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The impact of a school ability banding system on white, working-class males

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ABSTRACT

As part of a wider study into the educational attitudes and experiences of white, working-class male pupils in the north of England, this paper explored the ways that male pupils in years 10 and 11 navigated and experienced the six-level (A-F) academic banding system present in their British mainstream secondary school (Ayrefield Community school – ACS). Following an initial four-week period of both covert and overt observations (including guided conversations), three distinct groups of male pupils emerged. Influenced in part by Paul Willis' seminal study (1977) of males in a working-class school environment, these three 'lads' groups were representative of pupils in the top, middle, and bottom academic bands and were subsequently named Performers, Participants and Problematics respectively by the researcher. Following this initial phase of observations, a total of 74 male pupils from these top ($n = 29$), middle ($n = 26$) and lower ($n = 19$) academic bands were specifically selected to take part in a total of 14 group interviews with the aim being to explore the lads' experiences of, and attitudes towards, being taught in academic bands, as well as their views on education and qualifications more generally. Passages from these group interviews are combined with guided conversation responses to make up the findings presented in this paper which are then explored and explained using some key concepts from Norbert Elias's field of figurational sociology alongside key academic literature linked to the use of academic banding in schools. The paper suggests that despite the fact that all male pupils at ACS were exposed to very similar working-class upbringings and social pressures as part of their wider social figuartions, members of each of the three lads' groups became part of, and were subsequently influenced by, the specific, school-based figuartions that emerged as a result of their allocation to their respective academic group. Influenced by the increasingly diverse and complex social relations within these school-based figuartions, the lads from the three different groups seemed set to achieve relative 'success' at school, albeit on route to different destinations, for different reasons, and towards quite starkly different end goals – all whilst still being very much aware of, and influenced by, the wider social figuration of which they were inextricably a part.

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Introduction

The performance-related culture that has become increasingly synonymous with the British education system (Ball 2003; Leat, Thomas and Reid 2012) has inadvertently led to increased pressures related to standards, progress, and achievement (Watson and Hay 2003). For staff, this is closely related to the need to conform and achieve as part of school performance expectations, whilst many pupils have become increasingly strategic and pragmatic in their approach to gaining qualifications (Leat, Thomas and Reid 2012). Within this highly pressured, competitive, and performance-related education system, white, British male pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) remain among the lowest academic attainers at school – with white, British FSM pupils' attainment score being 36.1 (measured out of 90) compared to that of Chinese non-FSM pupils score of 69.4 (Department for Education 2022). Evidence suggests that this outcome is influenced by the attitudes and 'working-class expectations' often present in the home lives of many working-class males that stand at odds with those expected at school (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall, 2007; Ingram 2009; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Reay 2004b). This has been shown to lead to low academic expectation, erratic levels of school engagement, and an increased likelihood of self-exclusion (Demie and Lewis 2011).

Although many young males from these backgrounds can manage this difficult balance between social acceptance and academic engagement – as is the case with some members of the Performer and Participant groups in this study (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall 2007; MacDonald and Marsh 2005) – a sense of 'masculine honor' can often take precedence over academic ability and achievement for many others (Connell 2008, MacDonald and Marsh 2005), especially when adhering to school expectations stands to lead to effective 'exclusion' from friendship groups (Kelly 2009; Lawler 2000; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). In relation to the constraining influence of masculinity more specifically, it is the hegemonic masculinity – a 'culturally exalted', 'idealised' (Connell 1990: p83) and dominant form of masculinity – that exists and dominates within the majority of schools situated in predominantly working-class areas (Connell 1995, 2008; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This form of masculinity that emerges through the collective social practice of their wider social lives and communities (Tischler and McCaughtry 2011) leads to the valuing of specific attitudes and actions that are not only associated with being a 'proper' working-class male, but conflict starkly with the expectations and demands of formal school life (Evans 2007; O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000). Ultimately, therefore, the working-class identity that is developed and promoted within many 'traditional' and 'masculine' working-class localities and subsequently displayed in the school-based environment, can lead to young people from these backgrounds developing largely negative attitudes of formal schooling due to the conflict that exists between educational engagement and 'masculine' expectations (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall 2007; Connolly and Neill 2001; Connolly and Healy 2004; Healy 2006; Reay and Lucey 2000) – an issue that is accentuated when one considers that such types of behaviours and attitudes provide a very real opportunity for some male pupils in particular to gain influence, power, and status in and across their peer group (Connell 2008). Overall, therefore, such social processes lead to a contagion of misbehaviour in many working-class schools (Kelly 2009) that can prove difficult to eradicate, especially as the notion of individual identity and status emerges as a highly important social aspect of adolescence for most young males (Bromnick and Swallow 1999; Güneri, Sümer, and Yildirim 1999).

