

The Spark Programme Report

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Table of Contents

→	03	Context and Introduction
→	06	Session Overview
→	09	Evaluation Approach
→	10	Quantitative Results
→	11	Thematic Analysis
→	17	Conclusion
→	19	References
→	20	Appendix
→	21	About Inspiring Choices

Context and Introduction

Throughout their educational journey, boys are underperforming and this damages their prospects for employment and upward economic mobility (Reeves, 2022). In English state-funded schools, boys are outperformed by girls in all headline attainment measures. For assessments taken in summer 2024, at the end of Key Stage 2, 57.1% of boys (vs. 64.4% of girls) met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (Department for Education, 2025a). At the end of Key Stage 4, 64.5% of boys achieved grade 4 or above (vs 68.5% of girls) in English and Maths; grade 5 and above—which is considered to be a ‘strong pass’—was achieved by 45.0% of boys (vs. 48.9% of girls; Department for Education, 2025b). For entry into higher education (HE) in 2023/24 academic year, the HE progression rate by age 19 for young men was 39.5 (vs. 52.5 for young women; Department for Education, 2025c).

In York and North Yorkshire, boys are below the national average at Key Stage 2 but slightly above the national average at Key Stage 4. For assessments taken in summer 2024, at the end of Key Stage 2, 56.7% of boys met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (Department for Education, 2025a). At the end of Key Stage 4, 65.8% of boys achieved grade 4 or above in English and Maths, and 46.8% of boys achieved grade 5 or above in English and Maths (Department for Education, 2025b). For entry into higher education in 2023/24, the progression rate by age 19 for males in Yorkshire and the Humber was 34.5 (Department for Education, 2025c). Out of the nine regions in England, the progression rate for young men in Yorkshire and the Humber is one of the lowest, ranking seventh.

Other personal characteristics such as socio-economic status, ethnicity and disadvantaged status (e.g., eligible for Free School Meals in the last six years, Looked After Children, or adopted from care) have a large impact on boys. Boys who were eligible for free school meals are one of lowest attaining and progressing groups. In York and North Yorkshire, at Key Stage 2, 35.9% of boys eligible for free school meals met the expected standard for reading, writing and maths (Department for Education, 2025a). At Key Stage 4, only 38.6% achieved a grade 4 or above and 21.9% achieved grade 5 or above for English and Maths (Department for Education, 2025b). However, attainment alone does not explain the difference in HE progression rate between young men and their peers (Southern Universities Network; SUN, 2017). Evidence suggests that even when attainment is high, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to progress to HE (SUN, 2017). The progression rate by age 19 in

2023/24 for boys who were eligible for free school meals nationally was 23.5, and in Yorkshire and The Humber the progression rate was 19.8 (Department for Education, 2025c).

The choices made at 14 years old have the potential to impact on their future projections. Young men from low HE participation areas seem less persuaded by HE at the pre-16 stage of education and are more motivated by a career that suits their interests and skills rather than financial rewards (SUN, 2017). Higher education is perceived as a risky strategy as they are concerned about their ability to gain a place, fitting in, and the enjoyment of being a university student, as well as the affordability, especially as they expressed an aversion to taking on student debt (SUN, 2017). Other barriers to accessing HE for young men include various patterns of post-16 progression, negative perceptions of HE and differing levels of access to advice and support. Therefore, for those young men, HE is perceived as a risk that may not be worth taking.

Taking Boys Seriously Principles and the Spark Programme

The Spark Programme was influenced by Ulster University's Taking Boys Seriously (TBS) principles (Morgan et al., 2021), the Boys' Impact movement (Boys' Impact, 2024) and their conference (Energise and Mobilise; Boys' Impact Conference, 2024). The TBS principles were developed through participatory action research to inform engagement with young men in formal and informal educational settings (Hamilton et al., 2024). An inductive process led to the generation of 10 TBS principles of relational education. These principles are positioned as a framework for practice rather than a programme to be added to the curriculum. Although the principles may have a universal benefit, it was essential that boys provided insights of areas requiring action to create meaningful change (Hamilton et al., 2024).

