



**S.M.I.L.E-ING
BOYS PROJECT**

send me inspiring loving energy

SUMMARY

“Dozens of people have been fatally stabbed in the capital since the beginning of this year as latest figures show knife crime has soared to seven-year high.”

... “Stabbings in London have risen by 16% in 2018”

- The Sun

“The number of fatal stabbings in England and Wales last year was the highest since records began in 1946.”

- BBC

Responding to the recent rise in knife crime in London, the S.M.I.L.E (SEND ME INSPIRING LOVING ENERGY)-ing Boys Project is a research led photography, poetry and immersive art project which addresses the overall wellbeing of young black boys between the ages of 13 -25 through workshops, exhibitions, mentorship, and field study. The project uses the 8 Pillars of Happiness as defined by the Happiness Institute in Copenhagen, Denmark. It explores how teaching these principles can have an impact on the rising numbers of youth violence and murders in the UK over the past year.

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 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 (BAC), supported by Arts Council England.

KEY STATS

WELL-BEING: 22% POSITIVE CHANGE

52 YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGED

SELF-EFFICACY 19% INCREASE

80 ARTWORKS SHOWN

OVERALL HAPPINESS 28% INCREASE

20 YEAR 9 BOYS ON LONG-TERM WORKSHOPS

550 VISITORS

10 BAME & REFUGEE 16-19YO ON SHORT-TERM WORKSHOPS

ASPIRATION/SELF-WORTH 22% INCREASE

17 MUSIC TRACKS CREATED

EXHIBITION SHOWN FOR 3 WEEKS

ISOLATION 17% POSITIVE CHANGE

ABOUT KAY



Kay Rufai is an interdisciplinary artist whose work focuses on using art as an expressive tool to help participants and collaborators achieve a strong sense of themselves and improve their sense of well-being. He has shown work and conducted projects at home in the UK as well as internationally – in the US, Sweden, Denmark and Nigeria – and sees his own art practice as very interconnected to the work he does with young people. He was 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 boys of colour.

It was both the visible rise in violence connected to those around me in the past two years, along with the alarming political narrative around negative perceptions of young black men and boys, that galvanised me to say, 'well, you can either just sit here and watch it happen, or you can do something about it.' The way the media talks about young black men make me think, 'they are also talking about you. You are inside of it.' So that got me thinking about how I could be part of the solution.

“I decided I needed to create a project that challenges these stereotypes and empowers young people.” - Kay

“I wanted to **challenge perceptions** of a demographic of boys which challenges people to **break past their stereotypes**, outside of what the media portrays them to be.”



- Kay

PHASE 1: RESEARCH

During the research phase of the project, Kay went to Denmark to interview the Director of the Happiness Research Institute and to conduct ethnographic research to see first-hand how the 8 pillars were implemented within that society. As part of that trip, he also travelled to Sweden where he collected more ethnographic data and meetings with young people of a similar demographic to the boys in the South London workshops and their youth workers to understand the context better in those countries and inform his workshop design. He then travelled to Bhutan where they measure gross national happiness to see what strategies the government had put in place to create a happier society.

“The research was extremely helpful because it made me realise that hard facts-wise it’s possible to see that **people can be happier**. It allowed me to then look at what things are in people’s control and what things are at a bigger, societal level.”- Kay



PHASE 2: DELIVERY

Workshops

Workshops were designed based on Kay's research visits, interrogating which happiness factors are within our control and which factors are not, taking place over an eight-month period. Though some happiness factors can be assisted by certain government policies not present in the UK, workshops focussed on what young people have agency over. Hand-picked by their teacher as some of the most disengaged boys in the school with many involved in youth violence, the boys in the workshops were all Year 9. Many were in detention regularly; on the brink of social exclusion; and on pupil premium.

