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The evolving nature of teacher–pupil relations with challenging, white, working-class pupils – A figurational perspective

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ABSTRACT

Utilising covert and overt lesson observations, guided conversations and focus group interviews with KS4 male pupils placed in the lowest academic band, and the key sociological concepts of Norbert Elias' figurational sociology to frame the data, this paper explores the nature and evolution of the relationships that these challenging, white, working-class male pupils formed with a range of staff at their large, mainstream academy and the local further education college. The data reveals that the low academic aspirations and educational engagement of these pupils came to impact negatively on the majority of relationships that they developed with school teaching staff although this was not the case for the PE staff at the school. However, as these pupils grew older, it was the college tutors delivering vocational courses three mornings a week that emerged as the members of staff that were most able to generate and develop positive and productive teacher-pupil relationships with these pupils.

Introduction

Young people from working-class families in the UK have consistently demonstrated complex and often problematic relationships with school, teachers, and education generally (Archer and Yamashita 2003; Reay 2004). These attitudes and behaviours have been linked to the social expectations and influences associated with growing up within working-class communities (Ingram 2009) and have led to the historical academic underachievement of young people from this social class group that has proven difficult to eradicate (Strand 2011). When related to boys more specifically and despite decades of policy initiatives and pedagogical developments, the academic attainment of male pupils in the UK has been a concern for over 25 years (Welmond and Gregory 2021). However, it is white, working-class males from socially deprived backgrounds that are consistently reported as the lowest achieving educational group leading to consistent claims that 'something must be done' (Griffin 2000, p. 170) in order to address this persistent educational crisis. A range of seminal studies over the last 50 years have examined the ways in which white, working-class boys

experience and navigate their educational experiences. Early work included Hargreaves (1967) study that highlighted the status of lower academic attainers and the subsequent emergence of powerful, anti-school culture, and Learning to Labour in which Willis (1977) explored boys' perception of the school as an irrelevant, predominantly middle-class institution causing the formation of a counter school culture focused on gaining social status *via* rebellious behaviours. Following this, Ball's study (1981) demonstrated how boys in lower attainment bands were 'cooled out' and directed towards practical subjects – as opposed to higher attainers who were 'warmed up' and encouraged to have high academic aspirations – and Brown's work (1987) that explored the invisible majority of 'ordinary' working-class students in relation to the high achieving 'Swots' and the 'Rems' who had been placed in lower academic streams. For many white, working-class boys it is the enduring and somewhat constraining influence of the 'typical' working-class background that stands at odds with those expected at school (Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall 2007; Ingram 2009). In this regard, the strong force of working-class identity formation represents certain parameters for many young males (Connolly and Healy 2004) that can lead to the construction of powerful boundaries, restricted horizons (Ingram 2009) and the generation of dense impermeable limits as part of a 'complex interplay of social identities and inequalities' (Archer and Yamashita 2003, p. 67). As any proactive or strategic move by such pupils towards educational engagement and academic success would require difficult identity negotiations and reappropriations with friends and peers (Reay 2004) as well as the potential loss of social status within the peer group (Connell 2008) and exclusion from friendship groups (Kelly 2009), it is perhaps not surprising that many white, working-class males often lack the desire to pursue educational engagement and/or academic success.

One of the consistent and constraining influences strongly associated with the influence of family, friends and peers in many working-class schools is the presence of 'hegemonic masculinity' which promotes certain behaviours and a sense of 'masculine honour' that is often viewed as a measure against which boys compare themselves (Tischler and McCaughtry 2011) and can become more highly sought after than academic success by many white, working-class males (Connell 2008). Whilst multiple masculinities operate within any given social context such as that of the school environment (Mac An Ghaill 1994), there is often a consistent and dominant form of exhalated masculinity that emerges from the over-riding influence of masculinity in the wider, working-class community (Smith 2007) which is often strongly associated with physicality and aggression (Swain 2000). As a result, laddish behaviour – or what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) refer to as 'protest masculinity' – is common within this group, despite the fact that such attitudes and behaviours can significantly restrict any genuine opportunity of academic success at school (Archer and Yamashita 2003). In this regard, it is perhaps not surprising that many white working-class male pupils often view vocational courses (Ward 2018) and physical education (PE) as the only socially and 'educationally' acceptable way to express their 'natural', masculine attitudes and behaviours. In relation to PE more specifically, the subject not only stands as a site for the construction and display of hegemonic masculinities (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2002; Bramham 2003; Connell 2008) but can also emerge as a place where these male pupils can 'be' and behave like 'proper' boys *via* open displays of strength, aggression, heterosexuality, and toughness (Swain 2000; Bramham 2003). As a result, many male, working-class pupils see PE (and trade-based vocational courses) as an opportunity to generate and develop influence, power, and status over peers and staff for their own benefit (Swain 2000; Connell

2008) – an outcome that can also cause such pupils to openly engage in overtly aggressive, masculine, and disruptive behaviour – (Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall 2007) in order to gain, maintain and further promote this level of influence, authority, and status (Swain 2000; Connell 2008).