The TBS principles informed the initial development of the Spark Programme and were utilised throughout the programme. Although all principles were considered important, the Spark Programme emphasised some principles more than others. For instance, the first TBS principle is to recognise the primacy of relationship (Morgan et al., 2021). This principle recognises that not all boys are the same and the facilitator intentionally develops a relationship with each individual, placing each boy at the centre of their learning. This principle aims to encourage a renewed sense of belonging in their education and its importance for their future opportunities. Research has demonstrated the importance of focusing on engagement and developing trust between the facilitator and the young men involved (Cosmos, 2024). Therefore, a significant aspect of the Spark Programme was centred on building relationships.

The programme intentionally engaged with only a small group of six young men which allowed the facilitator to meaningfully focus on their individual needs and interests.

The third principle is to utilise a 'strengths-based approach' to learning (Morgan et al., 2021). Research has shown that boys feel that they are often represented negatively in the media and wider society (Morgan et al., 2021). For example, practitioners may summon generalisations about the attitudes and behaviours of boys, and they are unwilling to accept another viewpoint so consequently, practitioners are focused on the perceived deficiencies (Blower & Rainford, 2025). This can negatively impact the beliefs and attitudes boys hold for themselves (Morgan et al., 2021). This principle adopts an approach that acknowledges the strengths that exist within each boy rather than concentrating on deficits. The Spark Programme aimed to use this principle to support the boys with setting realistic personal and educational goals and to feel more empowered about decisions relating to their futures.

The final principle, principle 10, is to value the voice of boys. This principle encourages boys to fully participate in their own educational journey (Morgan et al., 2021). When boys are supported to actively contribute, they feel more affiliated to the environment and have a greater sense of ownership and belonging (Morgan et al., 2021). The Spark Programme tailored the sessions to fit with the boys' expressed interests. For example, when discussing post-16 options, more specific information on courses and entry requirements was provided for subjects they had said they were interested in. This principle aims to make the boys feel respected when sharing their thoughts and opinions, and for them to feel more motivated, valued and empowered (Morgan et al., 2021).

Aims

The aims of the Spark Programme were to:

- engage with Year 11 boys who were disengaging with their education.
- increase knowledge on Further Education opportunities.
- enable the boys to make informed decisions about their future.

Session Overview

The Spark Programme was delivered across nine sessions by an Inspiring Choices Outreach Coordinator. Seven sessions were delivered in-school, and each session was an hour long. The Spark Programme also included two campus visits, one to an FE campus for an afternoon and the other a full day to an FE campus with a University Centre. Overall, the programme included 12 hours of contact time.

1. Introduction

The first session was an introduction to the programme, which informed the six young men why they had been chosen to participate in the programme, and set expectations for one another (e.g., being respectful of others opinions). It was important that the participants understood their involvement was not a punishment, but rather something that they could learn from and contribute to. All six young men were asked about their interests and if there was anything they wanted to specifically know more about regarding their further education, encouraging TBS #10 Value the Voice of Boys from the beginning.

2. Motivation

The second session focused on motivation – considering the ways in which people are motivated, what factors can be both motivating and demotivating, and their relationship with goal setting. All participants were asked to set a goal for the programme, ranging from improving their attendance to achieving a certain number of GCSE passes. This session was informed by Mark Robert’s (2022) research and suggestions. Participants were encouraged to set their own “specific and challenging goals” that were individual to them and were short-term, intended to be completed over the course of the nine-session programme. Furthermore, conversation focused on extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, and performance versus mastery goals. Performance goals “tend to limit—or even sabotage—[boy’s] potential” (Roberts, 2022 p. 16) and therefore participants were asked to focus on the latter.

3. Further Education

This session explored further education (FE), presenting the variety of post-16 qualifications the participants could pursue, and what institutions existed within their local area. Information included within the session was influenced

by the interests expressed by participants during the first session, ensuring that the programme was suited to their needs. This demonstrated use of TBS principle #10 Value the Voice of Boys and discussions ranged from courses in the trades, to sport, to film and media studies. Further resources were also provided (e.g. prospectus from two local FE options) which they could take away with them and look through in their own time.

4. Apprenticeships

As demonstrated by previous research, young men from working-class backgrounds view apprenticeships as a preferred pathway, in both their further and higher education (SUN, 2017). However, whilst their initial perception of apprenticeships may be positive, their overall understanding of how to find and apply for these opportunities is minimal (Go Higher West Yorkshire & Cosmos, 2021). The fourth session prioritised breaking down what apprenticeships are, how to find them, the application process, and acknowledging that they can be highly competitive, particularly in North Yorkshire where few are advertised and travel is often required.

