



# S.M.I.L.E.-ing Boys Project

Founded by Artist Kay Rufai

2022 Report



# Introduction

Intensified by the pandemic, recession and growing economic inequalities, young people in the UK are in crisis, with young people from global majority backgrounds disproportionately affected. This is particularly pronounced when it comes to mental health. Young black men specifically are more likely than any other group to be diagnosed with severe mental health problems and are also far more likely to be sanctioned, though do not report poorer mental health before the age of 11. With the shift most likely attributed to higher incidents of discrimination, stereotypes and cultural barriers, there is a critical need for preventative measures to counter this narrative and foster healthier environments for young black boys to thrive. Connected to the rise in mental health issues and economic inequality, crime has reached a 20 year high, with black young people nine times more likely to be stopped and searched.



The S.M.I.L.E (SEND ME INSPIRING LOVING ENERGY)-ing Boys Project is a research-led photography, poetry and immersive art project that addresses these issues head on, working internally with young black boys their sense of selves, understanding their emotions and improving their well-being, as well as the impacting external environments the boys are surrounded by in their schools. -Boys improves the overall wellbeing of young black boys between the ages of 13-15 through workshops, exhibitions, mentorship, and field study, based upon the 8 Pillars of Happiness as defined by the Happiness Institute in Copenhagen, Denmark: **Trust, Security, Wealth, Freedom, Work, Democracy, Civic Society and Balance**. The project explores how teaching these principles can have a positive impact on the mental health of young black men, therefore setting them up for success in many areas of their lives.

# Key Stats

**300** young people engaged

**1500** Teachers engaged in well-being workshops in **10** schools

**6** Exhibitions with **600** artworks shown

**5000** People engaged through events, exhibitions and workshops



# The Project

The S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys Project aims to empower this demographic by providing tangible coping strategies to manage their mental health. It subsequently aims to help reduce the rising violent dispositions which have demonstrated correlations with the lack of adequate mental health provision. This project adapts the research and data so that it can be useful in the everyday lives of these young people, so they have a sense of agency over the factors that affect their future well-being.

The initial stage of The SMILE-ing Boys Project was held with 50 young, black boys in Year 9 at a school in Lambeth, supported by the Wellcome Trust, with further workshops and events held at Battersea Arts Centre, supported by Arts Council England. The most recent iteration of the project was supported by The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, working with 300 boys and 1500 teachers in 10 schools in 10 areas of London: Waltham Forest, Hackney, Southwark, Lambeth, Newham, Greenwich, Haringey, Wandsworth, Redbridge & Enfield.

The project is led by Founder Kay Rufai, an interdisciplinary artist motivated to create and implement The S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys Project based on his own personal experience of prejudice as a young black man living in the UK and aims, through these workshops, to be part of the solution to issues and prejudice facing young black boys. As part of this iteration of the project, Kay was supported by 2 facilitators who were trained in the S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys methodology, a key step to scaling up the project to increase its impact nationally and internationally.



## Workshops & CPD


The key facet to the S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys Project is the workshops with the boys. The methodology has continued to be refined since its first incarnation in 2019. The workshops with black boys are consistently evaluated, with regular sessions with alumni to continue to understand and maximise the impact of the project. The key area of experimentation most recently was with different artistic mediums, using more film and design as well as photography to allow the boys to express themselves in different ways.

One new, yet crucial addition to the workshops with the boys in schools, is the mandatory workshops that now need to take place with teachers in the schools where the project takes place. The workshops with teachers are part of their continuing professional development (CPD) where all teachers have to attend, challenging many of the stereotypes they may have about young black boys, and providing them with more tools to better serve the needs of these students. The aim is for these CPD sessions to help to change the culture of the school so that an aspect of their external environment can also be conducive to their success in the world. Over time, a mindset shift in some teachers and departments was evident, recognising there were some things they weren't doing that had a significant impact on feelings of belonging and young people generally. Examples of these shifts include language changes, casting black boys in a wide range of roles in drama departments rather than just antagonists, challenging their own stereotypes of black men, integrating more breaks and exercise and finding ways for schools or departments to take accountability and redesign their programmes to bring more voices of students into decision-making processes.

## Exhibitions

The exhibitions as part of the S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys Project are pivotal for securing the impact on the young boys who take part in the workshops, displaying larger-than-life photographs of the boys in public and/or influential spaces for positive visibility, which can be a moving and incredibly powerful experience for the boys. Some of these spaces have included City Hall, Brixton Market, The Barbican and more. The exhibitions are the culmination point of all the work that's happened, representing the journey they all go on to arrive at a sense of pride and feeling a sense of confidence and self-esteem.