“From a mental well-being perspective, it’s really important to understand the factors that impact the way we feel. Once we understand these factors, we can go back to those things and think how we have agency over them. Knowing these allowed me to reverse engineer the workshops to focus on what they have control over in their lives.” – Kay



Field Trips

One key element of the project was the field trips to art museums in London to give them exposure to art on a bigger scale. As the boys identified for this project were labelled as troublesome in school, they were not normally allowed to go on field trips. Their experience on these trips was quite the contrary.

“It was amazing to take them to two different art spaces and see how well they behaved. I wasn’t surprised but it was great to evidence. You just need to trust them and give them the tools to act appropriately in these spaces.” – Kay



Arts-based approach

All the workshops used an arts-based approach to engagement, giving them tools to tell stories through images. An arts-based element was essential to the success of the project by providing alternative methods of engagement. These methods were as follows:

1. Photography- each boy was given a camera and taught basic photography skills and visual storytelling
2. Creative writing- poetry added depth to the photographs taken, adding meaning and understanding
3. Film- interviewing for case studies taught them the technical and artistic sides of shooting film.

PHASE 3: EXHIBITIONS & EVENTS

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he exhibition was an opportunity to showcase the powerful revelations uncovered through casting an internal lens on the young men who took part in the project and their communities to reveal some of their truths, realities and growth throughout the process. It also provided the 500+ audience members an opportunity to understand and engage with the realities of these young people, offering a platform for them to celebrate their works and achievements; help boost their self-esteem; and share important learnings from the whole processes.

“It’s amazing how it started from a small session at school to a beautiful gallery at Battersea Arts Centre. I’m really happy about that.” -Abrar

Events and exhibitions were participatory through a digital photo booth and interactive wall displays, providing ways for visitors to contribute and make it more accessible to a wide demographic from different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages and sexual orientations. This proved to be a powerful means of demonstrating and encouraging positive perceptions of youth in that area and countering the one-sided negative narrative common in the media.

The project yielded a poetry album, *Boy and a Bike (Miseducation of Black Youth)*, which featured contributions from the 20 boys alongside Poetry written by Kay, offering them a chance to work closely with a professional artist. The album is an open exploration of themes connected to S.M.I.L.E., engaging the boys through moderated honest classroom discussions aiming to provide a therapeutic response to the common realities shared between Kay and the participants on the project. Their interludes on the album provided a platform for them to be unfiltered, vulnerable and unashamed of expressing themselves.

“One theme that has been stuck with me throughout the exhibition is ‘black boy joy’. There needs to be a space where black men are able to find their sparkle or shout about their sparkle and about what’s going on with them.”