5. Visit to Technical College

As part of the programme, two campus visits were organised for the participants. Their first visit was to Scarborough TEC, a further education college, which was presented as one of their local options for FE. This was an opportunity for participants to see classes in-practice and what an FE institution is actually. Utilising TBS principle #1 Recognise the Primacy of Relationship, which places the young men at the centre of their learning, this visit was specifically curated to their interests, subjects and courses that they had discussed earlier in the programme and gave the group an opportunity to speak with course tutors.

6. Higher Education

The sixth session explored higher education (HE), considering the differences between university and school, what subjects the participants may be interested in, and discussing the benefits and drawbacks of HE. The financial aspect of university was explained to the young men, as “cost and fear of debt are perceived to be deterrents to HE progression,” (SUN, 2017). As part of this session, the facilitator and participants played a tumble tower game. The game was designed for players to answer questions about their education and career choices whenever it was their turn, encouraging conversations about HE in a

creative and activity-led environment incorporating TBS principle #9 Enable Creative Learning Environments.

7. Visit to Agricultural College

The Spark Programme's second visit was to Askham Bryan College, a specialist land-based and agricultural college in York. As Askham Bryan College is both an FE institution and university centre, it was presented as an option for both their post-16 and post-18 education. As higher education is often perceived as solely 'long lectures' and 'schoolwork', visiting Askham Bryan College highlighted the practical elements and vocational aspects of HE (TBS, 2024). Participants met with the Widening Participation and Outreach Coordinator, who discussed the opportunities available to them. This included talking about travel to the college and the student transport service provided by Askham Bryan College, acknowledging the access to transport barrier that exists across North Yorkshire. Participants were led on a tour of the campus, allowing them to see the variety of facilities and the ways in which an HE institution differed from the traditional school experience. Additionally, this provided an opportunity for participants to speak with course tutors across different subjects, such as agriculture and motorsport.

8. Risk

The penultimate sessions focused on risk-taking behaviour, how risks can be both negative and positive, and how failure can be utilised as a learning opportunity. This was framed particularly in the context of school and upcoming GCSE exams, prompting discussion about their mock GCSEs exams, which had occurred shortly before these sessions. As with the session in week two on motivation, this session was influenced by the work of Mark Roberts (2022) who recommended that targeted programmes should "help [boys] understand that frustration and failure are part of the learning process," (p .16).

9. Reflection

Finally, the Spark Programme finished with a session to gather participant feedback, discussing what parts of the programme they found useful, and revisiting the goals that they had set at the beginning. The participants were also asked about their upcoming GCSE exams and their plans post-Year 11. Following this, two of the young men participated in semi-structured interviews, where they were asked in further detail about their experience with the Spark Programme and its impact.

Evaluation Approach

Participants

The Spark Programme was delivered in one school in North Yorkshire. Six male learners in Year 11 participated in the programme. They were all 15 years old at the start of the programme. The young men were selected by the school as they were eligible for pupil premium funding and thought to be disengaging with their education but were open to participating in the project.

Data Collection

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected throughout the programme from multiple sources:

- In every session, the young men completed reflection workbooks. The workbooks included multiple choice questions (including repeated questions), space for reflections and were designed specifically for each session.
- The facilitator also kept a reflective journal, which was completed after each session.
- At the end of the programme, two of the young men participated in semi-structured interviews about their experience of the programme.
- After the programme and after the summer assessments, the teacher present during the sessions of the programme completed a qualitative questionnaire.
- The school also provided data on attendance, mock exam results, GCSE exam results and Key Stage 5 Destinations.

Approach to Data Analysis

For the quantitative data collected via the reflective workbooks, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated. A paired samples t-test was conducted comparing the means from the first time the questions were asked to the final time. This test was used to assess for statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between the first and final response. The difference was also quantified as an effect size that signals the difference between scores in units of standard deviation (Cohen's d). For the qualitative data, content analysis was used to identify why, how, and what through an iterative process of coding, counting, and interpreting the participants' responses to the qualitative questions.

Quantitative Results

The descriptive statistics and results of the paired samples t-test are shown in Table 1. For three statements, there was a decrease in the mean value between their first response and final response. For two statements, there was no change in the mean score between the first and final response. For eight statements, there was an increase in the mean value between the first and final response. However, the paired samples t-test revealed only one statement had a significant difference in mean values - I feel confident participating in my school lessons. However, due to the small sample size of the programme, interpretation of the statistical analysis is limited.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Paired Samples T-Test and Effect Size.