Banding

In order to address and manage the varied levels of attainment and engagement of their pupils, many British schools engage in forms of 'ability grouping' (Ireson and Hallam 2009) or academic 'streaming' (Hallam 2012; Spina 2019; Taylor et al. 2019) – approaches that both involve the segregation of pupils across a proportion of lessons. Despite some reservations about the effectiveness of this approach, separating pupils by ability remains an embedded feature of many pupils' educational lives (Taylor et al. 2022) at both secondary school (Macleod et al. 2015; Stewart 2013) and primary school level (Bradbury 2018; Hallam and Parsons 2013). Despite the prominence of this approach, however, little is known about the short and long-term impact of grouping/streaming based on academic ability. Indeed, despite the fact that few topics in education have generated such controversy or longstanding academic examination (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, and Olszewski-Kubilius 2016) the impact of grouping/streaming by prior attainment remains highly contested (Hodgen et al. 2023). Proponents of such an approach state that grouping/streaming allows teachers to customize the content and pace of lessons in order to match students' needs (Buttaro and Catsambis 2019).

However, not only have some studies found that the impact of between-class grouping/streaming on GCSE attainment to be mixed and inconclusive (Ireson, Hallam and Hurley 2005), other studies have found that between-class grouping/streaming had no significant benefit to academic attainment for any group members (Rui 2009). Perhaps more alarming are claims that grouping/streaming can increase educational inequity by serving to widen any existing attainment gaps (Berends and Donaldson 2016; Capsada-Munsech and Boliver 2019; Hanushek and Wößmann 2006) with pupils in higher groups shown to make larger gains than pupils of similar prior attainment that had been placed in a middle or low ability group (Hodgen et al. 2023). In relation to this, for the pupils allocated to higher groups, studies have linked academic grouping/streaming to the impact of a Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968) where the mere presence of a pupil in a particular group can influence their levels of self-confidence and cause a self-fulfilling expectation of/on their academic attainment (Francis et al. 2020; Francis, Taylor, Tereshchenko 2020) due to the ways that teachers utilise different types and levels of encouragement in lessons and have higher expectations of academically more able pupils (Wang, King, McInerney 2021). In addition, studies have also highlighted the greater opportunity for top set pupils to access and benefit from a richer curriculum with much greater opportunity to learn (Burris, Heubert, and Levin 2006) and/or receive more regular access to better qualified and more experienced teachers (Francis et al. 2019). In almost direct contrast, pupils placed in lower attaining groups have been shown to experience lower teacher expectations (Campbell 2014, 2017; Ireson and Hallam 2009; Timmermans, Kuyper, and van der Werf 2015), the allocation of teachers with less subject-specific expertise or less experience (Francis et al. 2019; Kelly 2004; Papay and Kraft 2015), the 'offer' of a reduced curriculum (Hallam and Ireson 2005; Jaremus et al. 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2020), fewer opportunities for participation and discussion in lessons (Gamoran et al. 1995), and more restricted opportunities to academic progress (Buttaro and Catsambis 2019) – all factors which, not surprisingly, have been shown to impact on pupil self-confidence (Francis et al. 2020; Houtte, Demanet, and Stevens 2012; Ireson and Hallam 2009; Muijs and Dunne 2010).

In short, ability grouping/streaming policies and practices evidently affect students' experiences in school, including the courses they take, the curricula they receive, the peers with whom they learn, and the teachers who provide instruction (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, and Olszewski-Kubilius 2016) – outcomes that appear more pertinent when one considers that white pupils from low socio-economic groups are disproportionately found in low-attainment groups (e.g. Bosworth 2013; Moller and Stearns, 2012; Muijs and Dunne 2010; Strand 2012). Indeed, for Ball, banding systems are often the 'personification of a self-fulfilling prophecy' as many working-class pupils become much more likely to 'percolate downwards' (Ball 1981; 39–40) and subsequently develop feelings of shame, marginalisation, and self-perceptions of 'stupidity' as a result of being placed in 'bottom sets' (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall 2007; Reay 2006).

