and some experienced other mental health challenges as a result of economic and social restrictions. Understanding the pandemic’s long-term impacts on young people, including boys in the UK, is an ongoing task.

Masculinities as hegemonic, relational and hierarchical

As the previous section underscores, contemporary thinking about gender suggests that boyhood is not fixed, unitary and stable. Rather, boyhoods are multiple, plural, fluid and changing. They emerge in relation to femininities/girlhoods, other masculinities, contexts (including space and place) and the institutions and adults who shape the possibilities for how masculinities are defined.

Despite their fluid nature, gendered qualities are also hierarchical, with ideal 'masculine' qualities positioned as more desirable and socio-culturally valuable, than 'feminine' ones. This helps explain how some boys may invest in masculine norms as a route to status and pleasure – how they are, as Louise Archer noted earlier, 'seductive' for some boys, even if oppressive for others.

The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' has evolved in scholarship to help explain how men's dominance comes to be seen as legitimate – not just through physical force or political control, but by being more highly valued (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity attempts to capture ideals of 'proper' masculinity dominant in particular times and places (Connell, 2005), which are accepted even by those (arguably the majority) who do not achieve them. It relates these to patriarchy (that is, to a male-dominated social order that justifies the subordination of women and of other marginalised ways of being a man) and other power relations, such as those of colonialism (Connell, 2016).

Hegemonic masculinity is actively defined in relation to, and often built against, femininities and other subordinate masculinities. Although what it means is context-specific and therefore not fixed, it is commonly described as involving physical, sexual and mental prowess; being action-oriented; 'knowing'; having autonomy and separation from others; and being emotionally tough. The concept is important in accounting for the affective experience of being a boy or man – for instance, how and why boys may experience school failure (academically or at team sports) as particularly painful and shameful (Jackson, 2006).

Hegemonic masculinity as a concept also highlights how masculinity – specifically, white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity – is often assumed but invisible as a structuring norm. By explicitly identifying hegemonic masculinity while recognising that it is not total or singular, we create space for change and challenge, as we will explore. Some scholars have identified the emergence of more inclusive masculinities that accept or even celebrate feminism and gay rights and that permit deeper physical and affective intimacy between men (Anderson, 2010; McCormack, 2013). Others have argued, however, that this literature overstates how much homophobic attitudes have declined while understating prevailing misogyny (hatred of and defining oneself against girls/women and femininity) (Ging and Siapera, 2019).

Backlash or 'recuperative masculinity' politics

There is starting to be a recognition of the global backlash that we're seeing against women and girls' rights, against LGBT rights, and of the level of coordination and money that is flowing into men's rights movements for work that superficially sounds as though it's helpful to boys and young men, but often is potentially quite harmful.

Katherine Gilmour

Distinct from the critical concept of hegemonic masculinity, since at least the 1980s, forms of 'masculinity politics' have emerged that explicitly discuss masculinity's meaning and place in gender relations. However, they do so to portray men and boys (specifically, white, heterosexual ones) as in crisis, victimised by feminism and social justice movements and now suffering 'reverse discrimination' compared to women and racial and sexual minorities. There is also evidence of new 'hybrid' masculinities that self-consciously contest dominant hegemonic ideals but are firmly antifeminist (Ging, 2019). We have seen an alarming increase in the trend of 'men's rights' activism online, with social media influencers like Andrew Tate capitalising on the idea of male victimhood (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). Ignoring the intersectional complexity of race, class and gender, this backlash against equality is a misreading of social inequity and an expression of defensive or recuperative masculinity. To effectively counter it, we must place how masculinity is defined through processes of 'othering' within the context of processes of class, place, capitalism and globalisation.

The term 'toxic masculinity' has become popular in recent years, referring to the harmful aspects of traditional norms of masculinity, such as misogyny, homophobia, aggression and emotional repression. However, whether this term is helpful, or whether it reifies and simplifies toxic masculinity as located only within individual (men's) bodies, is much debated by educational researchers (Elliott, 2018).

Evidence on the State of UK Boys

With this conceptual background in mind, we turn now to discussing literature that helps us understand the state of UK boys. We address what have been identified as some of the crucial institutions in the lives of boys, including families, school, leisure, markets and social media, along with some themes related to violence and well-being.

Violence as Normalised in the Lives of Boys

Men's violence – against women and against other men and minority groups – is an endemic problem in all societies, one that is underreported and inadequately addressed in policy and practice. A complex, intersectional picture of masculinities and femininities enables us to understand how young boys are socialised into masculine norms involving dominance, violence and homophobia, which are disciplinary and harmful to boys in diverse ways (Burrell, Ruxton and Westmarland, 2019).

Lombard's (2015, 2016) research with 11- and 12-year-olds in Glasgow shows how children construct their understanding of violence through gender, childhood, space and time. They normalise violence as a biological – and, therefore, natural – difference between men and women. This enables boys to distance themselves from any violence in the present, in that they see violence as a mark of male adulthood, while also anticipating that violence during the transition to adulthood (especially men-on-men) would be a *normal* part of their experience. Normalising violence as part of the expected gender order means it is perceived as an individualised occurrence rather than as reflecting broader structural norms of male dominance. Lombard's work illustrates that children understood 'real violence' as involving men (gender), physical acts of violence in an outdoor setting between others (time and space) and some form of consequence. For these very reasons, however, they struggled to perceive or name violent acts and situations in their own lives – such as violence between peers/siblings or emotional or sexual violence in schools or homes – as violence.

As other research has found with older age groups (Sundaram, 2013, 2014) and even with preschool-aged children (Brown, 2010), a proportion of both practitioners and children justify male violence in heterosexual relationships through notions of men's possession and ownership of women and appropriate behaviours by women.

Girls told me [about] a multitude of experiences; of being pushed, shoved, kicked, followed, called sexualised names from their male peers. These examples did not fit the standardised constellation structure of 'real' violence: age (adult); gender (man) space (public) action (physical) and crucially, are generally without official reaction or consequence. Time and time again the girls – when they approached teachers or those in authority were dismissed for telling tales, ignored because of the 'trivial' nature of their complaint or relayed that old adage, 'he's only doing it because he likes you'. Thus their experiences were minimised and the behaviours, normalised.

(Lombard, 2014)

Current popular discourse tends to overemphasise the extent to which boys and men are the victims of intimate partner violence by women – as does even some research (Widanaralage *et al.*, 2022). Our interviewees provided examples of even very young boys repeating such myths: for instance, related to the recent case of actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, who had recently been involved in a high-profile US trial involving allegations of intimate partner violence. Despite a UK libel case having previously upheld the claim that Depp used violence against Heard, public opinion and influencers online undermined and disbelieved Heard and positioned Depp as a male victim of female extortion. Such popular misogynistic discourses rooted in 'rape culture' are increasingly prominent in youth sexual cultures in ways that need to be recognised and addressed in gender equity education (Ringrose *et al.*, 2021).

Even at 11, 12, 13, the young people with whom we are facilitating [relationships and sex education] workshops [to address gender and sexual violence] already have quite highly developed ideas about sexuality and relationships, consent, boundaries, what's normal, what's acceptable, what's desirable. We encourage young people to think critically about the norms that they have internalised and to centre ethics in how they conduct themselves. To identify what their values are and to behave according to them in these contexts.

Ruth Eliot

At the same time, however, research has documented the social taboos around reporting male-on-male sexual assault in particular. An intersectional approach that goes beyond a male/female binary can draw out how gender and sexual minorities are more likely to be victims of sexual assault and present a nuanced picture of the reasons for the under-reporting of boys' and men's experiences of violence and abuse. By contrast, 'gender-neutral' conceptions of violence have little purchase – and can even be damaging – in either understanding or preventing violence (Burrell, 2018).

● Family and friendships

Mother, to son: I'll buy you something, what would you like? How about this? (standing in front of car racing track)

Son (around age 3–5): (runs up to toy kitchen stuff) I want this!!

Mother: No, you can't have that girly cake mixer. Choose something else. Look over here.

Son: (now grabbing it and hugging it) But I want this!