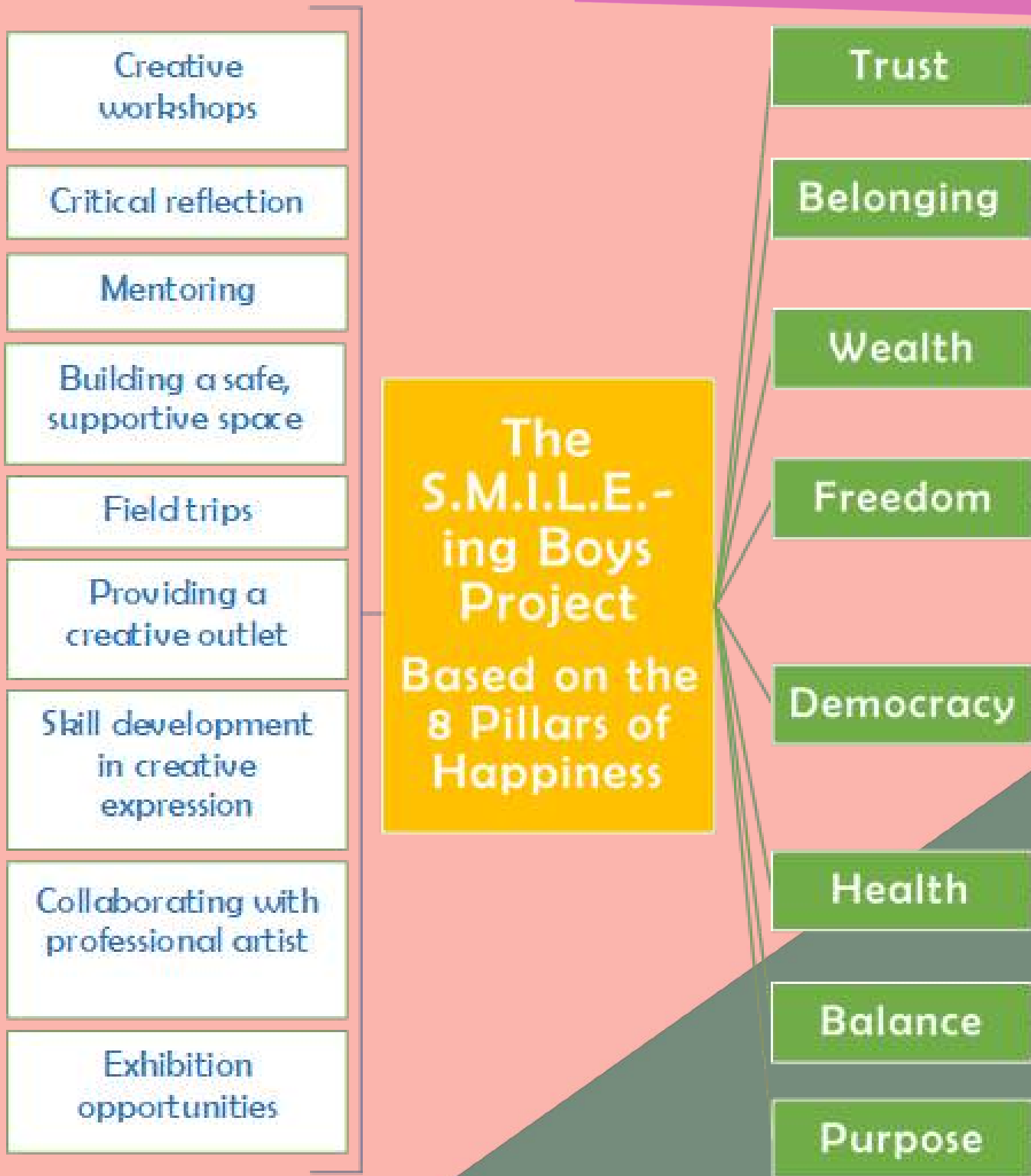
– Grace from Self Esteem Team, Exhibition attendee

“Kay told us to take pictures and write down how we feel. That was really powerful to me.”

– Darnell



THEORY OF



KEY

Activities

Outcomes

8 Pillars of Happiness

Overall aim

CHANGE

Young people will have increased self-efficacy

Young people will have increased understanding as to how their relationships impact their well-being

Young people will understand that wealth does not necessarily equate to happiness

Young people will understand that freedom as a concept they have agency over

Young people will have increased empathy

Young people will see the connection between making others happy and their own happiness

Young people will have an increased sense of empowerment to know they can change their habits

Young people will feel more empowered to make positive choices

Young people will have an increased sense of purpose in their lives

Young people from BAME backgrounds will have increased understanding of how to create happiness in their lives and solve conflicts in a more peaceful way.

IMPACT

The evaluation was designed to be as collaborative and integrated within the delivery as possible, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection. Quantitative data was gathered through questionnaires, based upon previous research on the key outcome areas listed below, at baseline, midpoint and endpoint timescales. Qualitative data was gathered through focus groups, questionnaires, videos, and interviews with young people, teachers, and audiences.