	Mean (SD)		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect size
	Pre	Post				
I feel valued as an individual at school.	4.0 (0.0)	4.0 (0.6)	0.0	5	1.00	0
I feel confident participating in my school lessons.	3.8 (0.4)	4.7 (0.5)	2.7	5	.04*	1.1
I am motivated to do well at school.	3.7 (0.5)	4.2 (0.4)	1.5	5	.20	0.6
I am confident that I will pass my GCSEs.	3.3 (1.0)	3.5 (0.8)	1.0	5	.36	0.4
I am confident that I can get the exam results required to progress to further education.	3.3 (0.5)	3.8 (0.8)	2.2	5	.08	0.9
I feel prepared to choose the right college/sixth form for me.	4.0 (0.6)	4.2 (0.8)	0.3	5	.74	0.1
I feel confident I could choose the course which is in line with my own interests and future goals.	3.7 (0.8)	4.2 (0.8)	1.5	5	.20	0.6
I feel confident I could succeed at college/sixth form.	3.8 (0.6)	3.8 (0.4)	0.4	5	.70	0.2
I feel confident I would fit in at college/sixth form.	3.8 (0.4)	4.0 (0.0)	1.0	5	.36	0.4
I am thinking about going to higher education in the future.	3.4 (0.5)	2.4 (0.9)	1.8	4	.14	0.8
Higher education is for people like me.	2.8 (0.8)	2.8 (1.1)	0.0	4	1.00	0
I would fit in well academically with others in higher education.	3.8 (0.8)	3.4 (0.5)	1.6	4	.18	0.7
I would fit in well socially with others in higher education.	3.6 (0.9)	3.2 (0.4)	1.6	4	.18	0.7

Note. * $p < .05$

Thematic Analysis

Boys Have ‘Low Aspirations’

In a report, where eligibility for free school meals was used as a proxy for working class children, there were some suggestions that those from working class backgrounds have low aspirations for their future (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). However, Pinkett and Roberts (2019) disagree and note that despite the popularity of the narrative, the low aspiration of the working class is a myth. The young men in the programme were not asked about their educational aspirations but asked more broadly about their aspirations for the future and they all wanted to be successful:

- “To become successful and be able to provide for my family. Have a nice house and car. To make my family proud.” (Learner 1)
- “Travel around the world and go on vacations. I would like to own a nice car. Own my own company.” (Learner 2)
- “Buy a house, have three kids, have a loving wife, get a dog or a cat, have a decent car” (Learner 3)
- “Successful job, nice car and house” (Learner 4)
- “Own a nice car, house, business - construction or painter” (Learner 5)
- “Buy my own house, own a business, get my dream car,” (Learner 6)

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation argued that aspirations were high across social groups but the difference between richer and poorer backgrounds was the strength in the belief to achieve those goals (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). This was reflected here as one learner described the possibility of not meeting his career aspiration,

If you have a good mindset you have a better chance. But you always need that backup just in case, because not everything’s guaranteed in life. So you need to always have a backup option. Even if you fail at the first thing, have a backup option. You need to have a backup option for that. (Learner 1)

Influencers

Recently, there have been concerns around the influence of social media and content creators, particularly around the subject of misogyny and the manosphere (Blower & Rainford, 2025). Therefore, the young men were asked if anyone/anything online influenced their decision making, and they responded that “nobody does.” Although it was reassuring to hear that the young men were not influenced by social media, it is still important for schools to facilitate

conversations around masculinity, societal expectations and stereotypes (Blower & Rainford, 2025).

The young men were then asked who they would speak to to help them make decisions and why they would trust this person. Every young man mentioned 'family member' with one specifically saying their dad, "because they are inspiring, they are trustworthy... I know them and would have already shared what I wanna do so they know more about me," (Learner 2). Similarly, about their family members, (Learner 4) said they were "trustworthy and have known them long time," and (Learner 3) "they made good decisions and can help me to as well."