Norbert Elias and Figurational sociology

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 social groups are termed figurations and are defined as structures 'of mutually orientated and dependent people' (Elias 2000, 316) made up of interdependent relationships with a range of others (e.g. friends, parents, peers, family) (Elias 1978; Gouldsblom 1977). It is these interactions with others that come to influence the actions and attitudes of people (Elias, 1978) to varying degrees. By extension, these figurations are not 'timeless static states' (Elias 1978, 112) – and as a result people often become interdependent with a much greater range and number of people (Goodwin and O'Connor 2006) resulting in the figurations of which they are a part becoming longer and more complex over time (Elias 1978; Goudsblom and Mennell 1998). For school pupils progressing through the education system, they are likely to become increasingly dependent upon, and interdependent with, a much greater range and number of people (Goodwin and O'Connor 2006) meaning that the outcomes related to these increasingly varied relationships become 'much more opaque' and therefore difficult to control (Elias 1978, 68). Put simply and applied to an education-based environment, pupils' interdependence with teaching and pastoral staff, peers, friends, and family members leads to outcomes that they 'would not act except under compulsion from [these] other interdependent people' (Elias 1978, 94). An additional key feature of this is that the processes and outcomes related to any social figuration are closely linked and influenced by the power relationships that exist within them. Although power is 'not something that can be possessed solely by one person' (1978, 74) and 'no one individual is ever absolutely powerful or powerless' (Murphy, Sheard, and Waddington 2000, 93), one must acknowledge that multi-polar relationships exist between a range of interdependent people in a variety of different ways within figurations of people (Dunning and Hughes 2012, 67). As a result, the ever-fluctuating influences among these wide-ranging inter-related groups (Dunning and Hughes 2012) leads to interdependent groups/individuals coming to depend on others in different ways as power balances vary and evolve. More specifically, one must acknowledge that although 'more powerful' groups exert influence over the 'less powerful ones', there is always scope for the seemingly 'less powerful' in any relationship to constrain the more powerful *via* process referred to by Elias, as a 'boomerang effect' (Elias 1978).

A further key feature to emerge from long-term social figurations is a persons' habitus which for Elias refers to a person's embodied social learning and dictates their 'automatic blindly functioning apparatus of self-control' (Elias 2000, 368). Although each person develops their own individual habits, they also form a series of social behaviours (habituses) that are shared with others who have been habituated through similar experiences (Dunning 2002) and as a result, take on a shared personality that 'grows out of the common language which the individual shares with others' (Elias 1987, 182). However, it is also important to acknowledge that a person's habitus is 'affected by his changing relations with others throughout his life' (Elias 1994, 455), therefore the formation of habitus is a function of social interdependencies, which can vary as the structure of a society varies (Elias 1994, 2000) – such as progressing through schooling.

The male pupils (lads) in this study, therefore, can only be seen as a product of the interweaving and continuous interplay of these relationships with other people (Goudsblom and Mennell 1998). In the longer term, whilst each lad is still clearly a personality in his own right, this 'individual stamp' can only emerge from the history of the whole human network within the complex interdependent relationships to which he is inextricably a part (Elias 1987, 68). However, as people become increasingly dependent upon, and interdependent with, a much greater range and number of people (Goodwin and O'Connor 2006) – such as the figurations evident in a school environment - the outcomes related to these increasingly varied relationships become 'much more opaque' and therefore difficult to control (Elias 1978, 68).

Methods

The study utilised an instrumental, ethno-case study approach (Scattergood 2024) within a 'typical'[1], white [2], working-class secondary school known as Ayrefield Community School (ACS). This included the use of covert and overt participant observation, focus groups, and guided conversations (Yin 2014). The aim was to gather and document multiple perspectives (Simons 2009) from pupils and staff in their 'natural' surroundings in order to gain a more adequate grasp of the ways in which the actions and attitudes of male pupil ('lads') came to impact on the manner to which they viewed and experienced the school academic banding system at ACS. Following initial access to the school via a gatekeeper in order to speak with the headteacher and gain written approval to undertake the study, ethical approval was gained from the University ethics board.

The school allocated all pupils to one of six academic-groups at the end of year 9 in order to study their KS4 qualifications, with male members of the top (set one), middle (set three) and bottom (set six) academic bands in both Y10 and Y11 becoming the focus of the study. Although never communicated to the staff or students during the course of data collection and influenced in part by similar terms in seminal studies involving working-class schools (Brown 1987; Hargreaves 1967; Willis 1977), the terms Performers (top set), Participants (middle set) and Problematics (bottom set) were created and utilised by the researcher to differentiate the groups. The top set (Performers) were part of a mixed-sex groups working towards GCSE qualifications and isolated from their peers in all lessons (including form period) except core physical education (PE). The majority had strong aspirations to complete A-levels at college before attending university. The Participants were completing a higher proportion of BTEC qualifications and middle-tier GCSE entries as part of mixed-sex,

isolated groups (except for core PE). Most pupils in this group aspired to attend the local further education (FE) college and enrol on a wide range of both 'academic' and vocational' courses. The Problematics were part of single-sex groups that were following a range of foundation qualifications at school as well as vocational qualifications at the local FE college three mornings a week. The majority of male pupils in this group were intent on following on with their trade-based vocational qualifications or finding paid employment via an apprenticeship.