Whilst authors have stated that the inter-personal connections that working-class pupils develop with their teachers 'are amongst the most salient and influential relationships' in their lives (Anderson et al. 2004, p. 46), research consistently confirms that schools and teachers often fail to generate impactful and effective relationships with their working-class, male pupils (Reichert and Nelson 2018) resulting in many working-class boys experiencing a sense of disconnection from and towards their teachers (Willis 1977; Reichert 2015). As school staff are perceived to live lives that bear very little resemblance to their own, teachers are often viewed as 'aliens' (Ingram 2009) by working-class families resulting in problematic 'them versus us' attitudes – an outcome that can be accentuated when teachers are seen to be over-authoritative or 'outsiders'. By extension, claims have also been made that classroom teachers can often play a significant role in the relative educational 'failure' of working-class children (Ball 1981) by uncritically accepting poor prior attainment data, having lower academic expectations on them, and making implicit mention of pupil social class in relation to their future lives (e.g. unskilled work, early pregnancy) (Dunne and Gazeley 2008).

Norbert Elias and figurational sociology

Ahead of any discussion relating to figurational sociology, it is important to acknowledge the shared intellectual heritage (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and degree of 'intellectual sympathy' (Dunning and Hughes 2012, 188) that exists between Elias and Bourdieu. Whilst Bourdieu's use of the term 'social field' looks superficially like a rough equivalent to Elias's use of the term figuration (Dunning and Hughes 2012) it is the concept of habitus where a clear line of influence from Elias to Bourdieu (Pickel 2005) exists despite subtle differences between Elias' reference to 'embodied social learning' and second nature behaviours (Elias 2000, 368) as opposed to Bourdieu's focus on lifestyle and values within social class groups (Bourdieu 1984, 1994). Figurational sociology is built on the concept that one can only understand the behaviour or actions of individual people by acknowledging 'their interdependence with the structure of the societies that they form with each other' (Elias 1978, 72). These often complex and dynamic interdependent social groups are termed figurations and are defined as structures 'of mutually orientated and dependent people' (Elias 2000, 316) that are made up of interdependent relationships with a range of others (Gouldsblom 1977; Elias 1978) and come to influence the actions and attitudes of individuals. By extension, these social figurations should not be seen as 'timeless static states' (Elias 1978, 112) due to the fact that they will become longer and more complex over time (Elias 1978; Goudsblom and Mennell 1998) as a result of the ever-increasing social relationships that many people forge and develop, as they progress into and through adulthood. For young people specifically, their progress through the education system not only leads them to become increasingly dependent upon, and interdependent with, a much greater range and number of people (such as a wider range of teachers, school staff and peers) but also means that these young people are compelled to act in ways that they 'would not (act) except under compulsion from [these] other interdependent people' (Elias 1978, 94).

Within these increasingly complex social figurations, multi-polar power balances also exist between inextricably linked individuals and groups (Elias 1978) that vary and evolve over time in a variety of different ways and stand to enable and constrain the actions of those inextricably linked within the figuration (Dunning and Hughes 2012, 67). Whilst Elias is keen to stress the fact that power is 'not something that can be possessed solely by one person' (1978, 74) and that 'no one individual is ever absolutely powerful or powerless' (Murphy, Sheard, and Waddington 2000, 93), for Elias (1978), there is always scope for the seemingly 'less powerful' in any relationship to constrain the more powerful via a process referred to by Elias as a 'boomerang effect' (Elias 1978) – an outcome accentuated by Elias (1978) concept of 'functional democratization that highlights the reduction in power differentials between previously dichotomous groups such as adults and children that leads to relationships being based on negotiation rather than direction and prohibition (Kilminster 1998; Mennell 1998). Therefore, whilst the greater power is usually held by those with the greater ability to 'withhold what the other requires' (Elias 1978, 79), the seemingly less powerful still maintain the ability to constrain the actions of the other – such as the baby with a parent or the pupil with a teacher (Elias 1978). More broadly, in order to adequately consider the complex and multi-polar relationships present in many social figurations, Elias (1978) uses the metaphor of a game in order to understand and explain complex and dynamic social figurations – such as those that exist between school pupils, their peers, parents/family and teachers. For Elias, the use of people playing a game provides an ideal metaphor for 'people forming societies together' (1978, 92) as it not only demonstrates how opponents inevitably come to influence the player's/individuals own intentions and actions (Green 2000) but also how '(b)eing interdependent with so many people will very probably compel individual people to act in a way they would not act except under compulsion' (Elias 1978, 94). By extension, not only do the interdependent relationships that exist within a game have the potential to 'show how the web of human relations changes when the distribution of power changes' (Elias 1978, 80) but also 'how power-ratios influence the extent to which the moves of one person or group can influence, if not quite determine, the moves of another, as well as the final outcome' (Green 2000, 183) including the increased ability of some to control the direction and nature of the game itself (Elias 1978). Ultimately, therefore, many players in the game often have to accept 'their inability to control the game' due to the 'mutual dependence and positioning of players' within the figuration, as well as the 'tensions and conflicts inherent in this intertwining network' (Elias 1978, p. 91). Put simply, game model allows us to bring out the processional character of relationships between independent people and at the same time show how the web of human relations changes when the distribution of power changes (Elias 1978). A fourth key aspect of Elias' figurational sociology pertains to the way that long-term social figurations come to impact upon a person's embodied social learning and dictates their 'automatic blindly functioning apparatus of self-control' (Elias 2000, 368) – a concept referred to by Elias as 'habitus'. A term used by a range of other key sociological thinkers, habitus is used to highlight the fact that whilst each person does develop their own individual habits, they also form a series of social behaviours (habitus) that are shared with others who have been habituated through similar experiences (Dunning 2002) resulting in a shared personality that 'grows out of the common language which the individual shares with others' socialised in the same way (Elias 1987, 182). However, it is also important to acknowledge that a person's habitus can be 'affected by his changing relations with others throughout his life' (Elias 1994, 455) meaning