Based on the aims of the project and the 8 Pillars of Happiness, this evaluation was based upon four key areas, with questionnaires designed around previous social science research in those areas:

Key outcome areas	Research Source
Well-being and happiness	<u>Cantril's Ladder;</u> <u>Diener and Biswas-Diener's Scale of Positive and Negative Experience</u>
Isolation and conflict resolution	<u>National Center for Biotechnology Information's Loneliness and Isolation scale</u>
Self-efficacy, self-confidence and sense of self-worth	<u>Validated Self-Efficacy scale</u>
Aspiration	<u>Huppert and So's Flourishing Index</u>

Social Impact

“Overall, there was a significant shift in the boys’ ability to express themselves and articulate their emotions. It was pretty incredible to see it from beginning to end.”

- Kay

As the aims of the workshops connected to the young people having more agency over their own happiness, questionnaires primarily encompassed self-reporting, triangulated through observations from Kay and their teacher. Observational behavioural indicators of improved happiness and well-being such as smiling frequency; frequent verbal expressions of positive emotions; sociability and extraversion were outlined and noted from the outset.



The social impact data breaks down as follows:

Well-being: **22%** positive change, Average baseline- 49/60 & Average endpoint- 56/60

Isolation: **17%** positive change, Average baseline- 21/28 & Average endpoint- 25/28

Self-efficacy: **19%** positive change, Average baseline- 25/32 & Average endpoint- 38/32

Aspiration & sense of self-worth: **22%** positive change, Average baseline- 32/45 & Average endpoint- 56/45

Overall happiness scale: **28%** positive change, Average baseline- 7/10 & Average endpoint- 9/10

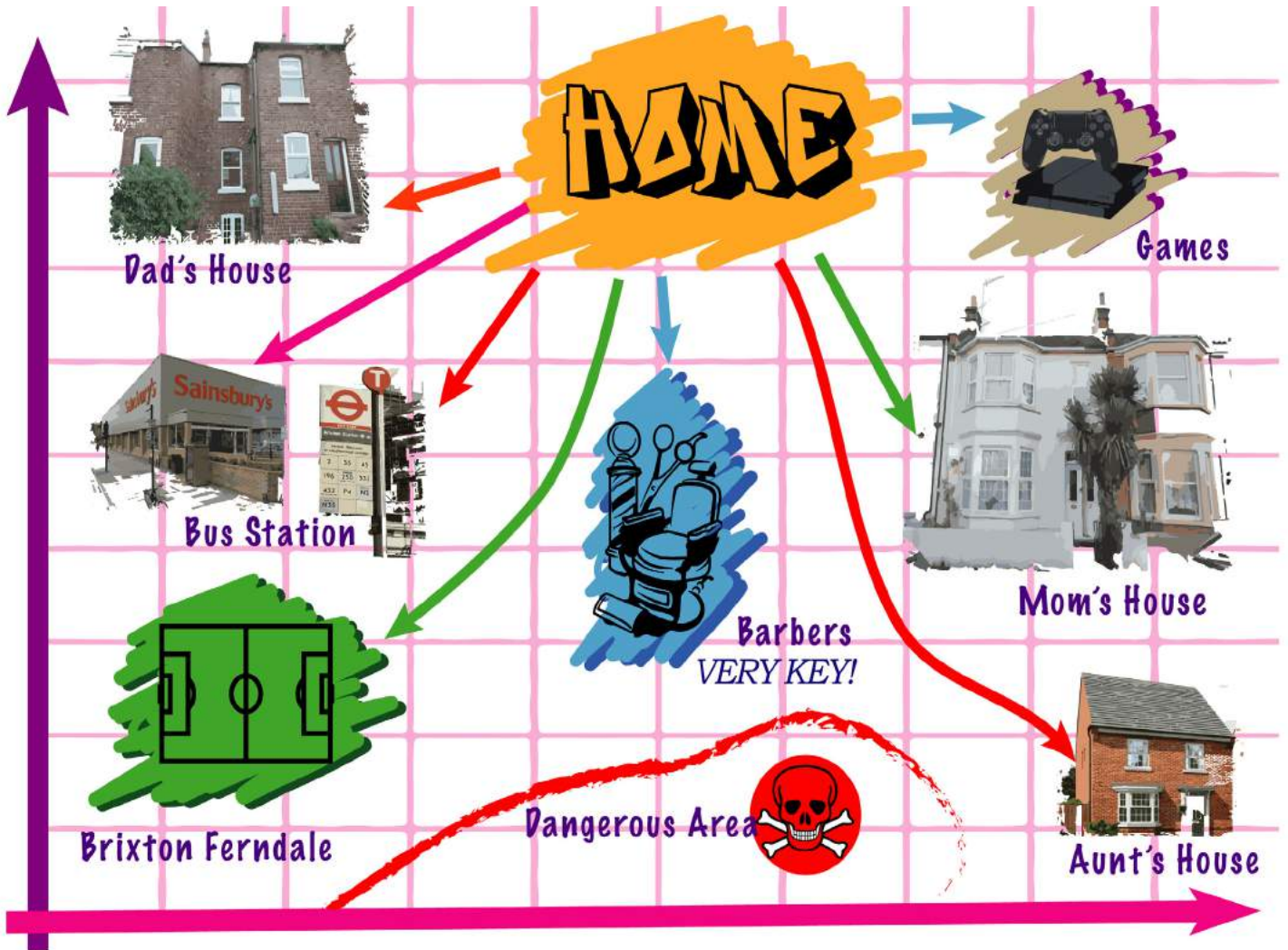
These figures demonstrate a significant change in all the areas the project set out to impact with the 20 boys involved. This data shows that through their engagement in the project, on average the boys have an increased sense of self-worth, self-efficacy, well-being, and overall happiness, higher aspirations and a decreased feeling of isolation. In order to sustain that impact, a peer mentorship scheme has been introduced so the young people can support one another to continue to be inspired and make positive choices.