Following a two-week familiarisation phase designed to become a more accepted presence across the school, the researcher took on the role of learning support assistant (LSA) in order to undertake the covert observation of male pupils across a wide range of lessons. During this time, 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 as they followed aspects of their day-to-day activities (Payne and Payne 2004). A total of 21 'academic' lessons were initially observed *via* this covert approach over a non-continuous, one-month period that also included guided conversations with both pupils and staff in order to provide greater insights into observed behaviours/comments (Yin 2014). Prompted by a desire to gain a greater insight into the attitudes and views of lads across all three groups, the true presence of the researcher was revealed after six weeks of covert observations in order to conduct 14 focus group interviews with specifically selected pupils from years 10 and 11 (Problematics: $n = 24$ across five groups, Participants $n = 21$ across four groups and Performers $n = 23$ across five groups), with an additional group interview conducted with the four, full-time male PE staff (total participants $n = 72$). The process of thematic analysis was applied to all focus groups transcripts where key themes were distinguished and subsequently extracted from the data using specific labels to comments in order to do so (Bryman 2012). Due to the fact that initial data analysis had taken place following periods of observation and guided conversations, several exiting labels were utilised (e.g. PEL – positive engagement in lessons) with additional codes created and applied that emerged from the focus groups (e.g. NVP – negatively viewed by peers). Despite the availability of data analysis software, this process was conducted by hand as part of an attempt to link the various sources of data together (Bryman 2012) and then highlight distinct themes from the focus groups specifically which led to key passages being selected for inclusion in the findings along with some passages from guided conversations.

The case – Ayrefield Community School (ACS)

Assessed against several recognised measures of deprivation, ACS was deemed to be situated within a socially and economically deprived area. The village of Ayrefield itself was ranked 1,141 for social deprivation out of a possible 32,482 lower super output areas (LSOA)[3] areas 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. Furthermore, 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 with 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% with the NA being 15%) with almost three-times that number on incapacity benefit (20%: NA 7%). There

was a strong prevalence of 'white' people living in Ayrefield with 1,330 of the 1,389 total residents classing themselves as white-British. Of the 965 pupils on roll at ACS in 2013, only 1% of students considered their first language to be other than English: '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 six years. In addition, Ofsted (2014, 7) stated that 'the school had faced challenges in the recruitment and retention of teachers' (Ofsted 2014, 7). This appeared indicative of both the reputation of the school and the behaviour and attainment of some pupils.

Findings

Comments from staff consistently pointed to the fact that they were aware that most lads at ACS came from very similar family and geographical backgrounds with the following response typical from staff in this regard:

> The type of area that our kids come from means that there is not much between them all. We don't get the kids of doctors or teachers…I've never known a school where there are no school buses have you? Most walk as it's that close (Guided Conversation – Sarah: Teacher of Maths: Year Lead: Year 8)

Expanding on this, conversations with staff working with pupils across all banding streams consistently highlighted the on-going conflict (to greater and lesser degrees) between school rules and the 'working-class expectations' on male pupils as a result of growing up in Ayrefield:

> It doesn't come naturally to most of them [working hard at school] if you know what I mean? Don't get me wrong, many of them turn up to school, behave, and try their best. But particularly as they get older it gets more difficult, especially for some of them. Even for the really good ones, we are often fighting against what is expected of them outside of school and even in some cases by their families. (Guided Conversation – Matt: Teacher of Maths)

From a figurational perspective, it was apparent that due to the similar socialising influences (Elias 1978) and the long-term interdependent relationships of which the lads from Ayrefield were inextricably a part, almost all lads at ACS had developed and adopted similar values, attitudes, and behaviours synonymous with aspects of their 'working-class' lives (Dunning 1999; Elias 1978). This meant that the vast majority of these lads arrived at ACS with an awareness of what it meant to be a 'proper' working-class lad and the social pressures associated with this.

However, despite the apparent commonality in the lads' backgrounds across all academic abilities/bands, comments from staff consistently alluded to the fact that informal groups of male pupils could be quickly identified and categorised in relation to their similar attitudes to education/school and attainment in lessons – even as early as Y7. The following response was typical of several others in this regard:

> You can see them straight away really, especially having worked here for a while. In fact, in some cases, you pick them out when they come up for their transition weeks at the end of year 6… You can see what type of lad they are going to be almost straight away (Guided Conversation - Jake: Teacher of Science: Joint Year Lead: Year 7).