Advocacy and community engagement are a key benefit of the exhibition, engaging influential people with political debates and providing an opportunity for future dialogue. The exhibitions are curated with high-profile people to maximise the advocacy aspect which also open the door for the potential for wider, more systemic changes. There have also been community partnerships with outdoor exhibition that have been powerful and transformative for the young people's sense of being in the places where they live while also expanding the way they see themselves in the world.







*I think it's probably one of the best interventions I've seen in my 15 years of teaching. It's difficult to find interventions or support packages that you know will definitely cater for the children you have and their needs. This provides them with a safe space where the boys can be themselves and they can be authentic and they know the person listening generally gets who they are, cares about what they're saying and then hopefully is then acting as a kind of go-between to the school to provide a voice perhaps they feel they didn't have.*

**-Laura  
(Asst. Headteacher)**





# Key Learnings

**-Facilitator Training-** Training 2 new staff members has been an integral step in future planning and scaling the programme but not without its challenges. It is difficult to ensure quality when bringing others on board so the training and selection of new staff members will continue to be developed for the future.

**-Systemic Barriers-** There are still many systemic barriers in schools, primarily the presence of police in a learning environment. As young black men are nine times more likely to be stopped and searched, this can be a triggering part of the experience of school for many black boys. While this can be addressed in the CPD workshops, it is more difficult to shift with some school administrators. Schools chosen for the project need to be willing to unpack issues around police presence in schools and whether or not it has any positive value for students.

**-Unseen Labour-** There is a great deal of emotional labour that goes into not only leading the workshops but also leading the CPD sessions with teachers, with Kay having not only to stand up for himself in these spaces but also the boys. This has been particularly prevalent in discussions around police and security, reliving traumas in this area for him and for them.

**-Continued School Engagement-** Generally schools who have signed on to do the project continue to engage year on year, demonstrating a commitment on behalf of the school to anti-racism as well as speaking to the impact of the project. For the schools that have been engaging since the beginning, the project has become part of the fabric of the school.







*I loved that this was a whole school forum. The conversations being had were so necessary but hadn't yet taken place in this setting with everyone present. It makes it much easier for the school and everyone in it to be held accountable for policies and decision-making and to generate the confidence in the first place to have these important ongoing discussions together.*  
**-Teacher, Ark All Saints**

**-School Buy-in-** Having a better relationship with schools has ensured that buy in comes from the top, not just one teacher, key to the long-term success of the methodology. The relationship starts with headteacher and requires a continued investment and buy-in from them. The project is very appealing but schools have been turned down if they are not committed to CPD teacher training.

**-Alumni engagement-** Having capacity to develop the continued engagement of alumni has been challenging. There needs to be a clearer alumni structure and still challenging, as most of the resources go into the school programme for young people. This aspect requires more resources, and there has been more alumni support developed but still a long way to go.

**-Arts based approach-** The art-based approach of the project has created a concrete evidence base for the value of using creative and art-based methods to enhance critical thinking and improve the students' overall engagement in their lessons. Through the CPD training, where some art-based approaches used in the project are shared for teachers to adapt in their lessons, there has been positive feedback from teachers highlighting the noticeable change in student engagement and restorative and transformative justice practices in their school. There have been some challenges for teachers feeling confident enough to use arts approaches in some of the stem/core subjects highlighting the need for more work to up-skill them further.