CASE STUDY - ABRAR

Abrar started off quiet and reserved in the beginning of the workshops, not volunteering himself forward to share opinions and speak out in front of the group. Around the third week his confidence visibly grew after the trust exercise and he began to speak up to share his experiences and challenge others' opinions, often volunteering to share his work and standing in front of the classroom. In the arts-based activities, he initially had no photography skills but showed a keen interest in the medium, proactively contributing to the photography sessions. Though he had never used a DSLR camera before, he soaked up all the skills taught in the sessions and went back into his home environment to capture a series of thoughtful and high-quality images that formed a significant part of the exhibition. He showed a visible sense of pride in that he took the initiative to be the first to turn up to the exhibition, inviting his entire family which is something he had previously never done with any other projects. From observed behavioural changes, he is now very confident in his ability to openly express his emotions, and in using photography and poetry to express himself.



“Before the project, I wasn’t as confident, and I wouldn’t share my feelings as much, but the programme has helped me build my confidence. Whenever I feel something, I’m not scared to let it out. Since I’ve started coming here, it’s not about people judging you, it’s about trying to get help and trying to work with our imperfections.” -Abrar



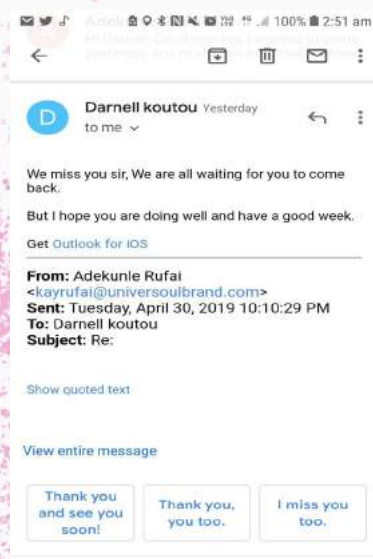
CASE STUDY - DARNELL

Having lost his mother two months before the S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys Project began, Darnell was consistently disengaged in his classes and frequently in detention and exclusion units after his mother's passing. He was initially very quiet and would not contribute, but during week three's session about trust, he opened up to the group about his mothers' passing and how that made him feel, saying he felt safe to disclose that to the group because he felt it was a safe space to do so. After that, Darnell became very engaged in the workshops, volunteering to share his tasks with the group. Normally, he hated Monday mornings with a very angry feeling on Sundays knowing he would have to go to school the next



day but expressed that since the S.M.I.L.E-ing Boys Project started he feels excitement every Sunday knowing he will be able to come into the classroom to express himself openly and inspired by workshops.