As an important extension to this, Jake also commented on how pupils appeared to '*gravitate to each other*' as a result of '*weighing each other up*' even during their first few months at Ayrefield. This was something that other staff at ACS also commented upon, suggesting it this often due to many pupils' astute awareness and assessment of other pupils' academic ability and engagement:

> A lot of it is how they act in lessons in that first few weeks and I suppose a lot pick up on just how they look and what shoes they wear – stuff like that. But they know kids don't they…they just know. (Guided Conversation – Laura: Deputy Head of Maths Department)

Time spent around school observing mixed-ability lessons combined with a range of guided conversations with staff in relation to this issue confirmed these early splits in friendship groups that were evident at ACS as early as Y7 had generally became very well established by Y9. Comments such as '*by this stage (April in Year 9) they are ready (to be placed in ability sets)*' and that '*most of them probably knew early on in Y7 so by now it's really clear*' (Guided Conversation - Matt: Teacher of Maths) were indicative of many others in this regard.

It was evident, therefore, that despite the shared habitus that existed amongst the male pupils at ACS, subtle yet significant differences existed between many of the male pupils from as early as primary school based on their similar (and differing) attitudes and behaviours within the school environment. This not only meant that certain pupils were consciously (and at times subconsciously) drawn towards one another into informal, school-based figurations of like-minded people, but these initial groups became more established following their formal allocation to academic-band groups. As an extension to this, these three, school-based figurations became increasingly longer and more complex (Elias 1978; Goudsblom and Mennell 1998) as they progressed into Y10 due to the differing academic expectations imposed on them by a diverse range of interdependent people including peers, friends, family, staff and even themselves. Subsequently, the different 'surrounding social relations' (van Krieken 1998, 60) and 'compelling forces' (Goudsblom and Mennell 1998, 118) to which lads in each of the three groups were exposed within their school-based figuration, caused the 'natural' behaviour of the lads to develop and change (Murphy, Sheard, and Waddington 2000) in ways that no one had considered or expected (Elias 1978; van Krieken 1998) as a result of the ways that they were viewed and treated by teachers and peers, the pressure that they felt to succeed academically, and the extent which the lads were influenced by 'traditional' masculine, working-class expectations. It is to a more specific examination of this process in each of three lads groups that this paper will now turn:

Problematics

Although significant examples of misbehaviour and/or aggression to peers and staff were rare in lessons involving the Problematics, it was not uncommon for these lads to arrive several minutes late (often smelling of smoke) meaning that the formal start to the lesson was often significantly delayed. Working relationships with the majority of teachers was relatively positive in many cases, although this was more likely to occur with male members of staff and/or with teachers who they deemed to be '*alreyt (ok) with them*'. It was also evident that a negative attitude towards school, education and most academic staff was extremely common when asked – something that appeared to have existed throughout their

time at school *'Av never been bothered abart school. Absolute waste o' time for me. Always 'as been*' (Corey: Y11 Problematic Group 1). Once settled and the lesson focus explained, the Problematic lads drifted in and out of tasks, distracting behaviour was common, and certain incentives (e.g. listening to music) were consistently presented to ensure written work was completed:

> These lads (Problematics) are now at the point where they pretty much do what they want (in classroom-based lessons). Don't get me wrong, we can manage them, they generally come to school and turn up to lessons, but once they are together it's a bit like a mob mentality. (Guided Conversation: PE Teacher Rich)

In most classroom lessons that were observed involving Problematics (both Y10 and Y11) one would best describe the lesson as being 'on the edge' in the sense that the teacher never seemed fully in control. Not only would the lads work in short bursts punctuated by off-task behaviour, but they were also well-aware of the way that they were viewed by peers and staff. Comments such as *'we know what they call us, never to ar faces like. Stuff like 'duggy diggers' because we gu to college and that'* (Zak – Focus Group: Y10 Problematic Group 1) and '*He's taught us loads (Mr Clorely) and knows what we're like by nar…he just knows what we're like. We dunt have to do much in his lessons really as long as we behave alreyt*' (Troy – Focus Group: Y11 Problematic Group 2). This was also something that staff picked up on themselves and the following response typified the view of several others:

> It's a really difficult with them (Problematics) really, especially when they are in college a couple of days a week and turning up in their work gear and rigger boots. It's hard to treat them as proper pupils, especially when their mind-set has already changed. (Guided Conversation – Laura: Deputy Head of Maths Department)