that the formation of habitus is a function of social interdependencies that can vary as the structure of a society varies (Elias 2000) that can cause young people's attitudes and actions to 'evolve' – such as the manner in which they progress through the education system.

Method

The data presented and explored in this article emerged from a larger instrumental, ethno-case study (Scattergood 2024) within a 'typical', white working-class secondary school known as Ayrefield Community School (ACS) that also incorporated some pupils' attendance at a local FE institution (Wigmore College – WC) three mornings a week. The study sought to examine male pupils' attitudes towards education as well as their relationship with a range of school and college staff using both covert and overt lesson observations, guided conversations, and focus group interviews. The researcher initially utilised covert lesson observations (ACS $n = 21$ and WC $n = 9$) and guided conversations ($n = 47$ of which staff $n = 16$ and pupils $n = 31$) with pupils over an initial eight-week period by adopting the role of learning support assistant. During this two-month period of covert observations, care was taken to minimise any influence on the actions or interactions of the subjects (Bryman 2012) with consistent attempts made to watch, listen to, and ask questions of the pupils and staff as they followed aspects of their day-to-day activities (Payne and Payne 2004). The guided conversations were utilised with both pupils and staff as a way of clarifying issues and incidents that had been observed (Yin 2014) and took place before and following lessons, at break and lunch times, during movement between lessons, travel to and from college, and at appropriate points during lessons (e.g. supporting during lessons). Acknowledgement was made of the ethically problematic nature of covert observation in that they prevent participants making an informed decision on participation (Denscombe 2010; Social Research Association, 2021) and can result in 'subjects' potentially being 'manipulated' and/or 'conned'. Despite these issues, the risk to participants was perceived to be minor (SRA, 2021) and the use of covert observation deemed to have educational value in the sense that the quality and depth of data to emerge from this approach was seen to outweigh any potential short- or long-term impact on the participants (Bryman 2012). Covert research was also justified at this stage of the project as part of a conscious attempt to build trust and rapport with pupils in a relatively short time frame (Evans 2012) in order to observe more 'natural' behaviour and promote the trueness of the pupils' actions (Gellner and Hirsch 2001) during all aspects of the school day. Finally, the justification and decision to use a covert approach with pupils during the initial two month period was discussed, justified, and formally approved by the principal and governors at ACS and Wigmore College as well as the University Ethics board.

It was during this period of data collection that subtle yet significant differences in the actions and attitudes of most male pupils became evident that were seemingly a result of the differing social pressures, school-based relationships, and the academic banding system in place from Year 9 (age 13 to 14) at ACS. Following covert lesson observations and guided conversations with pupils, and strongly influenced by seminal studies that have used groups and terms to explore the experiences of male pupils in the school environment (see Hargreaves 1967; Willis 1977; Brown 1987), the majority of the male pupils at ACS were allocated to three distinct groups identified and named by the researcher as Performers, Participants and Problematics. Mindful that not all students could be assigned to a group,

Weber's (1904) concept of an 'ideal type' was utilised as an analytical construct in order to develop a range of broad criteria that could be used in order to create a 'measuring rod' (Coser 1977, 223) for assigning male pupils. Whilst Performers were part of mixed-sex groups working towards GCSE qualifications with aspirations for further study and Participants were mid-achieving pupils keen to 'get in, get through and get out' of school and into college, the Problematics were students who were consistently the most dominant and troublesome students in school, that were taught as part of single-sex groups in KS4 and attended vocational course at the local further education (FE) college three mornings a week.