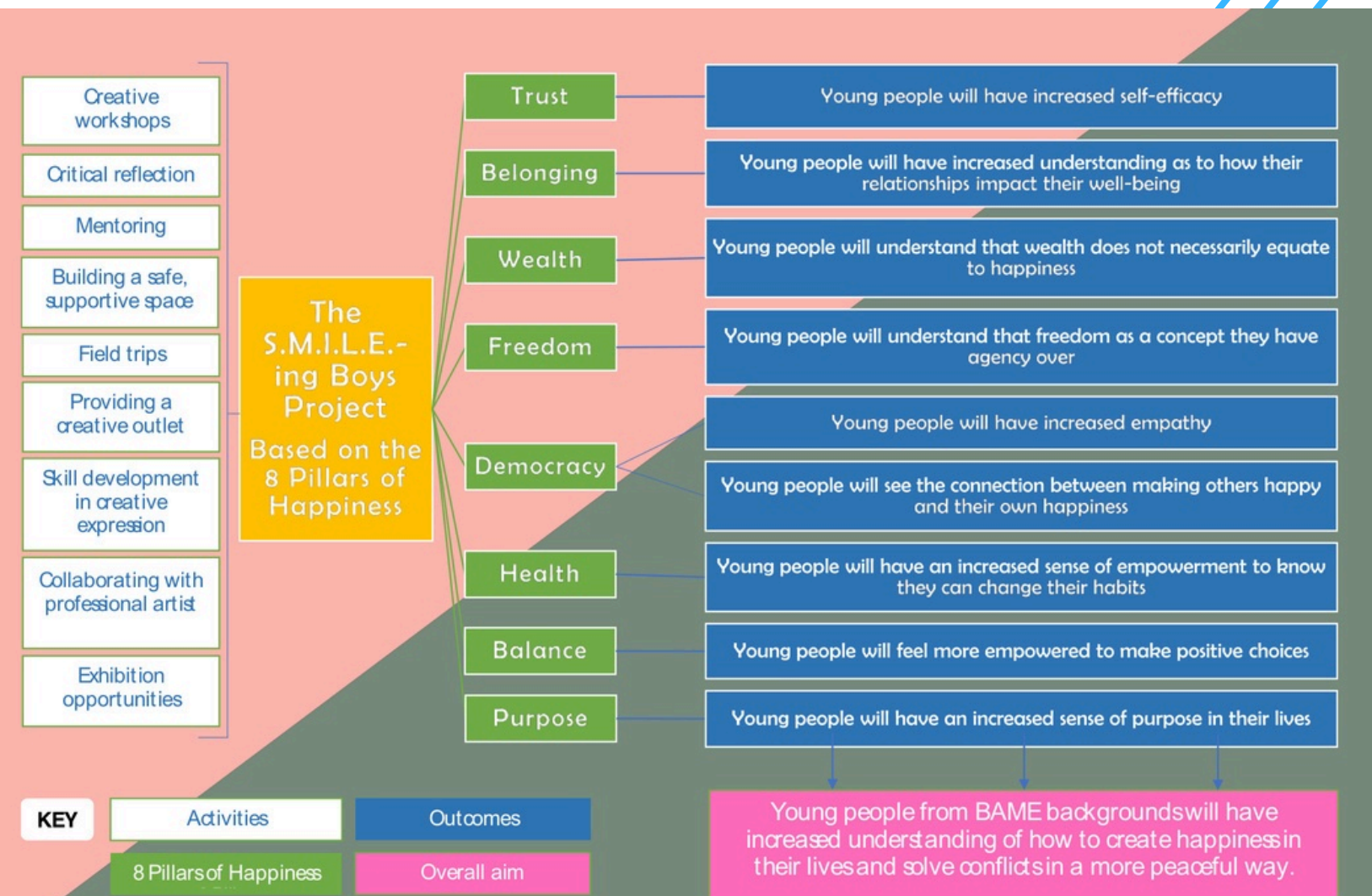
# Impact

Impact of the project is measured using a combination of quantitative data from surveys conducted at the beginning and end of the project and qualitative data from interviews with students, parents, teachers and visitors. In addition to some bespoke, project-specific measures, surveys are designed based on previous research studies on the following key areas:

- Well-being and happiness
- Isolation and conflict resolution
- Self-efficacy, self-confidence
- Sense of self-worth and aspiration.

Social impact data was taken from a sample size of 39 young people from Harris Academy and Kelmscott.

The evaluation was based upon The S.M.I.L.L.E-ing Boys Project's Theory of Change:





*I think it is the most valuable training I have had in years. The challenging and controversial topics brought to the school were eye-opening for the vast majority of us. I got so much info to work with in my lessons and so many ideas to implement with some students that I hope to be able to give a positive feedback at the end of the term/year"*

**-Head of Year 9**



# Social Impact

## Well-being and happiness

100% of young people had an **increase of positive feelings** by an average of **160%**.

92% of young people had a **decrease in angry feelings** by an average of **160%**.

100% of young people had a **decrease in sad feelings** by an average of **160%**.

95% of young people had an **increase in feeling happy** by an average of **120%**.

## Isolation

82% of young people had a **decrease in feeling like they lack companionship** by an average of **85%**.

92% of young people had a **decrease in feelings of being left out** by an average of **93%**.

92% of young people had a **decrease of feelings isolated** from others by an average of **69%**.