Mindset and Behavioural Changes

Throughout the programme the young men demonstrated changes in their mindsets. Although the young men still had mixed views about the enjoyment of school, there was a recognition of the importance of attending and an increase in motivation towards their schooling. For example,

[Attending school] It's kind of draining. And I can't lie, it still is, but you've just got to go by each day thinking that you need to focus just to leave school with your GCSE's. And you won't have to look back after that. So that's the main thing. (Learner 1)

The young men also spoke of lifestyle changes they had made due to conversations they had had during the Spark Programme and how these changes were affecting them, such as, an improvement in their sleep.

My sleeping pattern's getting better...like it can affect the quality of work that you do...if you're tired in school you forget things, and you're not focusing, so then that makes you set back. So, if you get more sleep, you can be more awake and you'll be able to engage more. (Learner 1)

Towards the beginning of the programme, the young men were unsure of their next steps in education and many had not applied for college or sixth form. One young man said "I feel uncertain about the future and don't really know what I would like to do after Year 11," (Learner 4) and another said simply "be a plumber" (Learner 3). However, by the end of the programme, the young men were taking more of an interest in their next steps and had a much clearer understanding of what they wanted to do, "go to college and get a job," (Learner 4) and "going to [Sixth Form] to learn biology, criminology and psychology. Mainly interested in criminology and I'm more excited to do that than anything else," (Learner 3). The young men were also being proactive about their next

steps. Following the visit to Scarborough TEC, the facilitator recalled having a one-to-one conversation with Learner 6 who was enthusiastic about applying to the college and had signed up for taster sessions to help him decide between subjects.

Additionally, it can be challenging to recognise changes within yourself. In the semi-structured interview, the young men were asked whether they thought their confidence had changed since the start of the programme. Learner 2 responded, "It probably has but I wouldn't have, probably wouldn't notice." The facilitator commented that they had noticed changes and thought that the learner was more comfortable and confident in the sessions. Therefore, suggesting that changes are sometimes more noticeable to others and reflecting a strength of the programme in collecting data from multiple sources.

School Attendance

The average school attendance of participants while in Year 11 was 83.2%. The Spark Programme is unlikely to be the cause of changes in attendance. However, the programme may have contributed to some mindset changes, perhaps through the information provided around FE, including entry grades. Other factors may also contribute to changes in attendance, such as, acknowledging the importance of Year 11 and their GCSE results for progressing to further education. Learner 2 said "previous years, I think my attendance was really bad... I think I've had two, three days off since January," and reported the change being due to "wanting to pass so I don't have to re-sit anything." Although their overall school attendance had not really changed, behaviour changes had improved Learner 1's classroom attendance and engagement,

I've always been getting removed from lessons so I was losing out on that... halfway through the year hit me and I was like, I need to knuckle down... I need to always be in school, not have a day off, or not miss lessons... because missing one day in school isn't worth resitting it for another year.

A teacher at the school agreed that the Spark Programme may have had some influence on the attendance of the young men. "Most boys attendance decreased since October half term until their exams apart from Learner 2 who improved his attendance by around 3%. The project would have certainly helped to slow the reduction trends in some of the boys selected," (Teacher).

GCSE Exams and Results

Improving attainment was not part of the aims of the Spark Programme, however, the programme may have had an indirect effect on their exams. For example, when asked about their mock exam results, Learner 1 reported

Oh my mocks. Ooh. Not as good as I hoped. They've definitely gone up since I started the programme. Because before I was doing terrible, I was on like 2s. And now I'm going to 3s. Which is good. And I'm doing all right in science.

Then, when asked about their upcoming GCSE exams,

It's [The Spark Programme] made me more confident about them. Because before I used to go into exams just thinking, ah it's just another hour of just doing the practise test. But now when I start my first GCSE this week, it's actually like, starting to hit.

Similarly, in reference to their GCSE exams, Learner 2 said that participating in the programme has "made me want to pass them all."

In the facilitators reflection of week three, a group discussion was recalled where it was recognised that GCSE were important and without them, you couldn't go anywhere, you would need to keep resitting and that would delay everything in your future. During the discussion Learner 5 said "It was more that you were stuck without GCSEs, where others would be able to progress further." Four learners attended all of their exams, one missed one exam and another missed a few exams. At the end of the programme, their teacher was asked whether participation in the programme had increased academic confidence or motivation towards their studies, and they thought that in some cases it had, "for a few of the boys, the end goal was for them to sit their exams in June, of which most did," (Teacher)

Further Education Options

The teacher reported that one of the most valuable parts of the project was the sections on the next stages of education. This is in agreement with the young men's perspectives. For example, "the two trips were fun and taught me a lot about college and the different environments and opportunities there are," (Learner 4) and the Spark Programme "taught me and went in to more detail about college and things you can do there," (Learner 6). All six young men who participated in the programme progressed into further education.