At this stage, the true presence of the researcher was revealed to pupils in order to allow for focus group interviews to be arranged alongside more strategic and focused lesson observations (ACS $n = 13$ and WC $n = 5$) and guided conversations ($n = 26$ of which staff $n = 14$ and pupils $n = 12$) at both school and Wigmore College. Importantly, all pupils were provided with an explanation and justification of the transition in role (Lauder 2003) with opportunity provided for questions from both pupils and parents in relation to the nature of the research and use of data collected (Scattergood 2024). Following this, a total of 72 pupils across year 10 (ages 14 to 15) and year 11 (ages 15 to 16) were specifically selected to take part in focus group interviews (average duration 48 min) which took place in available classrooms at appropriate points during the school day. All pupils were provided with information on the nature of these, provided with written consent forms to sign following this, and given the opportunity to decide against taking part on the day by simply attending their regular timetabled lesson without explanation. Following consent also being gained from parents/carers, five focus groups (3 × Year 10 and 2 × Year 11) took place with Performers ($n = 23$), four focus groups (2 × Year 10 and 2 × Year 11) took place with Participant pupils ($n = 21$) as well an additional focus group with male PE staff at ACS designed to further triangulate data that had emerged. For the specific purpose of this article, however, the data focuses on the male pupils assigned to the Problematic group in years 10 and 11 (Problematics: $n = 24$ across five groups) alongside other relevant responses from school and college staff.

Of the 965 pupils on roll at Ayrefield Community School (ACS), only 1% of students considered their first language to be other than English and 'most pupils were white British with a distinct lack of pupils from ethnic minorities on roll' (Ofsted 2014, 5). 45% of all pupils in Y11 at ACS were officially defined as being 'disadvantaged', and half (49.4%) of all pupils had been eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years. In addition, Ofsted (2014, 7) stated that 'the school had faced challenges in the recruitment and retention of teachers' (Ofsted 2014, 7) which appeared to be indicative of both the reputation of the school and the behaviour and attainment of some pupils. More broadly, ACS was situated in the northern village of Ayrefield (pseudonym) which was deemed suitably 'deprived' to meet the criteria of the study. It was ranked within the top 1500 for social deprivation out of a possible 32,482 lower super output areas (LSOA) nationally (ONS, 2014). Nearly a quarter of all residents in Ayrefield had no formal qualifications, and twice the national average of residents were in 'bad' or 'very bad' health. Further to this nearly two thirds of all households in the area were defined as deprived in either one or two of the four indicators of deprivation (e.g. one adult unemployed or no inhabitant had a level two qualification) (ONS, 2014). 11.5% of current residents had either never worked or were classed as being long-term unemployed and over twice the national average (NA) of adults were currently

claiming key working age benefits (36% – NA 15%) with almost three times that number on incapacity benefit (20% – NA 7%). There was also a strong prevalence of 'white' people living in Ayrefield with 95.7% of the almost 1,400 total residents classing themselves as white British.

Findings

It was clear that a range of teaching and pastoral staff felt that the majority of male pupils at ACS consistently demonstrated low levels of educational aspiration and academic engagement. This was not only associated with the fact that '*the entire community is a place like no other when it comes to aspiration*' (Guided Conversation: Laura – Deputy Head of Maths) but also the extent to which parents supported staff and viewed education more broadly '*on the one hand they (parents) want their kids to do well at school, but then they take their three kids out of school to go to Turkey for two weeks*' (Guided Conversation: Katie – Teacher of Maths). In relation to the male pupils more specifically at ACS, staff indicated that working-class expectations were key influences on behaviour, attitude, and aspiration '*Ayrefield is still a proper working-class community with everything that comes with that*' (Guided Conversation: Steve – Y10 Pastoral Lead) with older male family members holding a dominant influence on the young males' attitudes to education, engagement with school/staff, and the level and nature of their future aspirations '*Most of these lads live in houses where what their dads and grandads say goes. Strong men with strong attitudes and expectations*' (Guided Conversation: Sarah – Y9 Head of Year).