Mother: Well you can't, stop being silly. Otherwise you can't have anything else.

(Price, 2017, p. 12)

Families have been conceptualised as gender and heterosexuality 'factories' (Stacey, 2021) – alongside the workplace, the media, schools and other important institutions – for learning and enacting gender roles and identities. Parents may begin gendering their children even before birth based on the identification of external genitalia in scans, including through elaborate 'gender reveal' parties and a stream of purchases along gender lines (Kane, 2006; Price and Tayler, 2015). While the family is a place of nurturing and support for many children, it can also be where gender and sexuality are regulated and policed, as many of our interviewees and much research suggest.

[A 2021 study showed] 70 per cent of boys felt they could not, would not, be allowed to play with what might be deemed a girl's thing or a girly thing. They were feeling shame or embarrassment and that was coming from their parents....There are sometimes overtones of homophobia around it.

Olivia Dickinson

Although traditionally families have been seen as the most influential force shaping younger children's gender-related behaviours – in contrast to the influence of school and peer groups on older children – changing patterns of childcare, work and parenting styles and a recognition of the subtle ways children themselves negotiate gender norms may be contributing to a more complex picture. Roche's interviews (2020) document trans children from 7 years old expressing a sure sense of knowing their gender identity, overcoming initial hesitations or resistance from family and school, and highlighting the significance of parental support.

Early childhood spaces are generally much more liberal and open-minded spaces where children can experiment with gender in ways that aren't policed. But for some children, in some homes, that gets shut down – so, a boy child in a tutu will run out of nursery and the look on the parents' face is horror, whereas it's not been an issue all day while they've been playing in the nursery.


Jayne Osgood

Importantly, the narratives dominant in policy and popular debates (including some parenting guidance) blame mothers generally, and especially single mothers, non-heteronormative families and the absence of fathers as reasons for boys failing or being 'in crisis' and for a range of ills, including the 2011 England riots (Sandretto and Nairn, 2019; Ashe, 2014). But research, such as a recent study of trans parents in the UK (Imrie *et al.*, 2021), suggests that this hand-wringing about children growing up in non-normative families is unfounded. Issues such as poverty and racism are more significant to outcomes than family structure alone. Important research has challenged simplistic notions that boys require male 'role models' rather than mentors and guides of any gender who offer genuine empathy and sustained support (Ruxton *et al.*, 2018).

As noted earlier, policy and practice often rely on an assumed white, heterosexual, middle-class, nuclear family norm despite the actual diversity of families in Western societies – blended, multiracial and multigenerational, with single and/or queer parents. This monolithic norm is embedded in everyday life, such as in how houses are built and laid out. But – for example – the white norm has consequences for racially diverse families engaging in their children's education, with some reporting school staff's racist responses to their concerns (Bhopal, 2014; Gillborn, 2015).

Some evidence suggests that aspiring to fatherhood – and to being an involved father – is central to many boys' and young men's masculine identities (Ruxton *et al.*, 2018). This helps us understand how 'caring' masculinities emerge and can be encouraged and supported during boyhood (van der Gaag *et al.*, 2019). However, other research has pointed out that if society's main definition of good fatherhood revolves around providing financially, boys and men living in poverty may struggle to access a positive sense of themselves as fathers (Braun, Vincent and Ball, 2011).

Research has traditionally shown the importance of the peer group in gender socialisation – although, arguably, 'peer' is itself a gendered concept that often assumes same-gender bonding and overlooks cross-gender affiliations. A key concept in masculinity studies has been how gender is performed through homosocial relationships: for example, where gender norms are solidified by boys performing their masculinity norms for each other in order to participate in the group dynamic (Connell, 2005; Hickey-Moody, 2019). Pascoe's (2011) work in the US argues that homophobia (expressed in both joking and more obviously bullying ways) is a form of socialisation and discipline for all boys regardless of their actual sexuality, operating both within and outside the home.




Scholars have studied the construction of laddishness and lad behaviour in the UK and identified laughter, banter and entertaining one another as key elements of performing boyhood (Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Barnes, 2012). Banter is a form of in-group and out-group boundary that creates pleasure and bonding through camaraderie and alignment with similar values but can also exclude those who do not adhere to the same masculinity practices (Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Jackson, 2006). This dynamic has shaped how gender-based violence is expressed, with men performing dominance for one another in objectifying women and girls or gay men (Hearn, 2012) – including, as we explore later, in online spaces.

School

Schooling Across the UK

It is important to remember that there is no such thing as a 'UK education system'. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each have distinct national education systems, school types and forms of ownership, approaches to the curriculum and histories. For instance, schools in Northern Ireland are relatively segregated by religious affiliation. Policy in England tends towards privatisation and marketisation – such as in its current aim of making all schools academies that are independent of local authority (democratic) control. School intake in England is moderately segregated by socioeconomic status, resulting in concentrations of children from low-socioeconomic-status homes in particular schools, while there is also pressure from the English school accountability system and school league-table positioning to raise and maintain high attainment. The proportion of children educated in fee-paying schools is slightly higher in England than in Scotland, but generally, fee-paying schools in the UK are more expensive, exclusive and linked to elites than elsewhere in the world (Kynaston and Green, 2019). The gap between private and state schools in per-pupil resources has doubled since 2010 (Sibieta, 2021).

Schools are crucial for exploring and understanding boyhoods, as they are both the 'settings' for and 'institutional agents' of (Connell, 2005) the process of (re)producing gender identities, masculinity cultures and heteronormativity and of sustaining gendered violence. Sexuality and gender saturate every aspect of (formal and informal) schooling. Scholars argue that they are particularly contradictory for boys who may experience both privilege and pain, power and powerlessness across the various spaces of school (classrooms, corridors, playing fields): 'Boys are unable to escape these contradictions, as each boy must fashion his identity within a limited set of options' (Reichert and Keddle, 2019).



School as an institution that regulates gender


Schools have historically been structured and operate in ways that reinforce the notion of gender identity and expression as binary, especially in regards to school uniforms, toilets and sport (Bragg *et al.*, 2018). Many practices – some explicitly advocated by policymakers – rely on a gender binary, such as lining up as girls and boys and seating students in boy-girl arrangements as a method of behaviour management or literacy promotion. Architectural features, such as separate boys' and girls' toilets and playgrounds, may spatialise children's sense of gender: Again, gender and agency should be seen as emerging from this 'intra-action' between the social and the material. However, significant evidence exists of schools, particularly primary schools, moving towards less gendered practices in some areas, including school uniforms (Thomson, Bragg and Kehily, 2018).

It's important that, unless there's a really good reason for it, we don't divide children by 'sex' – that we don't have boy versus girl debates or line them up as boys and girls in the playground. It's so easy to slip into that binary, Mars-and-Venus thing that implies that boys and girls are very different and have little in common.

Mark Jennett

The culture, values and practices promoted at school may also reinforce gender hierarchies by centring ideals of masculinity in the curriculum, policies, uniforms, grading systems, and teaching and learning methods. Gender hierarchies can also be reinforced through patterns of authority and discipline, with more men historically in secondary-school leadership positions (Swain, 2005b). Historical accounts show how schools have privileged boys and men from white, upper- and middle-class backgrounds for centuries, either through excluding girls and working-class boys from educational settings or neglecting girls' educational needs within and/or outside the classroom, with elite and 'single-sex' boys' schools particularly prone to essentialising and dichotomising boyhood (Gottschall *et al.*, 2010). Despite some progress towards more egalitarian practices in the later decades of the 20th century, some scholars are now noting trends towards 'increasingly masculinized' school environments (Keddie and Mills, 2009). Some studies have pointed to academisation in England as a causal factor in embedding competitive, authoritarian cultures and pedagogies (Kulz, 2017). Research suggests education practitioners may tend to associate boys with underachievement and girls with high achievement (Jones and Myhill, 2004), but this is also an artefact of the expectations created by the public debates on attainment that we discuss below.

Research also shows the significance of gendered notions of learning, including on how boys engage with school (Taylor, E., 2021). A study of 11- to 15-year-olds in London secondary schools showed boys who actively distanced themselves from girls and qualities regarded as feminine (e.g., softness, schoolwork, emotional literacy, maturity) were considered 'real lads' by their peers (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002). Research has explored the possibilities of performing boyhood differently or 'improperly'.