In the semi structured interviews, the two learners were asked what they knew about further education before the programme, Learner 1 said “a little bit,” and Learner 2 said “nothing...now I know what it’s like and all.” The programme has helped the learners to gain knowledge about further education and explore some of their choices, “I’ve seen the wider variety of options,” (Learner 2). There was recognition that even though they had choices, and the programme could provide knowledge, gaining access to some of those choices was still down to them, “[My goal was] to see what I needed, for obviously, just a subject I wanted to do in college. I know what I need now. It just depends on my GCSEs and that,” (Learner 2).

Week three was dedicated to exploring further education, the facilitator noted that Learner 1 had previously mentioned doing a plumbing apprenticeship but had expressed an interest in studying sport this week and did not seem to realise that sport was an option. In the semi structured interview, Learner 1 discussed how his goal had changed through the programme, he demonstrated his passion for this new subject and took initiative to find out in detail his schedule, module content and potential career pathways.

[My goal was] to go get an apprenticeship in plumbing. And that’s what I thought I wanted to do for quite a while because I stopped playing football, and I didn't think I'd go back to playing it. But then after doing this [The Spark Programme] for so long it just made me realise that it’s something I'm good at and I don't really have any idea about plumbing. So it's just made me realise that I'm good at that sport. And it could get me somewhere. Maybe not playing football but like the physio side or the managerial side...I've got my football scholarship. I'll be doing that for two years... It'll be a busy schedule but it'll be worth it. Because you're not only doing like, you're not only playing football you're doing gym work, you're doing like the theory side of it. So you're learning everything about the body, you learn about the foods you're supposed to be eating and then how to keep the body fit. (Learner 1)

Higher Education Options

The young men were fairly neutral in their responses to their sense of belonging in higher education (i.e., whether they would fit in academically or socially in higher education). However, they were less positive about whether they would attend higher education in the future. “I don’t think I'll end up going to university. I'm definitely doing college, as you have to anyway. But I don’t think university would be for me. I'd like to go and do my own thing after I leave college,” (Learner 1). The reasons given for not attending higher education are reflective of systemic barriers rather than a lack of knowledge.

The most common reason for not attending higher education in future was financial, for instance, “I wouldn't be interested in going to university because it costs lots of money,” (Learner 6) and “cost is a big factor and there might not be anything that interests me,” (Learner 4). However, there was also concerns around moving away from home or travelling to higher education, for example, “because I have no money and [you'd be] away from home all the time,” (Learner 5) and “because the travel and university costs money,” (Learner 2). There was also comments on whether the subjects available are of interest to their intended career pathway (e.g., plumbing) “just want to go into work - forced to do college,” (Learner 3).

Participation in the Spark Programme

Throughout the programme the participants completed workbooks which included space for their notes and reflections, evaluation questions and were designed specifically for each session. The workbooks offered a different way of engaging in the sessions if they did not want to contribute verbally to the discussions, and helped the learners to recap the previous sessions. In the semi-structured interviews, they were asked whether they found the workbooks useful. “I mean, they were useful, in a way because I was able to look back at the previous things I'd wrote down... because I'm not much of the talker,” (Learner 2).

It [the workbooks] was good because not only are you thinking about it, you're writing it down. So then it makes you think more. Do you know what I mean? Because when- So say I'm in lesson I'm just sat there, I'd be bored watching the teacher do the lesson. I'm not going to remember it all. Because you want me to write it down to look back at it and remember all the stuff. So the notebook's definitely helped. (Learner 1)

The young men found participating in the programme enjoyable, the teacher reported that they often asked when the next session was and they were keen to attend. One of the young men also told their school mentor that he had been enjoying the programme and found it informative and interesting. The higher education session included playing a tumble tower game with questions around higher education written on the blocks. The teacher noted the importance of that session because “it's the relationships that the boys sometimes need more than anything else.” This reflected the importance of integrating the Taking Boys Seriously Principles into the delivery of the programme.