Staff–pupil relationships

Problematic pupils at ACS in particular had a disparaging view and relationship with staff that they perceived to be unfairly strict or had a tendency to treat the pupils with a lack of respect. Focus group responses such as '*it's his boring voice in't it (Mr Hunt) and the fact that he talks to you like you're five*' (Corey: Y10 Group 2) and '*he (Mr Webb) just thinks he's summat (something) he int and he's always just shartin (shouting)*' (Riley: Y11 Group 1) were very common. More lengthy focus group discussions suggested such staff were largely dismissed and distinctly unpopular with these pupils:

> **Riley:** *I think that they just show off to other teachers me.*
>
> **Troy:** *Yeah, when they are shouting at us like.*
>
> **Riley:** *I just give it 'em back me. Nobody shouts at me like that.*
>
> **Troy:** *He's like it all time that Mr Harper – he's a right knob head.*
>
> **Dane:** *Yeah, always hated him. Who does he think he is?*
>
> (Focus Group: Y11 Group 1)

As an extension to this, there was also a lack of respect and affinity for any member of staff that was viewed as an outsider to the local community and/or their working-class expectations, with responses such as '*what about him that Mr Carter. Proper dresses like an*

emo' (Focus Group: Ross Y11 Group 2) and *'I know. He talks reyt (really) weird like he's from London or summat (something). I can't stand him'* (Focus Group: Riley Y11 Group 1) typical of many others.

In slight contrast to these teacher-pupil relationships, the pupils did indicate that they had a slightly more positive attitude towards their working relationships with staff that were *'alreyt wi' em (ok with them)'* (Focus Group: Shane Y10 Group 2) or that they were *'a bit like us and not up their own arse'* (Focus Group: Rohan Y11 Group 1). Additional focus group discussions indicated that these more positive relationships emerged and developed as a result of 'staff being alreyt (ok) wi you if you're alreyt wi them' (Focus Group: Ross Y11 Group 2).

Finally, it was the staff that the pupils regarded as having some form of status, social value or respect in the school and community that were highly regarded by these lads with pupils referring to staff that had a strong affinity with the local area:

> **Lloyd:** *Mr Barnard taught my dad when he was here and he remembers him. We've seen him out a few times and my dad spoke to him. He lives on Flintwater dunt (doesn't) he.*
>
> **Ryan:** *Yeah mi dad said he was a decent footballer in his day and mi dad played with him for a bit. He got paid and that. First thing my dad said to me when I started was to go and tell Mr Barnard who I am, and he'll look after me.*
>
> (Focus Group: Y11 Group 2).

This positive relationship also extended to school staff that were viewed as being 'one of them' in the way that they acted around school as well as the things that they did or spoke about in their personal lives *'I saw him (Mr Flynn) at (football) match once we all his mates. He'd got a pint and I think he was a bit pissed'* (Focus Group: Dane Y11 Group 1). As an extension to this, there was also evidence that these male pupils were more likely and able to develop a positive view of several staff that lived and/or spent time in the local area *'Mr Cater walks to school dunt (doesn't)he. It's Mark Wainwright's relation in it…he plays football on a Sunday wi' mi cousin'* (Focus Group: Y10 Group 2) or even in some cases that members of staff came to the school themselves *'Mr Roper came here dint (didn't) he? I saw him in the Co-op the other night with his bird (girlfriend) buying some beers'* (Focus Group: Ryan – Y11 Group 2). As a result of this perception of staff by the pupils, the relationships in lessons and around school generally could largely be described as positive. However, as these staff were either teachers of classroom-based subjects or pastoral staff who dealt with incidents of challenging behaviour or non-attendance on a regular basis, these staff were aware that these relationships had the propensity to 'wax and wane' or even break down completely if issues or incidents occurred in the classroom or around school generally *'they soon stop asking me about the football for a couple of weeks when I have to suspend them from school'* (Guided Conversation: Matt – Y10 Pastoral Staff Member).

The overwhelmingly positive relationships that *did* exist between these pupils and staff at ACS, however, were reserved for the PE teachers as a direct result of the range of socially valued and respected attributes and traits displayed by these staff in and around school. Clearly the sporting attributes of PE staff were a prominent feature of this positive relationship with pupils, with comments such as *'Mr Cooper is mint (good) at everything. We even did Badminton last year and he was absolutely mint at that'* (Y10 PE lesson) and *'Mr*

Green plays for Farley on Saturday dunt (doesn't) he. He gets money to play' (Y10 PE lesson) indicative of many others. As an extension to this, it was evident that the relationship that existed between these more challenging pupils at ACS and the PE staff had emerged and developed as a result of several other socially significant factors. These ranged from the opportunity to talk to PE staff about playing football at the weekend '*Got a game this weekend sir? Gunna (going to) score again? (*Y11 PE Lesson), the fact that two staff watched the local professional football club regularly '*Mr Brooke goes home and away. I saw him at Stoke last year getting off a coach* – Y9 PE Lesson), the wearing of aspirational sports-wear that some staff wore for school '*Decent trainers them sir. Ah wunt (wouldn't) be wearing 'em to play football in though (*Y10 PE lesson), and even an apparent sense of social acceptance relating to the fact that one of the male PE staff was in a relationship with a female member of staff at school (*Mr goes art wi (out with) Miss dunt (doesn't) he (laughs). I've seen then come to school together in his car. She's reyt fit (attractive) an all (as well)'*- (Y11 PE lesson)