For example, Renold (2006) depicts how 'boy-ness' is defined as disassociated from femininity, girls or being 'girly' and how alternative masculinities are excluded as inferior because they do not align with dominant versions of 'doing boy'. Yet a small group of boys still choose to actively invest in other non-hegemonic masculinities (e.g., playing fantasy/computer games instead of football, showing emotional literacy, having pro-school attitudes), even in the face of bullying by other boys (Renold, 2004).

Some have questioned the conceptual relevance of hegemonic masculinity for younger boys. For example, Bartholomaeus (2012) argues that 6- and 7-year-old boys' discourse on ideal masculinity appears to be different (e.g., being nice and obedient) from the traditional values of (older) manhood due to the particulars of their young age. Researchers have coined the expression 'borderlands' as the spaces inhabited by non-hegemonic boys (Newman, Woodcock and Dunham, 2006), while Paechter (2019) notes the risks incurred by 'feminine' boys in school as they negotiate the boundaries of what is allowed of them.

Besides exploring the experiences of boys in school, scholars and activists have highlighted troubling patterns in school exclusion, which have increased so significantly in recent years that the issue has been forced onto the policy agenda (Department for Education, 2019). The literature consistently notes that certain vulnerabilities, individually or combined, increase the risk of school exclusion. These include SEND (special educational needs and disability), including social, emotional and mental health needs; poverty; low attainment; being from certain minority ethnic groups; being bullied; poor relationships with teachers; life trauma; and challenges in their home lives (Graham *et al.*, 2019). There are gendered aspects to this, in that boys are more likely than girls to be formally excluded from school, although there are forms of invisible exclusion that particularly affect girls.

There are also significant racialised aspects to this as well given persistent evidence of racial disparities in attainment, exclusion and discipline (Gillborn, 2005, 2008). Caribbean British pupils (particularly boys) are three times as likely as their white peers to be permanently excluded (Crenna-Jennings, 2017). These processes shape young Black masculinities in the UK (Whitehead and Ringrose, 2021). Connolly's (2002) research with primary school-aged boys highlights how Black boys' behaviours are often racialised and subject to racism. The beginning of the so-called 'War on Terror' in 2001 and the UK government's 'Prevent duty' are of particular significance. Under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, the Prevent duty requires all registered early childhood providers and schools to demonstrate the steps they have taken to prevent students' radicalisation. However, it has been criticised for disproportionately targeting Muslim boys, seeing them as dangerous and vulnerable to being radicalised by terrorist groups. For example, an 11-year-old primary school student, a Muslim boy, was referred to the Prevent programme after his teacher heard 'arms' when the boy expressed his desire to 'give alms to the oppressed' (Taylor, D., 2021).

Some research has shown how educational processes embed assumptions about the characteristics of an 'ideal' student or learner, against which all students are measured but some fail. Historical conceptions (from the Enlightenment) assume the ideal learner is male. Contemporary ideal characteristics include perceived 'intelligence' and 'good humour', closely associated with middle-class boys.




Attaining literacy has been easier for high-achieving middle-class boys who wish to do well in examinations and secure a good career. Skelton and Francis (2011) found that some groups of academically successful middle-class boys rework hegemonic 'real boy' constructions of masculinity to incorporate and 'non-gender' feminine attributes that offer social and financial merit in an economically neoliberal society (see also Williams, Jamieson and Hollingworth, 2008). Additionally, middle- and working-class girls are positioned against an ideal female pupil, who takes on a supporting role by creating an environment that facilitates boys' learning. While middle-class girls are seen as moderately successful in approximating these characteristics, working-class girls are often positioned at the bottom of the classroom hierarchy (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015). Francis (2006) argues that at secondary school, working-class boys are demonised as wasting resources and failing to be neoliberal subjects for not taking responsibility for their own achievement or failure. Studies recognise the challenges for working-class boys in negotiating contradictions – between the values of their communities and the individualistic or neoliberal ones propagated by schools, for example – and how uncomfortable the space of school can be for them as a result (Stahl, 2018; Ingram, 2009; Reay, 2002).

Schiffrin-Sands' ethnographic research in primary schools (2021) depicts boys as young as 8 who are perceived as both popular and academically successful engaged in 'boysplaining' – a younger version of 'mansplaining' (Rebecca Solnit's famous term). This involves practices such as physically controlling a specific area of the classroom, dominating equipment, and disregarding the needs of other students, as well as verbally:

...repeating “I know I know” when others explain things...reject[ing] answers by other students that did not complement their own... [taking] the sole credit for work that had been collaborative...[being] quick to interrupt girls as they spoke... ignor[ing] their classmates' contributions...[correcting] girls...shaming girls' work and behaviour.

(Schiffrin-Sands, 2021, p. 667-668)



Boysplaining, Schiffrin-Sands argues, both implements and legitimises boys' *normalised* hegemony and power. Other research in a Welsh primary school notes that despite decades of feminist and gender equality activism, members of school communities continue to draw upon essentialist binary discourses, predominantly justified by what are seen as 'biological' theories, to explain alleged gendered differences in terms of classroom behaviour, subject attainment, curricular preferences and future life choices. These referenced notions of acceptable ways of 'doing masculinity' and the 'high-achieving, conforming school girl culture' (Hamilton and Roberts, 2017). By contrast, research also shows children being ready and willing to accept or adopt non-normative ways of 'doing gender' within an appropriately supportive context (DePalma, 2013, 2016; Atkinson, 2021).

As previously noted, the peer group is an important feature of school experiences, and there is some evidence that boys 'do' friendship differently from (their perceptions of) how girls do this (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2012). Yet the same researchers note that intimacy and emotionality should not be understood 'as an individualised psychological dynamic; instead, it is important to connect it to the contextual institutional dynamics' in school (p. 488). These dynamics shape possibilities for how friendship can be performed, and the researchers argue that boys' friendships in particular may be experienced and practised differently from the conventional understanding of adult masculine relationships.

When all boys are together, you've got to be quite a brave boy not to conform; that's one of the biggest challenges – how you can empower boys from very early on to feel that they can stand up for the boys that are not feeling boyish enough, and also that they can call out overly negative boy-like behaviour. I think that's the biggest challenge.

Olivia Dickinson


As the section on violence suggests, the way schools respond to incidents of harassment and abuse plays a key role in communicating messages about boyhoods and sustaining or challenging gender-based violence.

We heard how difficult it is for young people to challenge behaviour when teachers don't challenge it. Children notice what you do. Sometimes, it feels like brushing over something is better, but children internalise that, and then they tell us it makes it harder for them to engage with their peers on that topic or issue....It's often young women who tell us they feel silenced when teachers ignore sexist banter.

Katherine Gilmour


In 2020, relationships and sex education was made a statutory part of the English curriculum, with direction to ensure it is LGBT-inclusive.¹ However, discourses of 'maintaining childhood innocence' continue to dominate relationships and sexuality education practice, with discussions around sex and sexuality deemed an optional part of the curriculum (Morgan and Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2022; Atkinson *et al.*, 2022).

¹ This is particularly significant given Section 28, a notorious measure introduced in the 1988 Local Government Act by the then-Conservative UK government to prohibit the 'promotion of homosexuality' by local authorities. It was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in England and Wales in 2003, but its malign influence in terms of inhibiting schools from addressing issues of LGBTQ sexuality continues to be felt. See: Lee, C. (2019) 'Fifteen years on: The legacy of Section 28 for LGBT+ teachers in English schools', *Sex Education*, 19(6), pp. 675–690.




School discipline often involves homophobia for discipline, as when a research participant reported how a primary school teacher used 'jokes' about same-sex love to stop two 9-/10-year-old boys from messing around. The children's reactions, comment the researchers, show that they have already 'learned about compulsory heterosexuality and the taboo against transgressive sexuality' (Atkinson and DePalma, 2008). Additionally, some have noted that if LGBTQ issues are addressed only in relation to risk (of bullying or poor mental health), it can undermine attempts to identify and speak about broader issues (Gilbert *et al.*, 2018).