Indeed, it was apparent when asked that for the majority of Problematic lads, not only was spending time with friends *the* most important aspect of coming to school - with comments such as '*I think it's (school) alreyt, just to have a laff wi't mates*' (Dane: Y11 Problematic Group 2) common - but also that the Problematic lads took a great deal from being able to engage in this as part of a cohesive friendship group with very similar values and future aspirations. The following response from the Problematics (Y10 Group 2) was indicative of several others:

> Interviewer: Why do you seem to like school in Y11 more than you did lower down school then?
>
> Karl: 'cause I'm wi mi mates and nobody is really on at us all the time.
>
> Leon: We all like t'same things and that. We gu to college, go to t'chippy for us dinner and we're art at night an 'all.
>
> Corey: I'm never gunna like school but it's miles better nar 'cause we're not we' all t'others.

It was perhaps not surprising, therefore, given their behaviour and attitude at school that the college tutors (with whom the Problematic lads worked several times a week) were particularly respected and valued. Several times, the Problematic lads across both year groups suggested this was because they '*felt that they were being treated like 'grown ups*' (Riley: Y11 Problematic Group 2) and that '*Yeah, you get tret [treated] like an adult at college*' (Bailey: Y10 Problematic Group 2) – outcomes that seemed to be linked to the fact that '*If*

you want a drink you can go for a drink' (Riley) and *'They're not bothered if you swear and that'* (Levi: Y10 Problematic Group 2).

Overall, the Problematics were evidently part of a less-complex figuration of mutually-orientated people in their school-based academic group which meant that the lads were much less likely to have their behaviour, effort and engagement at school constrained by staff due to the lower academic expectations imposed on them. As a result, the Problematics were also less likely to be influenced by the same compelling social forces experienced by lads in the other three groups and so were largely able to continue with the types of 'traditional', working-class behaviours in school that they valued and engaged in outside of it. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the Problematics, found the college environment a much more appropriate 'school'-based figuration as a result of the fact that the expectations present at college closely matched those linked to their home lives.

Despite, this apparent relative 'freedom' at school and college, however, the school and college-based figurations of which the Problematics were a part, were not as simple as they might initially seem. This meant that they were unable to *completely* switch off from education, qualifications and their adherence to school rules due to the constraining influence of the very-real need for the Problematics to gain the minimum amount of qualifications required to progress into their desired college courses and/or apprenticeships. As a result, not only were the power relationships between Problematics and school staff much more equal as they may have seemed on the surface, but even the Problematics were required to 'toe the line' in order to complete their schooling and make their desired next step into college. This was either to gain the qualifications for the appropriate course:

> Rowan: I'm only here for t'GCSEs…I'm not coming back when I've gone.
> (Focus Group: Y11 Problematic Group 1)

Or in some cases just remain in school per se:

> Wayne: Ar dunt like school and ar dunt really like them (teachers), but I know I'm close to being kicked art. Mi mum's been in twice since Christmas and they even gid me t'forms to transfer schools but that's not happening. I need to keep mi 'ead darn [my head down] and just get t'end. Ar can't wait for college next year me.
> (Focus Group: Y10 Problematic: 1)

Perhaps just as importantly, this attitude and apparent tempering of aspects of their behavioir was something that staff were very much aware of. A direct consequence of the increased need to gain FE qualifications in order to gain suitable employment with the following quote typifying this awareness:

> Yeah, I suppose in my generation they could do what they wanted at this stage as the jobs were there for them. Now they are just a bit more wary of what they can get away with and what they can't because they need to get into college and they know it. (Guided Conversation - Jake: Teacher of Science: Joint Year Lead: Year 7)

Performers

Within their classroom-based lessons, the Performer lads appeared genuinely engaged in the content of the lesson and demonstrated a mature and focused attitude. Tasks set by staff were completed with little prompting from their teacher and they had a particularly positive

relationship with the staff at ACS which was evident in the way that they spoke and approached their teachers in lessons and around school. In most cases, these lads were also involved in a range of events and school sports activities and the following quote seemed to typify the view that most staff had of them:

> This lot (Performers) are a great bunch of lads and have been friends right from year 7. They have all their lessons together now, so they are really flying at the minute. They push each other quite a bit and are a pleasure to teach…We have a laugh and that, but they want to do well and I really get a lot from that. (Guided Conversation – Alex: Teacher of PE and member of SLT)

From both guided conversation and focus group responses, it was also clear that the Performer group were aware of where they wanted to be and what they needed to do in order to get there:

> We know what's expected of us from school and our families. I suppose we've always known it but sh*t just got real. We need to stay focused towards A-levels and then uni if we want a decent job in the future (Will: Y10 Performer Group 3)

In relation to the school environment more broadly, not only did staff at ACS consistently acknowledge the level of expectations imposed on the Performers:

> The tag of 'top set' really does have an impact to be fair. It has died down slightly since we brought the groups in, but everyone knows who they are and most importantly they know it too. (Guided Conversation – Louise: Joint Year Lead – Year 11)

But the lads themselves were also aware of other pupils' attitudes and responses linked to their ability grouping name and status with comments such as '*They (other pupils) gi us stick (verbal abuse)*' (Alex: Year 11 Performer Group 1) and *'Lets' be honest we're just smarter than them aren't we and we get better grade…so they don't like us*' (Jake: Y10 Performer Group 2) common amongst the Performers.

In addition to this, there was also a strong awareness from Performers in both years that they seemed to get a wider range of better opportunities at school as a result of their elevated status at school, especially when compared with their peers '*We go on the trips. University and college and that or get picked to go away if there's a trip somewhere. They say it's open to everyone, but I think it's because they know we'll behave and not let the school down*' (Chris: Y11 Year Performer Group 2).

Just as important in relation to the focus of the paper was the fact that the Performers clearly appreciated the opportunity to engage in their studies in an environment that was conducive to such an approach with a range of comments alluding to the fact that *'it's a different world from Y9 really without the idiots*' (Alex: Year 11 Performer Group 1) and '*I never really realised how much better it would be with us all on our own but it's mint*' (Josh: Focus Group: Year 10 Performers Group 2).

One of the seemingly unintended consequences of this academic isolation, however, was the fact that the Performers' school-based figurations became increasingly complex and much less opaque meaning that they were much more difficult to control (Elias 1978) as a result of the academic expectations imposed both *on* them and in some instances, *by* them. Whilst the academically streamed timetable in year 10 and 11 evidently provided them with the welcome opportunity to isolate themselves as part of a figuration of

mutually-orientated peers who were 'just like them' away from the constraining pressures to act like a 'proper' working-class lad, the Performers also clearly understood that their engagement with, and achievement at, school did not necessarily match that of a more traditional working-class background and the dominant, hegemonic-masculinity present at ACS.

An almost inevitable consequences of this status and isolation in school, therefore, seemed to be the heightened sense of expectation placed on them generally by many teachers – a pressure that came across consistently from staff at ACS towards the Performers with quotes such as '*They'll come in and go oh', you're 'top set', you need to be setting examples, you need to be doing this and if you're five minutes late it's like 'ooh, "top set" you shunt be doing that'* (Joel: Focus Group: Year 11 Performers Group 1) and *'Some teachers tek it to t'extreme by saying "Why dunt you act as top set"* and *"You should be doing that because you're top set""* (Josh: Focus Group: Year 10 Performers Group 2). Secondly, it was also evident that the Performer lads created and perpetuated a sense of pressure and competition both on and between themselves with comments such as '*I feel pressure like but I try not to think about it*' (Luke: Year 10 Performers Group 3) and *'There's more than a little bit of competition… just anything we can beat each other at a lot of the time*' (Callum: Y11 Performers Group 3). Importantly, it seems, however, that despite the academic expectation and level of achievement that existed as a result of being placed in with the top academic set, the majority of Performers were able to 'manage' this potentially conflicting situation between academic attainment and peer-group acceptance *via* mixing socially outside of lessons and being engaged in school sports activities. Not only did the Performers consistently allude to this '*It can all change at lunch and after school to fair…we've grown up with lads who go to college and play football most nights wi' 'em*' (Adam: Focus Group: Year 10 Performers Group 2) but it was interesting to see their presence at a range of sporting activities taking place after school (5 a side football) and even their participation in large scale games of football at lunch with lads from across the year group. This mixing of the Performers with a range of peers in their year group *outside* of the formal school environment was also an outcome that several staff alluded to**:**

> Yes, the lads are a distinct group but it's funny to see them mixing when they're out of lessons sometimes. I think that's helped that most of them play school sport and come to five a side football along with the bottom group…I've watched them out of the staff room window a few times at lunch and it's fascinating how they revert to type so quickly and easily. (Guided Conversation – Alex: Teacher of PE and member of SLT)