One of the more consistent types of interaction between these challenging male pupils and the PE staff was also the informal nature of their communication and the levels of 'banter' between the two groups with examples observed linked to polite 'requests' for baked goods at the start of lesson '*Food technology again this morning boys? Anyone got a bun to go with my coffee?* (Mr Green – PE Teacher), personal appearance '*Been for a hair cut Zak? When you going back for it finishing off?* (Mr Cooper – PE Teacher) and the mention of potential relationships with girls by the PE staff '*Did I see you with Sarah Clarke this morning Corey? Punching there mate aren't you?* (Mr Brooke – PE Teacher). When the nature, process and intentions related to these relationships were discussed with the PE staff, it was evident that these were things they were very much aware of and worked hard to promote and develop, particularly with the more challenging pupils. Comments during general conversations such as '*it's a big part of what we do with the lads here as it really helps us get them on-side*' (Mr Macintosh – PE Teacher) were indicative of many others. As an extension to this, there was also evidence to suggest that the PE staff were aware of the impact that such an approach had on the most challenging pupils in school with comments such as '*we know some of these are a nightmare around school but it's so much easier to get them on board in PE*' (Mr Cooper – PE Teacher) and '*You know banter and a laugh goes a long way with these type of kids*' (Mr Brooke – PE Teacher) indicative of this.

As a result of the nature of these relationships and the manner in which staff sought to create and sustain them, it is perhaps not surprising that even the most challenging male pupils at ACS viewed their PE teacher with such high regard. Comments such as '*I get on wi' him (Mr Green). He's definitely best teacher 'ere*' (Focus Group: Wayne Y11 Group 2) and '*They're reyt (really) easy to get on wi'. A reyt (good) laugh*' (Focus Group: Jay Y10 Group 1) common.

In this regard, therefore, it was evident that even for the most challenging male pupils in school, the PE staff held a level of social significance and status that far exceeded that of any other member or group of staff at school. This meant that in KS3 PE lessons (observed as part of the wider study) incidents of misbehaviour, disengagement and non-participation were kept to minimum as the result of the PE staff's ability to control these aspects of behaviour. However, when viewed more broadly and over a more prolonged period it was evident that the nature of these PE staff/pupil relationships began to evolve and change as

the pupils moved in to KS4. Driven by the changing nature of the male pupils' lives (both inside and outside of school) as well as the social relationships they engaged in as they matured, the PE staff were well aware that '*there's a change in them when they come back for Y10 after the summer*' (Mr MacIntosh – PE Teacher) and that by the time that they begin KS4 '*most of them are well known to the police…and school is just something that they have to do to get into college* (Mr Green – PE Teacher). More specifically, additional comments from PE staff acknowledged the fact that their own status decreased significantly for the most challenging pupils in KS4 in particular, in favour of the social acceptance and status from friends and female peers with comments such as '*I think as younger lads they almost hero worshipped us, but now (Y11) it's about impressing their mates and girlfriends*' (Mr Cooper) and '*We really can't compete with the influence of their mates by this point (Y10), especially with how close they all are, how much time they spend together and the pressures on them to act in a certain way*' (Mr MacIntosh – PE Teacher). As a result, the ability of PE staff to influence and impact on the attitudes and behaviours of these most problematic pupils becomes limited – particular when viewed in relation to year 7 and 8 – to the point that the relationship between the two groups becomes very precarious, finely balanced and in some cases eroded all together in KS4:

> *We've lost quite a few of them at this stage now mate (April in Year 11). Even we are off their radar. What happens outside school is their main focus and we're no longer the force that we once were in their lives. We still have a bit of craic with them but most of them just see us as another teacher.* (Mr Green – PE Teacher – Guided Conversation)

In order to address and possibly counteract this outcome, the PE staff were evidently keen to maintain some version of the positive relationship they had developed with the most challenging pupils in KS4 by continuing to engage in 'familiar' verbal communication and banter '*no wonder you've not got a bird (girlfriend) Wilson with a haircut like that*' (Mr Cooper – PE Teacher). However, lesson observations with Y11 in particular and guided conversations with PE staff confirmed that the nature and 'feel' of this relationship in the majority of cases had changed subtly, yet significantly, as these pupils moved in Y11.