Recent work demonstrates how creating an affirming environment for trans children can offer opportunities for schools to become aware of how curricula, policies and practices rely on cisnormative, gendered understandings and create environments that broaden possibilities for *all* students (Payne and Smith, 2014; Neary, 2021). Other research in primary schools shows children as being capable of comprehending and developing complex messages about gender and sexualities. Hall's (2020) research with 6- to 11-year-olds in two Greater London primary schools, for instance, demonstrates how children's responses to equalities education change socio-spatially. Within 'formal' spaces like classrooms, students engage with 'recognisable liberal pluralistic equalities discourse' (e.g., inclusive narratives around gender, sex and sexuality). In informal spaces like corridors, the playground and the toilet, however, they summon the heteronormative discourses of gender, sex and sexuality that have currency in their everyday online/offline geographies (e.g., home, family, preschool), and masculine, heterosexual prowess once again becomes the norm. Playgrounds, as other research notes, are areas of freedom for children in comparison to the classroom due to less teacher control (Paechter, 2007). Hall found that 'whilst many teachers were convinced that pejorative use of the word gay was no longer a feature of school life...boys confessed to almost constant use within toilets' (2020, p. 179). The following example from a focus group with children approximately 9 years old shows how boys negotiate these terms and their nuanced awareness of context:

- 
- **JH [Joseph Hall]:** Have these words been banned (pejorative use of gay and lesbian)?
 - Callum [focus group participant]:** Yeah, we're not allowed to say gay or sissy...
 - JH:** Do people still use these words?
 - Callum:** Not as much...gay's used
 - JH:** In the playground?
 - Callum:** Yeah, but if you told a teacher they would be in Chris's office (deputy head teacher)
 - JH:** So you would be in trouble?
 - Callum:** Yeah but no one tells, that's the problem....the word gay has been banned but people use it in the boys' toilets whenever you go in.

(Hall, 2020)



Atkinson's (2021) research in two schools, one involved in proactive sexualities pedagogy and one not, suggests a more positive picture. Whilst homophobia persisted across both schools, children's understandings of its acceptability differed markedly according to their involvement in equalities pedagogy, with institutional silence interpreted by many as equivalent to school-sanctioned homophobia.

Are (White, Working-Class) Boys 'Failing'?


The 1970s saw campaigns to improve girls' participation in maths and science. However, subsequent policymaking has been dominated by moral panic about whether boys are 'failing', positioning boys as the 'new disadvantaged' who require intervention.


There's often an underlying assumption that boys should be attaining higher than girls, and if girls attain higher, then that's a problem.

Louise Archer

Scholars argue that presenting data in simplistic, binary terms – 'male versus female', as though they are two homogenous social categories – renders invisible the bigger differences and variations in performance within groups of girls and within groups of boys. Other variables, such as ethnicity, social class, disability, location, sexual identity and religion, need to be addressed to bring about change (Elwood, 2015). There are many groups of boys – and girls – performing well above the national averages, from primary school all the way through to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, although girls' educational success has not translated into gains in the labour market (Ringrose, 2007, 2013).

Elwood (2015) argues that allocating all students to binary categories of boys and girls reinforces stereotypes and leads researchers to use these categories to look for 'causes' of gender differences. By contrast, viewing gender as socially constructed suggests that differences in performance are created by social and cultural practices influencing how men or boys and women or girls come to be and act. So, any differences observed among the genders are not fixed, but open to change in relation to the social, cultural and historical contexts in which people live and learn (Elwood, 2015; Ringrose, 2007).





We need to understand the intersections in looking at boys and disadvantage. It's never just because they're boys; it will be boys and their socio-economic status, or they might be neurodivergent and not been diagnosed yet. It could be race and ethnicity. It could be based on the attitudes of particular teachers or the way a school captures data or their attitudes towards certain students, particularly neurodiverse or Gypsy Roma travellers.


Nic Ponsford

In recent years, politicians and the media have identified white, working-class boys as the most underperforming and, therefore, disadvantaged of any group in the education system, a misleading claim so widespread that it deserves to be unpacked in detail. Crawford's (2019) work highlights the racialised implications of the (mis)use of statistics. In the UK, eligibility for a free school meal (FSM) is used to assess levels of poverty or social disadvantage, although this is a crude measure in itself. When politicians and the media claim that white, working-class boys are uniquely disadvantaged, they are actually referring only to the one in ten who claim FSM. However, it is understandable that the 60% of the white British population who identify as 'working class' would assume that the claim refers to them rather than this smaller number. And the rhetoric obscures that, for instance, Black Caribbean, Black African and Bangladeshi students are more likely to claim FSM than white children (at rates of 23.5%, 35.1% and 44.6%, respectively) (Crawford, 2019, p. 7) or that white boys *not* receiving FSM are achieving significantly ahead of some other 'minoritised' groups in terms of obtaining five 'good' GCSEs (Gillborn, 2008, p. 56).

In this way, the discourse of white, working-class boys as neglected and failing is both manufactured and actively misleading. It can be read as a backlash discourse instead of providing insights into the intersectional dynamics of privilege and marginalisation. Some of our interviewees commented that this rhetoric is being exploited by those in positions of power and privilege who otherwise have no interest in improving this situation or in referencing any other intersections.

Games/Sport

In the UK, boys aged 8 to 15 spend significantly longer than girls on organised sports (40 minutes per day compared to 25) (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Organised sports and PE in and beyond school, as well as within families, are important environments for experiencing and performing gender. Research shows how discourses of sport, fitness, health and masculinity work together to produce pleasurable experiences for those who become popular by virtue of being seen as 'good' at sports and 'strong'. Sports participation is associated with better mental health and peer relations (Ahn *et al.*, 2018), which is why men's health organisations such as Movember are developing programmes of work around sports. However, sports practices can also be associated with exclusion, humiliation, bullying and homophobia for those boys who do not measure up to athletic ideals (Drummond, 2019).




Sex-segregated sports systematically strengthen traditional gender binaries and legitimise supposed biological differences (Green, 2008; Wilkinson and Penney, 2016, p. 751). Football in UK primary schools has often been a powerful space to produce masculinities since it supplies behaviours connected to hegemonic masculinity, like physical confrontation, violence and aggression (Renold, 1997; Keddie, 2003; Connell, 2008, p. 140). Boys are more likely to be pushed by teachers towards sports like football that are seen as requiring ‘toughness’, to be coached by professionals and to train during and outside of school hours. They may also be discouraged from ‘softer’ activities like aerobics, badminton, table tennis or netball, reinforcing their difference from girls (Flintoff, 2008). Masculinities are heavily scrutinised through physical skills and capability or incapability; coaches often criticise boys who fail to display aggression or skill as ‘girly’ or not ‘boy’ enough (Gubby, 2019, p. 751). Such approaches signals the limitations of some PE pedagogies and the need for curricula to tackle gender and equality issues.

Even the popularity of sports heroes provides insight into contemporary gender relations: Research with primary school students aged 6 to 7 in Australia demonstrates how figures like footballer David Beckham are regarded as ‘the manliest’ by both boys and girls due to masculine traits, such as muscularity; famous female athletes are considered less ‘womanly’ due to their ‘muscles’ and ‘strong body’ (Bartholomaeus, 2011). It remains to be seen whether the English women’s football team winning the Euros in 2022 has displaced any of these stereotypes.

Well-Being/Suicide

There is concern about the striking increases in the reported prevalence of long-standing mental health conditions among UK children and young people (Pitchforth *et al.*, 2019). Gender is relevant to this in terms of masculine norms, relating to being (for example) autonomous, in control, not expressing emotions or seeking help and relating to how problems might be expressed internally or externally (Gutman *et al.*, 2015). Recently, the American Psychological Association identified adhering to masculine norms as a risk factor for men and boys’ mental health (Way, 2019). Research in early-years settings helps explain how such norms are established young, demonstrating the dominant belief that emotion and needing others are opposed to constructions of masculinity: ‘Crying and comforting soft toys are not allowed, and neither is sharing your experiences with other boys who may, in turn, police your gender. Boys are being strongly directed towards self-reliance’ (Cooke *et al.*, 2022, p. 10).