Conclusion

The aims of the Spark Programme were to 1) engage with Year 11 boys who were disengaging with their education, 2) increase knowledge on further education opportunities and 3) enable the boys to make informed decisions about their future. The Spark Programme was purposefully delivered to a small number of participants. This was to ensure Taking Boys Seriously principle #1, recognise the primacy of relationship was embedded in the programme and the facilitator could develop a relationship on a more individual basis. The young men engaged in the programme and reported increased confidence and motivation in participating in their school lessons and towards their GCSE exams. However, the small sample size is a limitation for statistical analysis and interpretations must be taken with caution. Therefore, more cohorts and a larger sample size would increase the confidence in the quantitative analysis.

The programme was only nine weeks within their last year of secondary school. Therefore, there is a limit on how much change can be expected within a short period of time but an extension to the programme may be beneficial. However, the young men valued the visits to the further education institutions as it allowed them to experience the sites firsthand. The qualitative comments suggest that the young men had an increased knowledge on further education opportunities, and understood the different qualification types available, the different institutions in the local area and the entry requirements for the courses.

The quantitative analysis showed an agreement in feeling prepared in choosing a college or sixth form that was right for them and agreement in feeling confident in choosing the course in line with their interests. Nonetheless, the young men suggested additional visits to other local institutions to help with their decision making for further education, therefore, the programme could be extended with further visits. During this programme, the learners visited a University Centre however, there could be more focus on higher education and include visits to other higher education institutions. The programme could also be extended to include sessions on employability (e.g., transferable skills, CV writing) and revision techniques.

The mixed methods approach and collection of data from multiple sources was a strength of the programme and allowed for triangulation of data. Therefore, future renditions of the programme will continue to collect evaluation from the participants, the teacher within the sessions and the facilitator of the programme. The Spark Programme will be delivered in two schools in the 2025/26 academic year. We would like to thank the school and the learners for their engagement in the programme.

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Appendix

This section displays a sample of quotes selected from the learners' workbooks and semi-structured interviews.

What are your goals?

"I want to improve my attendance, I need to do this because it will improve my learning and help my grades." (Learner 2)

"I want to get better at maths, English and psychology so I can get into Sixth Form." (Learner 3)

"Improve my overall grades from last year and aim to get 4's or higher in all my subjects." (Learner 4)

"To not get that many seclusions, head down a bit more." (Learner 5)



What is the main reason you wouldn't go into higher education?

"Because I have no money and away from home all the time." (Learner 5)

"I wouldn't be interested in going to university because it costs lots of money." (Learner 6)

"Because the travel and university costs money." (Learner 2)

"Just want to go into work - forced to do college." (Learner 3)

"Cost is a big factor and there might not be anything that interests me." (Learner 4)



What are your aspirations for the future?

"To become successful and be able to provide for my family. Have a nice house and car. To make my family proud." (Learner 1)

"Buy a house, have three kids, have a loving wife, get a dog or a cat, have a decent car" (Learner 3)

What would you like to do after Year 11?

"Be a plumber"
(Learner 3)
- Session 3



"Going to S6F to learn biology, criminology and psychology. Mainly interested in criminology and I'm more excited to do that than anything else."
- Session 9

"I feel uncertain about the future and don't really know what I would like to do after Year 11."
(Learner 4) - Session 3



"Go to college and get a job"
- Session 9



Additional Learner Quotes

"Forget what's around you, forget the people around you. Focus on the teacher and what he or she has to say. And just try your hardest. And some people may not get the results that they want but as long as they tried their hardest that's all that matters but then at the same time, it's a pain because then you have to re-sit them. But you'll always get given another chance." (Learner 1)

"I enjoyed going on the trips because they allowed me to experience colleges and see what they're like and helped me to see what the course I wanted to do was like and what GCSE I need to get into it." (Learner 2)

But like it's helped me realise where I want to go and the grades I need, and just life in general."
(Learner 1)



About Inspiring Choices

Inspiring Choices is a Higher Education Outreach Partnership and one of 29 partnerships within the Office for Students' Uni Connect Programme. Since 2017, our mission has been to close the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups. We provide tailored support to young people across York and North Yorkshire.

Working with local secondary schools and colleges we offer guidance on the full range of routes into and through higher education (HE) in the form of workshops, activities and events. Our aim is to help young people overcome barriers to their success. These include those related to academic attainment, sense of belonging and lack of knowledge.

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