> *It's a totally different animal now mate, especially when they get into Y11. The way in which they saw us and the control we had lower down school has gone now and it's all about managing them the best that we can when they come on a Tuesday afternoon* (Mr MacIntosh – PE Teacher – Guided Conversation)

In addition, there was evidence from lesson observations and guided conversations that the PE staff used the content and delivery of KS4 PE lessons with the most challenging pupils in order to 'keep them on-side'. By delivering PE lessons that were dominated by large-scale, competitive and physical games of football '*that's literally all they want to do, and will ever do*' (Mr Cooper – PE Teacher) relaxing expectations on swearing '*you hear it but just pretend you haven't*' (Mr Brooke – PE Teacher) and the wearing of PE kit '*it's not worth the effort or confrontation trying to get them changed*' (Mr Green – PE Teacher) relationships between the challenging pupils and PE staff were largely maintained. However, it was clear that the 'tables had turned' by KS4 as PE staff had to carefully manage their relationships with the most challenging male pupils in order to promote engagement and participation and minimise poor behaviour and confrontation by carefully considering the nature and content of their PE lessons.

Ultimately, it was at the vocational college that these challenging pupils attended three mornings a week where they were least likely or able to exercise and exert any tangible control within their teacher/pupil relationships. Importantly, from speaking with these pupils and observing them in lessons at the college, it was evident that they enjoyed and even benefitted from the different 'feel' and environment that the college provided as a result of them dressing in work-related clothing and footwear in order to attend, being able to '*just go t'canteen if we wanted owt (anything)*' and that '*there are no little uns knocking abart (present) and getting in our way*' (Troy – Y11). More specifically, it was clear that the socially valued skills of the college staff '*I know he does load of work on the side and earns a fortune*'(Riley, Y11), the very nature of what they were being asked to do '*this is a bit better than maths in't it mate*'(Ryan, Y11) and the ways that they were treated by the college staff '*they treat us like blokes not kids as long as we dunt mess 'em abart (misbehave)*'(Wayne, Y11) all combined to create a suitable and socially relevant environment for the pupils which led to a situation where they felt comfortable, accepted, and perhaps most importantly, relatively capable. As a result, these pupils saw these mornings at college as highly positive experiences '*ar just wish we were darn 'ere (down here) all t'time*' (Rohan – Y11) as well as environments where they realistically aspired to study further upon leaving secondary school and work in as adults '*I just can't wait to get started at college nar (now). A hate gunin (going) back t' school*' (Ross, Y11).

Within this different educational environment, lesson observations confirmed that a positive relationship existed between the pupils and college staff that in a similar vein to that of PE staff was based on general banter alongside some work-related jibes '*have you cut that with your eyes shut?*' (Mick – Vocational Lecturer) and '*who is going to get the honour of making my morning coffee then?* (Colin – Vocational Lecturer). However, not only was there a strong sense that college staff were able to use their status and credibility as former tradesmen to assert a suitable degree of control over the actions and behaviours of the pupils attending their sessions, but a sense of mutual respect had been created and developed during sessions. In this regard college staff were often quick to reprimand pupils '*You're not at school now Ross. Concentrate otherwise you're out*' (Ian – Vocational Lecturer) and '*talk to someone at work like that mate and see what happens. Just think about it*' (Mick – Vocational Lecturer) in order to maintain a high degree of discipline and control in vocational lessons but the lads also saw that '*they treat you like adults not kids and I like that*' (Ryan – Y11 Group 2) as well as '*they know we have a fag (cigarette) at break and we swear sometimes but they're not that bothered as long as we work*' (Troy Y11 – Group 1). Subsequently, it was evident that pupils acknowledged the extent to which they improved their behaviour and focus at college *via* common responses such as '*we just don't mess about down here. It's different int it*' (Dane Y11 – Group 1) and '*it's what I want to do for a job so I have to switch on don't I*' (Wayne Y11 – Group 2). Unlike the waning influence of the PE staff at ACS as the pupils got older, college staff were able to sustain a significant degree of control over the pupils in to KS4 whilst maintaining the positive relationship that existed between them. This was not only due to the respectful and positive relationships formed between the two but the awareness of pupils that college staff had the ability to terminate the college course for poor behaviour or erratic attendance' *last year, Craig Jarvis got binned (removed) from the course for pissing about*'(Troy, Y11) and/or constrain their ability to progress into full time trade related courses on leaving ACS.