Research on mental health with 9- to 13-year-old boys in North East England has challenged the appropriateness of applying adult-defined understandings of men and masculinities to the attitudes and behaviours of pre-adolescent boys, arguing that we should rethink how we gender young boys. The institutional production and regulation of boyhood produce ‘boyiness’ within attendant normative emotional boundaries. For example, when discussing teacher expectations, the boys in the study shared gendered uncertainties around expressions of emotion – such as being unable to share fears and anxieties (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2012).



When I first began researching in this area, we gained the impression that our interviews and focus groups were often the first opportunity for boys and young men to discuss issues around gender, identity and relationships. Since then, and with the greater exposure to discussions around gender and identity in popular culture, boys are now more prepared to be open about mental health issues, though conventional expectations around ‘bottling it up’ or ‘manning up’ still hold sway among some groups and communities. But directly raising issues around identity and relationships with boys is much less productive than indirect and creative methods of engagement.

Martin Robb


While there is some evidence of change, an intersectional approach requires we attend to the experiences of different groups of boys and young men: Young Black men, for example, are both at risk for mental health due to experiencing racism and discrimination, yet may also face more barriers to accessing support services that are seen as unwelcoming (Meechan, John and Hanna, 2021).

Technology, Media and Markets in Children’s Social Worlds




In popular debates, much concern has been expressed about the ‘commercialisation’ of childhood (Buckingham, 2011). While there is not space here to explore this issue in depth, it is notable how boys have been brought into the world of consumption in different ways in recent years – for instance, in terms of body image and the notion of the ‘six-pack’ as a masculine ideal. Additionally, campaigns such as Let Toys Be Toys have opposed the marketing of children’s toys, books and so on in gendered ways that reinforce binaries and stereotypes. Our interviewees identified positive changes in terms of representation in popular and consumer culture. For instance, as a result of the Let Toys Be Toys campaign, many retailers and publishers have committed to removing signs demarcating clothing, toys and books by gender. As another example, the Australian children’s show *Bluey*, popular in the UK, has two sisters as protagonists and a stay-at-home dad who participates in his children’s fantasy worlds. However, it is unclear how far these changes have extended to marketing, which often continues to target products at boys and girls in distinct ways. Interviewees also identified some steps backwards, such as the queen’s Platinum Jubilee book given to every primary-age child in the UK in 2022; the book only managed to muster two women for its list of ‘creative geniuses’ since 1926.

Meanwhile, young people are increasingly engaged with virtual worlds through digital gaming, messaging apps and social media, where they discover new strategies for communication, self-expression, and relationships (Danby *et al.*, 2018). Children and childhoods can no longer be conceptualised as separate from the digital: The offline/online distinction is increasingly irrelevant in an age of ubiquitous polymedia.



Childhoods exist in digitally mediated, networked and connected cultures of texting, chatting, gaming, sharing and learning (Ringrose and Harvey, 2017; Setty, 2021). The production, tagging and circulation of images through mobile online technologies help construct and regulate particular classed and racialised norms of popular masculinity (Harvey, Ringrose and Gill, 2013). The homosocial peer group also shapes digital cultures amongst boys and how they perform themselves online (Harvey and Ringrose, 2015), which can lead to forms of image-based sexual harassment and abuse, such as the non-consensual sending and posting of nude images (Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021; Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead, 2022). Researchers argue, therefore, that digital literacy and sex education need to be joined up for young people and delivered in primary school since many children join social media apps much earlier than the 13-year minimum age advised (Livingstone and Yoo, 2018; Cawthorne, 2018; Ringrose, Mendes and Horeck, 2021). The role of social media has also intensified with the onset of COVID-19, although arguably, some of the 'risks' associated with digital intimacies have come to be seen as safer in some ways than face to face during and since the pandemic.



Significant concern has surrounded cyberbullying, the bullying and harassment of others by means of digital technologies. Some research suggests that cyberbullying does not create many *new* victims but it does extend the bullying beyond school (Wolke, Lee and Guy, 2017). Research also flags continuities with the naturalisation and normalisation of violence. Aggressive online behaviour is often accepted as normal in ways that prevent addressing it, and responsibility for dealing with it often falls to victims rather than perpetrators. Research on online harassment with UK university students suggests it is gendered in nature, with those holding female and transgender identities more likely to be its targets (Haslop and O'Rourke, 2021).

In other words, online harassment is a 'digital extension' of existing gender-based hierarchies, pressures, oppression and violence that shapes a 'gender-related digital divide' (Haslop, O'Rourke and Southern, 2021). Moreover, as noted earlier, there is evidence that this situation has much earlier roots: Girls report receiving unsolicited nudes like 'dick pics' from the time they join social media applications like Snapchat – sometimes at aged 10 or even below – and being pressured to send nudes (Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2019), whereas boys have been harassed with unwanted sexual content and porn in social media contexts and reported feeling upset and distressed (Ringrose *et al.*, 2022).

Clearly, this is starting early, [sometimes] earlier than secondary school. Our research [e.g., Haslop, O'Rourke and Southern, 2021] showed a normalisation of non-consensual image-sharing of girls, of seeing women as a currency, a form of capital to be discussed, alongside other competitive behaviours like getting the best memes or banter about each other. And if [our university-age participants] didn't do it themselves, they knew of people who did do it or they heard of it. But they just didn't see some of those practices as misogynistic.

Craig Haslop

Research has looked at the masculinist social subjectivities produced through digital gaming, showing this is complex since both 'jock and geek' masculinities can be performed, suggesting the elasticity of hegemonic masculinities (Salter and Blodgett, 2017).

Research with boys in primary school points to gaming's salience, both for identity formation or recognition as a 'certain person' and for the social currency afforded by knowing the intricacies of the video game (Scholes, Spina and Comber, 2021). This resonates with earlier work by Walkerdine (2007), who identified gaming as one key site for producing contemporary masculinities. Walkerdine's work on young boys and gaming draws attention to how the boundaries of masculinity are maintained and negotiated, such as disparaging girls' gaming abilities, and her psychoanalytic perspective questions the fantasy function of being an action hero and having omnipotent control, achieving masculinity by disavowing dependence on adults, especially mothers.

Inclusive initiatives that seek wider gender equality in digital gaming (e.g., girls' gaming clubs) remain precarious in challenging the networked, techno-masculine status quo. Nonetheless, research also challenges the idea that participation in gaming is necessarily developmentally detrimental to boys and points to the gender experimentation and 'queering' possible within gaming experiences and associated socialising (Sihvonen and Stenros, 2019). The game itself, of course, determines the possibilities of play through the game's technological affordances, which may offer programmed routes for challenging hypermasculinity (Kagen, 2018). Therefore, technology creators and providers need to be a part of the conversation around transforming problematic masculinity gaming cultures, as we discuss later.

How Can We Transform Problematic Gender Norms?

This section explores challenges and opportunities for transforming problematic gender norms and harmful masculinities. We build on our expert informant interviews and also refer readers to work by the UK Government Equalities Office in 2019 (Burrell, Ruxton and Westmarland, 2019).



Problematic Approaches Informed by Backlash

Popular discourses and practices can stoke rather than challenge misogynist ideas in the name of helping boys, such as that schools are overly 'feminised' environments lacking positive man role models or that girls and students of colour have benefitted from initiatives in ways that take away from and victimise white boys in a zero-sum game. Our expert informants noted some dangerous trends around men's rights initiatives tied to regressive politics that do not align with gender equity.


Under scrutiny, some initiatives prove to be limiting – and, thus, damaging – in their assumptions about boys. For example, some anti-bullying programmes focus more on 'fixing' individuals, thereby pathologising them as the source of problems, than on tackling the systems and structures that allow or encourage bullying. Pedagogical responses to raise boys' achievement or literacy rarely reflect complex insights from the research; instead, they are often based on simplistic stereotypes, deficit models and assumptions about boys' interests that can hurt boys' self-understanding. Boys may be homogenised as disengaged, reluctant readers who are predominantly interested in nonfiction, potentially reinforcing narrow cultural norms in classrooms and limiting opportunities for authentic engagement and sustained learning. Hypermasculine nonfiction may be used in schools as 'boy baits' (Scholes, Spina and Comber, 2021), alongside problematic practices of gender segregation.