## Self-efficacy and aspiration

97% of young people felt **they will be able to achieve most of the goals they have set themselves** by an average increase of **79%**.

92% of young people felt **that when facing difficult tasks, they are certain they will accomplish them** by an average increase of **83%**.

97% of young people **felt like they can obtain outcomes important to them** by an average increase of **100%**.

95% of young people **believe they can succeed at almost any endeavour they set their mind to** by an average increase of **67%**.

90% of young people reported **they will be able to successfully overcome obstacles** by an average increase of **79%**.

85% of young people felt that **even when things are difficult, they perform quite well** by an average increase of **60%**.

# Social Impact

## Self-worth and self-confidence

**97%** of young people had an **increase** in enjoyment in learning new things by an average of **94%**.

**92%** of young people had an **increase** in feelings that what they do in life is **valuable** and worthwhile by an average of **74%**.

## Conflict resolution

**100%** of young people had an **increased** awareness of emotions and how they feel by an average of **88%**.

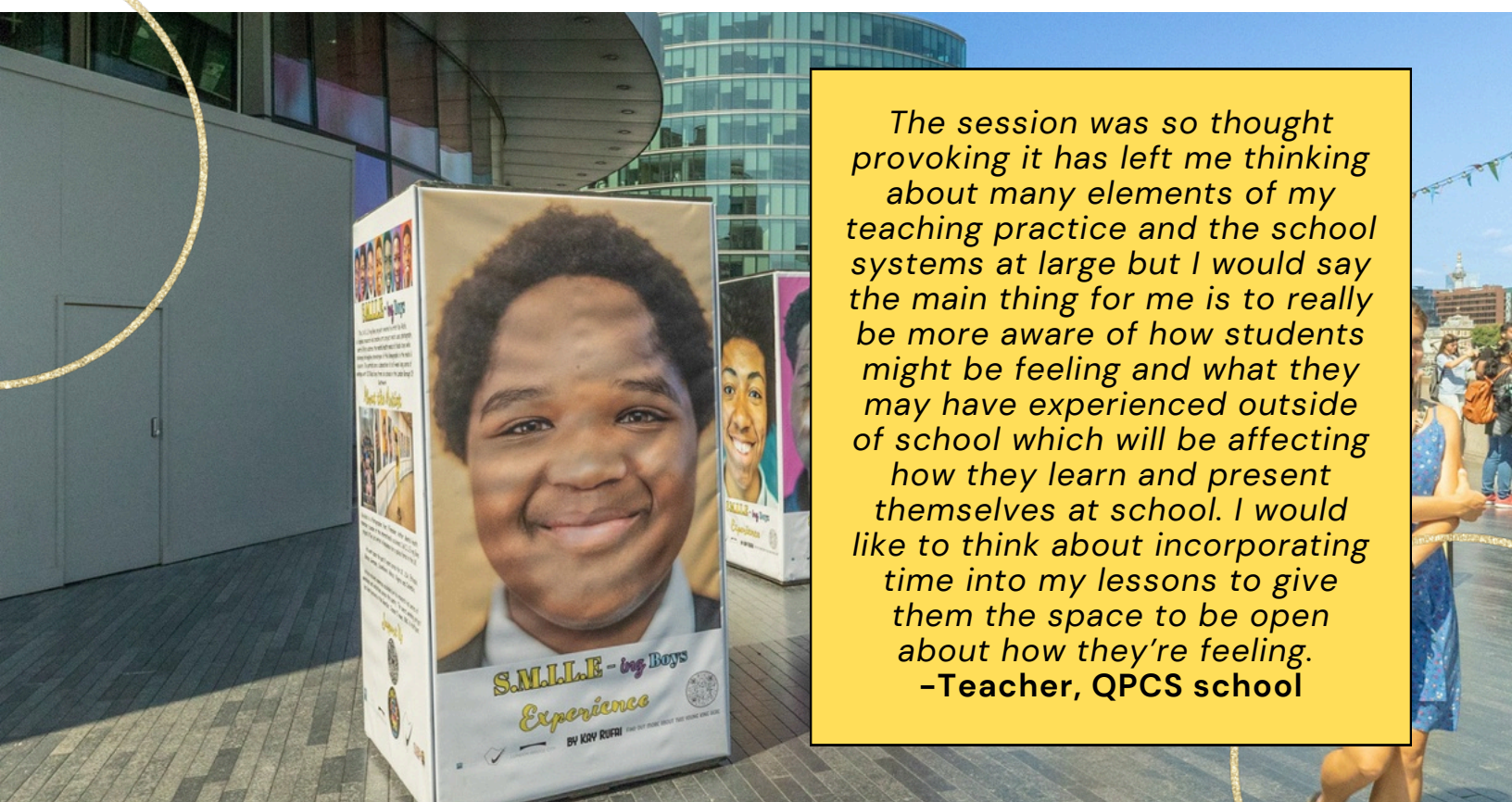
**82%** of young people were **less likely** to deal with conflict through violence by an average of **82%**.