Discussion

It was evident that the social figurations of which this particular group of male pupils were a part had led to the emergence of a social habitus that they shared with others who had been habituated through very similar, short and long-term experiences (Elias 2000; Dunning 2002; Dunning and Hughes 2012). These socialising influences (Elias 1978) meant that they had adopted similar masculine values and behaviours synonymous with their working-class upbringings (Elias 1978) and had subsequently developed negative attitudes towards school and education and staff. As the nature of these relationships became increasingly fluid, varied and volatile, the social relationships that these male pupils formed with staff as well as each other emerged as one large 'sociological game' that became increasingly complex and difficult to control (Elias 1978). Initially, the structure of the school-based figuration for Y7 and 8 pupils was less complex and dynamic (Elias 1978) meaning that school staff possessed the greater degree of power in the relationships. However, during Y9 and into KS4, the structure and nature of the social and college-based figurations of which the most challenging pupils were a part became increasingly complex and opaque (Elias 1978) which not only caused the very nature, structure and direction of 'the game' to change as they matured but enabled these pupils to 'steer the activities' (Elias 1978, 79) towards an increased ability to control the intentions and actions (Green 2000) of most staff. When the most challenging male pupils viewed certain members of ACS staff as lacking 'had what the other requires' (Elias 1978) they sought to control the nature and direction of the 'game' (Elias 1978) by disrupting lessons and subsequently constraining the ability of the staff to do their job. Other staff at ACS staff enjoyed a more even balance of power due to respect granted by pupils as a result of socially acceptable actions and reputations – although this was often nuanced and even fragile in nature meaning that control of the game was prone to flux and change within the increasingly complex social figuration of which both groups were a part (Elias 1978). For PE staff at ACS more specifically, the nature of the subject and the positive relationships formed through masculine attributes and sporting prowess meant that PE staff were able to 'steer the activities' (Elias 1978) and control the actions of the challenging male pupils during years 7 and 8. However, it was evident that as these male pupils progressed towards their mid-teens and the structure and nature of their social figurations became increasingly multi polar and complex (Dunning and Hughes 2012) the outcomes associated with this became increasingly opaque and difficult to control (Elias 1978). Therefore, as social acceptance and status from peers and friends emerged clearly as the power that they 'sought to posses' (Elias 1978), the relative and actual power previously held by the PE staff at ACS significantly decreased meaning that the nature and direction of the 'game' became based on a process of negotiation rather than direction between PE and staff and these pupils (Kilminster 1998; Mennell 1998) resulting in PE staff needing to provide large-scale competitive games of football as a means of directing rather than controlling these pupils. Although this meant that the PE staff had to consciously relinquish a degree of power that they had once held over these pupils, the nature and delivery of these KS4 PE lessons enabled PE staff to 'withhold what the other (pupils) required' (Elias 1978, 79) in order to maintain sufficient power to minimise disruption and promote participation. Ultimately, therefore, it was the less complex and more easily controlled figuration and 'game' that the challenging pupils formed with staff at FE college, which enabled the actions and intentions

of these particular KS4 pupils to be clearly and consistently controlled by staff. Whilst college staff evidently held a similar type and degree of power over the challenging pupils to that of PE staff at ACS in KS3 due to the status they held as a result of their practical skills and work-related experience, it was the role of college staff in facilitating a progression to trade-related post-16 courses that meant they were able (and willing) to control the nature and direction of 'the game' and 'influencing the moves' of these pupils by utilising the very real threat of preventing their transition to a post-16 course through *via* expulsion from their current course or the removal of a suitable reference. As a result, as the college-based sessions on trade-related courses emerged as the only genuine place where staff were able to steer the actions and attitudes of the pupils, towards high attendance, rule adherence, and sustained engagement within an educational setting, the ability of staff at ACS to control the actions of these challenging pupils diminished at differing rates and to differing degrees to the point that even the most positive relationships formed with PE staff became based on negotiation rather than control and direction. Therefore, the different educational establishment of college evidently created a figuration in which the boys were relatively content to relinquish control in order to progress towards their socially desirable future study and careers.

The key contributions of this paper initially relate to the manner in which the learned behaviours of more challenging pupils come to impact on the varied relationships that they form with staff and the extent to which these pupils are both willing and able to influence the actions and attitudes of their teachers and lecturers over time. In the early KS3 years, whilst some staff acknowledge their lack of status and subsequent power with the most challenging pupils, others teaching staff are able to gain greater influence over the most challenging as a result of their socially acceptable actions and behaviours. However, it is PE staff that stand out as the most able and willing to utilise their power over the most challenging pupils at this age to constrain and influence their behaviour due to the status that emerges from their sporting prowess and the possession of masculine actions and attributes. Therefore, this subtle yet significant dichotomy in staff-pupil relationships emerges as an important consideration to consider and address when examining staff-pupil relationships in working-class schools within any further study of this kind. However, it is the evolving nature of these social processes and outcomes as more challenging pupils became increasingly influenced by peers, friends and aspects of their wider lives as they move through school that appears to be the true issue to arise from this paper, particularly given the short time frame during which these differences emerge. Whilst the previously prominent and dominant PE staff gradually become increasingly unable to control the actions of the most challenging pupils resulting in the need to use negotiation and compromise as a means of directing behaviour, it is the college staff who are able to assert and then maintain a degree of tangible and more subtle power and control over the most challenging pupils at ACS – even in years 10 and 11. Empowered by the status that they hold due to their skills and experience combined with the practical nature of the course and more relaxed environment, college staff benefit from an ability to control the actions and attitudes of these most challenging pupils which is no longer the case for staff at ACS.

Disclosure statement

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