There are some very old-fashioned attitudes about masculinity and how we want boys to behave. The very ways that we often try to engage boys with education are the ways that put them off education, because if you always give them books about football and snot, then that's not saying reading is interesting.


Mark Jennett



Scholars have identified 'pedagogies of poverty' in low-socioeconomic-status schools, contrasting these with pedagogies developing creativity, agency, pleasure, critical thinking and problem-solving that may be more likely in schools in locations with a higher socioeconomic status. Pedagogies of poverty involve a diminished pedagogical offer emphasising particularly strong teacher control and defining teachers' role as to transmit knowledge to children, who are positioned very passively. They focus on raising test scores on 'basic skills' in literacy and numeracy – suggesting how accountability systems (which are particularly dominant in England) are more likely to hurt the experiences of boys and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They also require student compliance in carrying out teacher-set tasks, with pre-defined correct answers and little peer discussion. While this has been seen as an issue of education in contexts of inequalities, it is possible to see how such pedagogies – offering narrow subject positions that assume student deficiency and demanding obedience – may be particularly challenging for masculine subjectivities founded on notions of autonomy and agency. In some economically marginalised schools, practices such as reading may be coded as 'feminine'. If resistance to the feminine provides working-class boys with a means of affirming their place in society, what needs to change is the coding – not the offer. Research has shown how pedagogies that foreground children's volition and social interaction disrupt such 'pedagogies of poverty' and lead to better social and academic outcomes for students from low-socioeconomic-status households (Hempel-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2018). Overall, more complex accounts are needed to address multiple intersecting causalities (Parsons, 2019).



A further response to the 'boy problem' attributes it to the absence of 'positive male role models' and 'father figures', leading to recruitment drives for men teachers (Brownhill, Warin and Wemersson, 2015). These position men as rescuers and frame women, communities of colour and non-heteronormative families as in deficit. They also frame women as inadequate to parent and teach boys, especially in boys' teenage years (Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2012). But the evidence does not support this position. Researchers have questioned the benefits of placing the onus on practitioners and teachers to assume a fathering role when they are employed to work with children in a professional capacity (Cushman, 2005, 2008). Cushman notes that the presence of a father figure may not always be beneficial, especially when boys' experiences may have involved abuse or neglect, and challenges the stereotypical perceptions of what men as 'role models' are expected to provide (in many cases, qualities that align with hegemonic and patriarchal masculinities). All these prevent a necessary focus and emphasis on girls' as well as some other non-dominant boys' needs within educational settings (Ringrose, 2007, 2013) and, hence, constrain our capacity for developing gender-just and equal research and policy.



Our interviewees challenged approaches that position boys and their families or communities as deficient in some way, such as lacking in knowledge and interest in education and specific subjects. Instead, they called for turning attention back onto institutions and services to identify where they may be failing and, thereby, become more welcoming of participation and engagement. Louise Archer's work, for example, sets out to draw on and value forms of expertise in homes and communities, linking these to classrooms in order to support effective learning and make scientist identities more 'thinkable' for a wider range of young people (Archer *et al.*, 2012; Archer, Dewitt and Osbourne, 2015). (See also the [ASPIRES project](#).)

The Youth Endowment Fund has produced [a useful toolkit](#) that critically examines existing research on approaches to preventing serious youth violence. This specifically identifies that 'masculinised' projects like boot camps and prison awareness programmes are not only ineffective but harmful in terms of violence prevention. Our informants articulated the shortcomings of both overly didactic and 'zero-tolerance' approaches.

[A zero-tolerance, punitive approach does not] inspire genuine shifts in values or attitudes, behaviour, ethics. It encourages a kind of NIMBY ['not in my backyard'] approach to problematic behaviour: not in my classroom, not in front of me. But if the only reason that I am giving you for not doing that is because you will get into trouble, all that does, at its core, is to discourage people from doing that in front of authority figures. It does absolutely nothing to unpack why it's being done, to reflect on entitlement. It does nothing to discourage it being done outside the context where that person might get caught.

Ruth Eliot

In addition, our informants cautioned against approaches that 'fix' boys and young men to specific notions of masculinity rather than challenging underpinning social and structural hierarchies within which boys and men are operating. Approaches that claim to be gender-blind or gender-neutral deny the relevance, complexity and diversity of gender identities and the role of gender in the issues boys are facing (Tembo, 2021; Chapman, 2022). They risk reinscribing harmful, negative, rigid, cisnormative understandings of gender and gender identity. If they overlook how boys of colour experience boyhoods differently, they tend to centre white boyhoods. Equally, the informants suggested gender-segregated approaches are inadequate in today's society since, by prioritising gender rather than other intersectional aspects of experiences, they recreate an essentialised gender binary that does not correspond to many young people's understandings of their own and others' identities. They may also reproduce many of the problematic practices that take place around gender policing in and around schools.

If it's not tackling the underlying, broader, gendered power imbalances and other structural imbalances, then it's only going to reinforce them.


Dan Guinness

Another issue raised in the literature is the limits of 'safe' approaches such as Stonewall's families approach – which, by emphasising and representing monogamous, childrearing, nuclear LGBTQ relationships and the similarities between gay and heterosexual family lives, risks creating new norms and 'disavowing lives that do not look like this idealised hetero-monogamous nuclear family' (Hall, 2021, p. 67).

Promising Approaches to Changing Masculinities


All our expert informants talked about the challenges to transforming masculinities and cautioned against simplistic, binary explanations and fixes, but also pointed out positive ways forward. Importantly, it is increasingly recognised that institutions – not just schools but also other actors, such as technology producers – need to be part of the conversations about change (Thomson, Bragg and O'Riordan, 2021).

As the research discussed in this paper demonstrates, *gender equity* must be centred rather than only *gender equality*. These terms are often used interchangeably, but they refer to different, yet complementary, strategies. Gender equality refers to the idea that equal numbers of something will add up to a more equal society – for example, more women in parliament will create gender equality – and is measured in terms of ratios and parity. But this doesn't necessarily address the problem of gender norms enforcing ideals of gender that can be oppressive and problematic. Gender equity refers to a wider set of principles to create equity through practices of fairness and inclusion that take stock of background inequalities, meaning we do not all start from the same place. Given many years of sexism and sexual inequity in society, we need policies and practices in any institution that directly combat both overt and hidden forms of inequity.



Researchers and practitioners have argued for, variously, 'gender-just', 'gender-transformative', 'gender-expansive', 'gender-full', 'productive', 'gender-sensitive' and 'norm-critical' approaches and pedagogies. These aim to promote gender/sexuality inclusivity, diversity and justice. They create critical awareness around harmful forms of masculinities and support boys' critical reflection on these and on assumed norms, acknowledging their experiences of masculinity within spaces of social support and mutual respect. There is already some evidence that such approaches in relationships and sexuality education may increase contraceptive use and gender-equitable attitudes among sexually active youth (Lohan *et al.*, 2022).

An intersectional perspective is critical to enlarge the range of masculinities available to boys and to strengthen diverse boys' capacity to resist and desist from distinct forms of social pressures. A complex approach that goes beyond individualised methods, such as the approaches often mobilised for bullying, can help boys challenge hierarchies that distort, suppress and harm themselves and others. It can also help build commonalities: what young people have in common rather than only how they are different. Recognising how heterosexuality and fixed gender identities are presumed and, at times, encouraged is crucial to challenge dominant and unhelpful manifestations of masculinities. Practices should centre young people's voices and experiences, including those who are marginalised, and tackle issues around homophobic and misogynist harassment and violence through an explicitly gendered lens (Reichert and Keddie, 2019).



