



Teaching Boys: A Positive Perspective

IBSC UK-Europe Regional Conference

St Paul's School

Friday 27 February

Background

On Friday 27 February, St Paul's School hosted the International Boys' School Coalition's UK–Europe Regional Conference, *Teaching Boys: A Positive Perspective*. The conference aimed to reframe the narrative around boys' education by shifting the conversation from a deficit-focused 'crisis' discourse to a strengths-based approach that recognises the positive role schools should play in boys' development. It aimed to equip school leaders with practical, evidence-informed strategies to support boys' wellbeing, relationships and engagement. The conference also discussed how schools can better understand and respond to boys' perspectives on masculinity, identity and belonging so that their voices more meaningfully shape school culture. The day fostered dialogue between independent, state, primary and secondary schools and emphasised the importance of cross-sector collaboration and collective responsibility for boys' advancement. The programme included a keynote address from writer, broadcaster and humanitarian Rory Stewart, a panel discussion featuring Heads Mark Sturgeon, Joanna Hubbard and Jaideep Barot as well as Director of the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys Nick Isles, a plenary from Dr Niobe Way, Professor of Developmental Psychology at New York University, and a series of interactive workshops around PSHE, entrepreneurship, research, sport and the arts.

Themes, Outcomes and Actions

Moving Beyond the "Crisis" Narrative

Boys face serious challenges which feed a 'crisis' narrative when discussing their education more broadly. Boys lag behind girls at every stage of formal education, are more likely to be excluded from school and are underrepresented in university progression. Wellbeing indicators are equally stark, with male suicide rates exceeding 14 deaths per day in the UK. Our conference aimed to resist the simplistic "boys in crisis" framing. In his keynote speech, Rory Stewart situated these educational concerns within wider geopolitical, economic and technological shifts. The erosion of traditional economic roles, the rise of algorithm-driven media ecosystems and the disruptive potential of artificial intelligence are reshaping identity and opportunity for young men now more than ever.

However, he chose to focus on heroism. He described young men who found maturity and purpose through service, be that volunteering abroad, building institutions or taking responsibility for others. His argument was that growth and character come from difficult, embodied commitment to something larger than oneself rather than abstract rhetoric or digital status. We must resist reductive stereotypes and strive to cultivate agency, character and connection in our schools and institutions.



Character in an Age of AI and Populism

Stewart used Aristotle's conception of education as the formation of virtue, *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos* to provide the big-picture backdrop of the day's discussion. In a world shaped by populism and the quantification of status, schools must equip boys with moral clarity, intellectual humility and civic courage, moving beyond national examination curricula.

This theme was reinforced in the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education workshops, which invited educators to anchor their curricula in fundamental character questions: Who do you want to be? What kind of world do you want to create?

The panel emphasised that character is formed through modelling. "Be curious, not furious" and the idea of "safe uncertainty" captured the need for adults to respond with openness rather than outrage, enabling boys to be vulnerable and emotionally literate from an early age. Leadership is learned, not innate, and schools must provide varied, attainable role models and purposeful mentorship. Ultimately, Stewart framed education as the cultivation of virtue, shifting the focus from results to forming young men who feel seen, heard and equipped to flourish.

Social Health and the Crisis of Connection

Another key theme of the conference focused on belonging. Drawing on her mixed-method research, Dr Niobe Way's plenary examined how boys demonstrate strong relational intelligence in early adolescence yet often become increasingly disconnected in cultures that privilege emotional restraint and stereotypically "hard" traits. She also expanded on the panel's notion of curiosity. Through qualitative research methods, she concluded that if boys themselves stop being curious, they start to stereotype, and if they stop questioning others, they stop questioning themselves.

Rory Stewart's positioning of the modern world as a product of fallen liberal democracy also resonated with the antisocial society Dr Way described. Both argue that social health (forming healthy friendships and relationships) is vital in their development and wellbeing.

Boys do not lack emotional capacity but cultural norms can inhibit its expression. Schools therefore have a responsibility to cultivate social health alongside academic attainment.