“Kay told us to take pictures. He really inspired me. He taught me to always stay off the road and stay in school to get my studies and my education. He’s really a joyful guy, a guy I can really speak to. Since he came here, it’s opened up my mind to so many things. It makes me want to wake up to the morning and see him speak. It’s inspirational.” – Darnell



CASE STUDY - OTHNIEL

Othniel heard about the project from a friend and decided to come in for one session to see. After the first session he stayed behind to ask if he could join even though they were 3 weeks into the program. Later on, also his tutor highlighted that he has become more engaged in his classes, the quality of his



school work has improved, and he has become more confident since engaging with the project. Following many of the lessons such as the one about balance, he has affirmed he is more able to balance his time by prioritising the things he spends his time doing, so he can dedicate time to football and his school work more efficiently. His also tutor highlighted that he has become more engaged in his classes; the quality of his school work has improved, and he has become more confidence since engaging with the project.

“The workshop has helped me express myself and not feel judged with stuff that I say. It’s fun as well and is better than tutoring where I normally go during that time. It helps me see other peoples’ perspective on things.” – Othniel



**YOU CAN BECOME
A MOVING TARGET**

IF YOU ARE NOT CAREFUL

**BLACK
LIVES
MATTER**

SELF-EXPRESSION

VUNERABILITY

IM JUST LIKE YOU

#FREEDOM!

**HELD DOWN BY
STEREOTYPES**

LAUGHTER

CREATIVITY

BLACK BOY JOY



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

There were four key insights gathered from the project that will be explored through future workshops.

1. **There needs to be a conscious shift towards more well-being focused approaches in schools and other youth services.**

These sessions were a clear indication that all it takes is one person to create a space that is non-judgemental and is full of encouragement to express to create change and ownership that they belong somewhere. As part of measuring academic achievement, well-being also needs to be at the centre of that. Teachers have spoken of increased focus and even increased attainment for some of the boys who took part in the project so it's not that they are incapable of doing this but that there are a lot of other factors that are prohibiting them from doing it. There needs to be a more conscious drive towards well-being approaches though many schools are not equipped to do this.

2. **Arts-based approaches are key to unlocking well-being**

Invest more in the arts. It makes them feel that they are worthy. For example, they took trips to Tate Britain and Mandela exhibition but there wasn't much there that reflected them and who they are. We need to make arts spaces reflect them and who they are, and they need to feel welcome in them. If they feel comfortable in these spaces, they will spend less time doing other things that aren't necessarily positive. How can we redesign our art spaces, with young people directly involved in that process, to feel more engaged and included?

3. **Projects like this should be used to also challenge negative perceptions of young boys at risk of social exclusion.**

This project was designed to consciously counter the negative stereotype of young people of colour and how they are seen and portrayed in the media. There should be places where you can counter falsified stories that do not portray the full picture, and the arts can be a powerful tool to do this.

4. **There should be concerted efforts to provide targeted well-being initiatives for young people of colour from a young age.**

There is a different level of trauma and socio-economic conditions that makes it more of a challenge for those groups to get mental health education. There should be more of an effort made to counter those barriers and create more opportunities for them to be more equal to their white and middle-class counterparts.

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BLACK BOYS DESERVE A CHANCE
BLACK BOYS ARE LOVED
BLACK BOYS ARE INTELLIGENT
BLACK BOYS ARE CREATIVE