Importantly, however, they need to be 'whole school' rather than in pockets (Bragg *et al.*, 2022), and their perspective needs to be nuanced. They need to engage with the complexity and multiplicity of boys' social and emotional lives as boys in the present rather than for the adults they will become, not constructing them as future men or future perpetrators but with sensitivity to the intricacies of learning masculinity (Kean and Kazuo Steains, 2022; Driscoll, Greal and Sharkey, 2022).


Scholars stress the benefits for *all* children of understanding how the gender binary limits them, not just for those children who are gender-nonconforming. Gender-diverse, affirmative learning environments help identify how schools are already saturated with gender, amplify the diversity that already invariably exists in schools, and challenge the norms that limit children to enacting particular gender performances (Payne and Smith, 2012). It has long been argued – including by feminists in relation to work with girls – that such 'inclusive by default' frameworks improve settings such as schools for the whole community, not just targeted groups (Younger, Warrington and McLellan, 2005).

Given the significance of gender-based violence in young people's experiences of school, Lombard (2016) suggests that (restorative rather than punitive) spaces need to be created for naming violent acts as violent so they can be validated as such and labelled as wrong by children from an early age. She argues that schools need to do more to address gender stereotypes that shape children's experiences and understandings of violence and that they should reflect on the physical environment and the practices, processes and procedures that may lead to the reproduction of gendered stereotypes rather than contribute to change.

Starting Early: Participatory Engagement with Children and Young People


Our informants emphasised the need to start early on work to challenge gender norms because children are aware of and actively engaged in their 'gender projects' from an early age: Even from birth, their gender identities are being constructed, imposed and navigated. Research shows how rigid, binary gender roles can successfully be challenged in non-discursive ways within nursery and early-years classrooms and by working with non-stereotypical representations, objects, toys and so on (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019; Spinner, Cameron and Calogero, 2018). The gender equalities organisation Lifting Limits has demonstrated how its interventions in primary schools can raise awareness and confidence in challenging stereotypes, addressing gender inequalities and increasing acceptance of diverse gender roles across multiple groups, including leaders, staff and parents/carers, as well as children (Horvath, 2019).

Currently, we see the rise of gender diversity in the UK and internationally, and discussions of the 'trans child' have become prominent in public debate. Our key informants emphasised that some resources developed to support trans children could be useful for all children and regretted how such resources have become controversial and politicised.



Some of the work we currently do around supporting trans children – all those resources, like the Genderbread Person [for understanding the concept of gender: <https://www.genderbread.org>] – I wish we were using more with everybody to try and break this idea down that masculinity looks like one thing, that there's only one way to be a boy...Young people are very interested in gender identity, and you've got an open door there to think about not just trans identities but to talk about how [as a boy] your sex or your gender need not define you. But because of some of the current debates around trans, people are now worried about how much they can say, and these helpful resources have become very controversial for some.

Mark Jennett



In terms of focus, informants emphasised that part of working effectively with children and young people is about creating a safe space – of social support and mutual respect – in which they can share and reflect on their views, attitudes and assumptions without fear of judgment. Sometimes, this will be the first time they have been invited to do this in educational settings.

A gender-transformative approach provides the space for individuals and groups to recognise how their belief structures, thought processes, emotions, perceived needs and behaviours are bound up to that whole constellation of things that we would call gender. Helping people understand their position within gender, and other parts of their identities. And we've got to create a space where they recognise that it's not them who's up on the judgment blocks here.

Dan Guinness

Involving young people as active co-producers and participants in their education around gender equity and social justice is also recognised as a core organising principle of pedagogical processes that can enable gender transformations (Renold, Ashton and McGeeney, 2021). Whilst any educational provision in school is not consensual in the strictest sense of the word, our informants stressed the importance of respect: for example, enabling students participating in relationships and sexuality education contexts to contribute on their own terms as much as possible, even if this means allowing them to disengage from the work. They also noted the need to avoid shaming individuals for expressing particular opinions or beliefs (for instance, those that are victim-blaming) and

instead to identify that these are widely circulated ideas and reflect on their sources and implications. Informants acknowledged that it is challenging to create spaces that can be both safe and non-judgmental while also countering problematic practices or behaviour. However, they argued that enabling peers to challenge one another supports critical thinking, reflection and curiosity – which is also why mixed-gender groups could be such an important element of work on transforming gender.

Others discussed how PE lessons and co-ed or mixed sport can be used to shift binary social thinking by providing opportunities for equality, teamwork, integration, diversity and inclusivity (Messner, 2011). Gubby's research (2019) proposes korfbal – a deliberately mixed-gender sport that does not rely on physical strength – as a means to create equal interaction and participation; 11- to 13-year-old boys and girls in her research described korfbal as an empowering athletic experience because it encourages girls to play with boys and have the same physical function and role as boys. The charity and awareness-raising organisation [Movember](#) is increasingly supporting work with men and boys on mental health, using organised sports as a site for action.

The Scottish government has issued guidance on 'gender-friendly' nursery approaches and supporting trans children in schools, addressing gender-based violence, mental health and LGBT equality (McMillan and Morton, 2019). Informants encouraged scrutiny of extracurricular 'offers' and diverse creative subjects in the core curriculum. Whilst there are undoubtedly funding challenges to overcome, small acts and interventions can trouble unspoken assumptions about gender (DePalma 2013, p. 4). For instance, a 'dress-up box' in nursery can include a range of materials, from hyper-feminine to hyper-masculine to 'neutral', such that children can exercise their imaginations and practitioners can observe and learn from them. Equally, informants noted that books with alternative, anti-stereotypical depictions of gender roles or where the protagonists' gender is uncertain could potentially generate debate without being overly focused on changing individual children – provided such texts are treated as ordinary rather than as special and exceptional.

A lot of young men weren't given any tools at school to deal with any of this, and their teachers and people around them didn't know what to say, how they could make it better for them. That has to change significantly; we have to be more open, braver and give young people a lot more credit that they can deal with this stuff.

Craig Haslop

Our informants, like the literature, encourage the view that young people are both willing and able to change with appropriate support. They also, however, noted that adults underestimate what is happening for young people and fear trying to address it. They mentioned a number of resources: multiple useful sources curated by [the Global](#)

[Equality Collective](#), for example, and the [padlet of collated research](#) by Graham Andre; Andre also appears in the BBC documentary about challenging gender roles in primary school, *No More Boys and Girls*, which is available on YouTube. In relation to advertising stereotypes, <https://genderremixer.com/html5/> is a witty site that enables images and sound to be transposed from advertisements for 'boy' and 'girl' products, raising awareness of stereotyping. Some alternative resources were referred to, such as [one on 'radical safeguarding'](#) and others that try to shift understandings of key issues in school for boys and minoritised groups, [such as exclusions](#).

Most frequently mentioned were EJ Renold's (2019) [AGENDA resources](#), which contain extensive research-based ideas for working with children aged 7 to 18 on issues of gender equity – not least because our informants identified indirect and creative methods of engagement as much more productive than directly raising issues around identity and relationships with boys (Renold, 2019; Renold, Ashton and McGeeney, 2021).