**97%** of young people felt they **express their emotions better** through the things they've learnt in S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys by an average of **106%**.

**79%** of young people were **more likely to speak to someone** when they needed support with feelings/emotions/mental health by an average of **61%**.

**97%** of young people now have a **stronger understanding of their identity** as a black boy by an average of **100%**.

**100%** of boys reported an average increase in happiness levels of **113%**.



*The session was so thought provoking it has left me thinking about many elements of my teaching practice and the school systems at large but I would say the main thing for me is to really be more aware of how students might be feeling and what they may have experienced outside of school which will be affecting how they learn and present themselves at school. I would like to think about incorporating time into my lessons to give them the space to be open about how they're feeling.*  
**-Teacher, QPCS school**





*I've learned to open up more so that it doesn't get built up to the point where you do something silly on the road. That situation could end up kicking off even more because of a situation I've held in. Even the way you've dealt with us from the beginning of the project, it's been like family, shown us that you've been through what we've been through.*

**-Rennell**

*The project has helped me to understand and express my opinions and what I think about real world problems. So, it helped us to deepen our understanding of problems and you helped us a lot with how to prevent this things or deal with them properly. I've learnt a lot about myself as a young black boy.*

**-Jason**



*I've learned you're not the only one to go through stuff. I've learned I can be myself. You know what is and what you want to be. Just do it.*

**-Afran**

*This is the first ever group I've seen that is just for black boys. It was a lot of the stuff we learn about anyway like health but just black boys, and I'm grateful for it.*


**-Thomas**



*We talked about real stuff, real problems that black boys and black men face. Its ok to open up and talk to people about what's going on.*

**-Israel**





*Students grew in confidence, and some were able to reflect on and change their behaviours and responses, resulting in less time out of lessons and fewer sanctions. – Mental Wellbeing officer Harris Peckham*

*Most students that have taken part seem more reflective and overall less confrontational. I noticed this during the latter part of the programme's duration and after it ended. If they were to be in trouble or given a sanction, most would retaliate or try and argue back without resolution. It feels to be that the boys have moved from this, and if they feel a punishment is unjust, they wait until a better moment to discuss why. –Assistant Head Teacher*

*Most of the students who participated are more self-confident and have improved in their ability to articulate themselves. There has been an evident shift in the way Joshua uses the mood cards as a self-regulatory tool in the last term which in turn sees him engage much better, and this has helped a few teachers support him to engage better in lessons. –Curriculum Lead, QPCS school*



# Looking to the Future

The following represents the future plans and ambitions for the SMILE-ing Boys Project.

1. **Parent programme-** to continue to support the external factors that impact the well-being and success of young black boys, there have been many requests for a programme for parents alongside the workshops with boys and teachers
2. **S.M.I.L.E.-ing Girls Project-** As many of the issues facing black boys are also very present for black girls, there is a great deal of interest from schools to develop a SMILE-ing Girls Project. There are plans for this in the works though further support will help to refine how the methodology and training need to be adapted to best serve young girls.
3. **Longitudinal Evaluation-** The programme has been running since 2018 and many of the boys from the first iterations of the project are going to university, entering the workforce, pursuing their dreams and becoming young men. Anecdotal based on Kay's continued relationship with them, the impact of taking part in S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys has been pivotal in this success, though a longer-term evaluation needs to be conducted to further understand this impact. The culmination of this research would be a film to showcase the project and its impact.
4. **Alumni programme-** There has been a strong demand for a more robust alumni programme that supports peer mentorship, internships in creative and non-creative field and continued engagement. As part of this, there are plans to find a permanent space to hold events, workshops and sessions with alumni.
5. **Scaling up-** As the demand for the project increases, there are plans in place to scale the project up to 15 more boroughs in London as well as an international pilot planned in LA. This will be an important step in creating a global community to better understand commonalities between cultures and see differences. The pilot planned for January 2023 will be used to test how the methodology translates internationally, with the possibility it will grow into an international exchange programme of trips.



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