Preventing Alienation in RSE and other social disciplines

The PSHE workshop offered highly practical strategies for preventing alienation when addressing topics such as consent, misogyny and masculinity. Speakers highlighted the importance of lesson sequencing, language choice and the distinction between "snitching" and responsible reporting. Delegates were encouraged to discuss micro-interventions and peer teaching, with discussion focusing on how boys can be invited into complex conversations without diluting their seriousness. The emphasis was on designing inclusive pedagogies that encourage participation and openness.

Sport, Character and the Whole Boy

The sport workshop explored sport as a core vehicle for boys' holistic development: a central site of character formation and social connection. Drawing on a pupil panel spanning Year 4 to Year 12, the session explored how sport builds focus, strategic thinking, resilience and goal setting, with pupils



articulating clearly the link between physical activity and academic performance. Delegates highlighted how traits such as humility, integrity and empathy map naturally onto the sporting environment and that sport's greatest pedagogical gift is the immediacy of its consequences: boys learn to win and lose with grace, to navigate failure and to take real responsibility for others. Schools should adopt and workshop a sporting programme designed to stretch, challenge and build the whole boy.

Literacy, Belonging and Intellectual Identity

The morning research workshop focused on literacy and reading culture. Reading among young people, particularly boys, is in decline, with exam pressures and digital distraction reducing time for sustained engagement. Delegates noted that boys' reading often becomes invisible on devices and that reading risks being coded as feminine.

Numerous practical considerations were proposed, incorporating ideas from both the state and independent sector: protected reading time, tutor-led reading programmes, visible teacher and parent modelling and greater collaboration between departments and libraries.

Boys and the Arts: Belonging Beyond STEM

Another important strand focused on boys' engagement in the Arts. National data indicates a 42 per cent decline in Arts GCSE entries since 2010, with boys specifically surveyed as viewing the Arts as subjects least likely to yield the highest salary and least likely to lead to a job. Workshop discussions identified barriers including parental pressure towards STEM, scheduling constraints and fear of exposure in performance subjects. Delegates explored the Arts as an infrastructure for empathy, creativity and whole-brain development

Policy-centric actions discussed included assessment reform that better rewards the creative process and how schools can clearly articulate the Arts' civic and cultural value.

Research, Collaboration and the Way Forward

A central outcome of the day was a renewed commitment to research-informed collaboration. The St Paul's School Research Centre for the Education of Boys outlined its mission to support and disseminate rigorous inquiry into boys' academic development, wellbeing and character formation. The emphasis on action research, practitioner-led, ethically grounded and collaborative, generated significant interest and over 30 different schools and institutions expressed an interest to collaborate.

Delegates in the workshop expressed a strong appetite for cross-sector partnerships and a network of researching schools capable of sharing data, insights and replicable practice.

Agency and Real Responsibility

Entrepreneurship might have seemed an outlier theme, but it reinforced the conference's emphasis on agency. The St Paul's *Start It* programme described a pathway from entrepreneurial mindset to



networks and alumni mentorship, explicitly framed around sustainability and social impact rather than narrow profit.

Through activities aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, boys are encouraged to address real-world problems (food waste, clean water, social mobility) and to see themselves as capable of building solutions.

The key takeaway was that boys respond to authentic challenge. Purposeful projects, visible peer role models and structured opportunities for leadership channel competitive energy into contribution.

Conclusion

Across these diverse sessions, a unifying conviction emerged:

- The problem is not boys themselves, but the cultural and structural conditions in which they are growing up.
- Character, connection and purpose must sit alongside academic attainment and continue to be schools' priority.
- Schools cannot act in isolation; collaboration and research are essential.
- Boys flourish when they are given responsibility, visible role models and meaningful belonging.

The conference was a serious, hopeful and outward-looking conversation about how schools might cultivate young men who are intellectually rigorous, emotionally literate and morally courageous.

The work now lies in turning that shared vision into sustained practice within our own institutions and across the wider educational community.

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