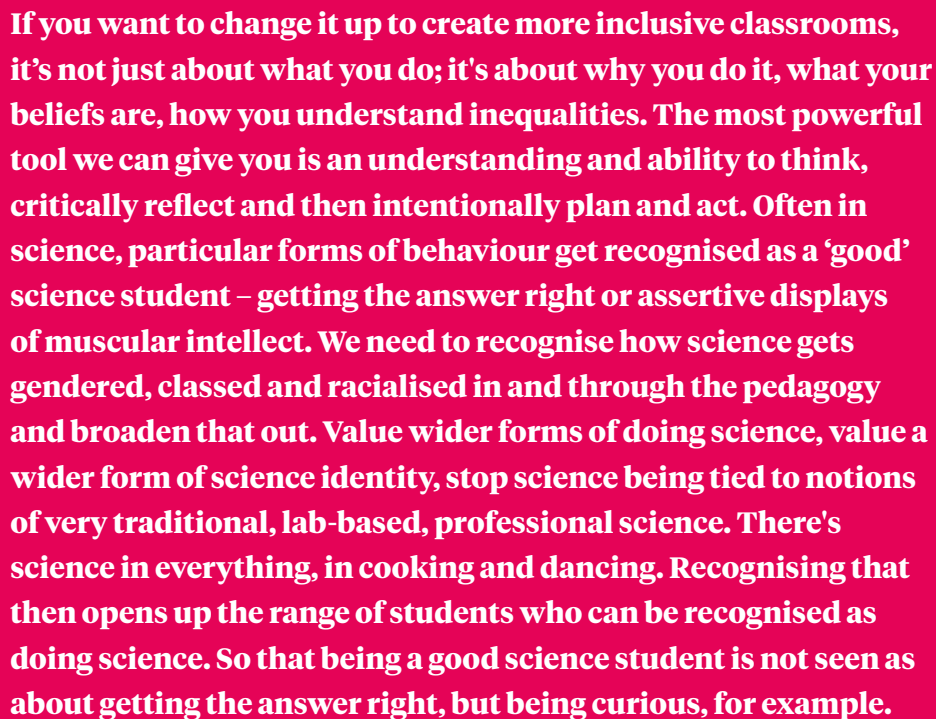
Gender equality and sexual harassment, consent, healthy relationships in schools is the most useful, exciting, innovative work that creates safe spaces for dialogue.

Vanita Sundaram

Craig Haslop's work (forthcoming) emphasises the role of 'impact statements' by those who have experienced misogynist and homophobic/transphobic harassment to help young men 'connect emotionally', noting that boys may be technically competent but ill-equipped to understand the social, cultural or emotional implications of the complicated digital spaces they find themselves in from a young age.

Ongoing Education for and with Practitioners

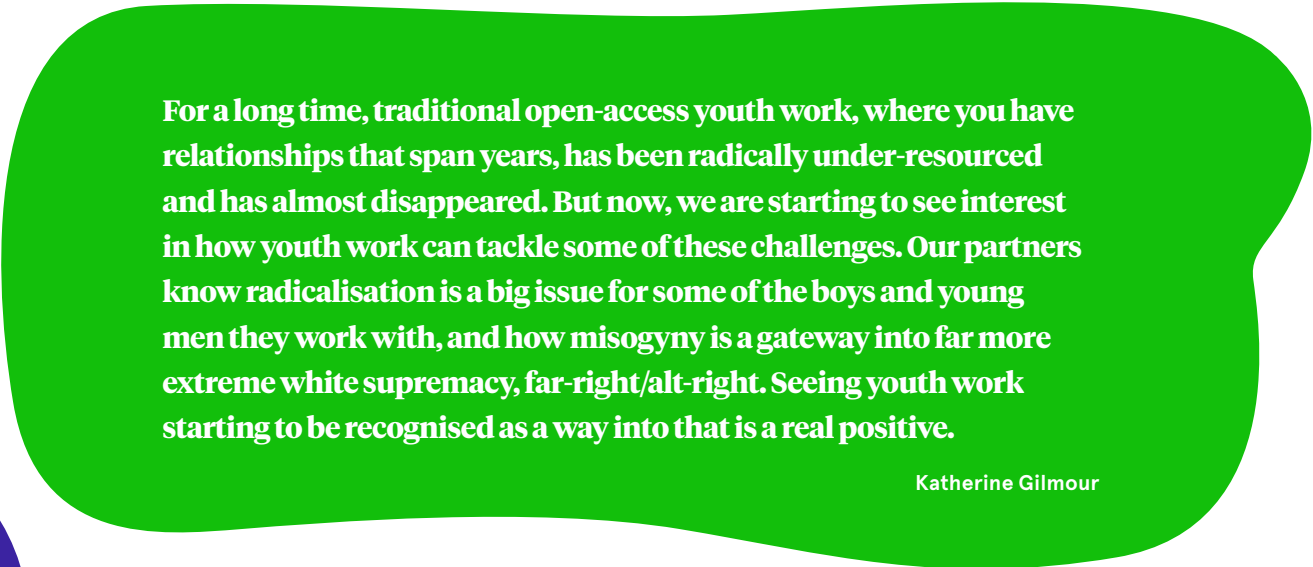
Our informants and the literature stress the need to shift the perceptions and understandings of adult practitioners, not just young people, to achieve lasting change. They also acknowledged that this task requires resources, support and time, as well as that such critical reflection and challenge will inevitably be uncomfortable. This sits uneasily with the eagerness of policymakers and politicians to find simple, cheap 'silver bullets' for complex issues. However, to effect change in institutions, it is essential to conduct long-term work with teachers, youth workers, early-years practitioners and other professionals so they can reflect on their attitudes, biases and areas of ignorance; to become 'critically aware'; and to take risks and experiment with the curricular and extra-curricular provision. As previously noted, *Lifting Limits'* work has shown substantial progress towards these goals among adults following critical, whole-school work on gender stereotyping and inequalities in primary schools (Horvath, 2019).



If you want to change it up to create more inclusive classrooms, it's not just about what you do; it's about why you do it, what your beliefs are, how you understand inequalities. The most powerful tool we can give you is an understanding and ability to think, critically reflect and then intentionally plan and act. Often in science, particular forms of behaviour get recognised as a 'good' science student – getting the answer right or assertive displays of muscular intellect. We need to recognise how science gets gendered, classed and racialised in and through the pedagogy and broaden that out. Value wider forms of doing science, value a wider form of science identity, stop science being tied to notions of very traditional, lab-based, professional science. There's science in everything, in cooking and dancing. Recognising that then opens up the range of students who can be recognised as doing science. So that being a good science student is not seen as about getting the answer right, but being curious, for example.

Louise Archer

A topic for debate is what teachers in school can do relative to the role of outsiders or specialists. Informants mentioned the importance of sustained relationships, including those found in long-term youth work. Even those who run workshops in schools recognised that having a more permanent presence – one distinct from a teaching role – could benefit young people.



For a long time, traditional open-access youth work, where you have relationships that span years, has been radically under-resourced and has almost disappeared. But now, we are starting to see interest in how youth work can tackle some of these challenges. Our partners know radicalisation is a big issue for some of the boys and young men they work with, and how misogyny is a gateway into far more extreme white supremacy, far-right/alt-right. Seeing youth work starting to be recognised as a way into that is a real positive.

Katherine Gilmour

Conclusion

This report has demonstrated throughout the diversity of experiences of boys and boyhoods in the UK. Gender is a category that is in flux and under constant revision and negotiation, and boys are actively navigating these shifting norms and ideals. Masculinities are diverse, and an intersectional lens highlights that all boys have positionalities based in race, class, sexuality, ability, faith, space/place and cultural context. We need to capture this breadth in subtle ways, both to enlarge the scope for action and to avoid stoking misplaced politics of backlash.

Some persistent norms related to masculinities promote desires for dominance, violence and otherisation, which can impact UK boys and others in negative – but sometimes also seductive – ways. Families, parenting practices and institutional settings both regulate and support shifting gender identities and norms. Importantly, educational settings, early years and schools are sites of gender socialisation, where hierarchical dynamics of class and race often restrict educational achievement in inequitable ways, but which can also be sites of new possibilities. Additionally, games and sport are key sites and practices for performing masculinities, as are online spaces, where masculinities are digitally mediated and are actively being performed, reshaped and renegotiated.

How do we address harmful masculine norms among UK boys? Some of the pedagogical and educational approaches available for working with boys can be problematic if they re-essentialise masculinities and embed limited assumptions about boys. However, promising processes, practices and initiatives do exist, as our expert informants have seen first-hand in educational and intervention spaces. Carers, practitioners and educators must all have the proper training and tools of critical reflection that they need to support young people, including boys, towards the common goal of achieving gender equity in UK society. To continue breaking down harmful norms, we crucially need to work in partnership and dialogue with children and young people, being curious about their perspectives and experiences rather than assuming that they need to be 'fixed'. Participatory, creative and open-ended approaches are required that respect and actively engage them. Critically, as this report underscores, addressing these norms must start early, given gender socialisation is a process that begins before birth. Perhaps most importantly, we must note the potential gains for *all* young people, including boys, when we work together in gender-just and gender-transformative ways.

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