Overall, then, it was apparent that, the actions and attitudes of the Performers so prominent and consistent in their formal KS4 school-based figurations, did not appear to be long-term, deep-seated amendments to their general habitus. Instead, based on both observations and verbal responses, their approach to formal school life appeared to be more of a pragmatic response to a strong desire to 'progress in life' rather than a deep-seated, long term behavioral change. This appeared to be due to the fact that the Performers were clearly tied to 'yesterday's social reality' (van Krieken 1998, 61) and the wider social figuartions of which they were inextricably a part in their wider lives which meant that they were both willing and able to revert back to types if and when required. One of the consequences of this was the Performers' view of their academic success as a pragmatic necessity towards their longer-term goals of a university education that would lead to a *'nice job, nice car, nice*

house and nice wife' (Michael: Focus Group: Year 10 Performers Group 2). When asked specifically about their views on school and education not only did many Performers make comments akin to '*You're obviously not going to enjoy school are you, there's a lot of work and it gets boring and stuff but, I enjoy it as much as you can*' (Rory: Focus Group: Year 11 Performers Group 1), but it was evident that their attitude to further and higher education appeared to be based on financially-based pragmatism rather than a focused aspiration for further study or even a specific career responses with the following comment fairly typical '*I definitely want to go to University but I'm not sure what I'll do. I mean a degree sets you up for life doesn't it*' (Matt: Focus Group: Year 11 Performers Group 2). When this attitude was mentioned to PE staff during their focus group, their responses suggested that aspirations to go to university by the many of the Performers were based on the desire for a sound financial future rather than a strong desire to continue with study, pursue a clear career path, or move away from the local area.

> I don't suppose that there's much wrong with it, but you'll see these top set lads in a few years' time and they'll have gone off to Uni and have degree from a local university…but they won't move far, probably marry a girl from round here and live not far away. You can't be too critical I suppose but it's a common trend for this type of lad here. (PE Staff Focus Group: PE Teacher Rich)

Overall, therefore, it did seem that the Performers were well aware of the fact that their 'brainy' tag needed to be considered in relation to the range of 'other people occupying other positions in the web of relationship' (Elias 1978, 124) and whilst keen (and able) to embrace their 'academic' label around school, they were well aware of the fact that they could not ignore the complex network of interdependent relationships of which they were inextricably a part. Neither it seemed did they want to, as this group of lads were both willing and able 'to walk the line' between academic engagement/success and being ostracised by their peer group due to the fact that they regularly 'hung out' and playing sport with a wide range of peers whilst outside of their school-based figuration.

Participants

In classroom lessons, the Participants completed tasks with little prompting from staff in a relatively detached yet engaged lesson environment. They participated in what seemed to be small and close-knit friendship groups (to which the majority of their communication was confined) and their interaction with the staff was fairly limited and pragmatic (e.g. '*What do we need to do now sir?')*. Responses from teachers consistently confirmed that a particular 'middle' group did exist at ACS in all year groups:

> Yeah, I suppose we've always known that these lads (Participants) exist. They always turn up and bring their kit, do what they're asked and never really cause us any problems. Just keep themselves to them themselves really. (Guided Conversation – Phil: Teacher of PE)

In a more general sense, one comment from a member of staff that regularly worked with this type of group seemed to typify the attitude of many teacher/pupil attitudes by describing his middle-set Y10 maths group as '*generally my "drifting" lesson*' in that *'they generally come in, do what I ask them to do and then go to their next lesson*'. (Guided Conversation: Karl: Teacher of Maths). Indeed, it was quite pertinent that the same teacher

stated that *'the best way that I can put it, is that if I see them in Tesco in a few years' time I'll probably not be able to remember their name'*

When placed in context with the other two lads groups, the Participants consistently spoke about their more short-term aspirations to do their best and achieve whilst at ACS with a clear desire for the majority to '*get into college and stuff'* (Anthony – Focus Group: Year 10 Participant Group 2) and many others articulating a pragmatic yet achievable attitude towards progression into further education and future employment with the following quote representative of other Participant lads when asked about their futures:

> Cooper: I'm not sure abart uni me but I definitely want to go to college. I should get my grades to go to college and do some BTECs. I'd be happy at that really, especially if I end up with a decent job. Owt on top of that is a bonus. (Focus Group: Year 11 Participant Group 1)

Perhaps most stark in the majority of their responses, however, was their awareness of their position and status around school, in relation to both peers and teaching staff. Not only was the following exchange typical of the Participants' attitude towards their isolation as part of their academic band group:

> Ryan: I love it being in this group me. We're not with the idiots and don't have to do all the work the Performers do. This year's been the best year of school we've had I think. I'm with me mates in every lesson. (Focus Group: Year 11 Participant Group 1)

But Stevie's quote also seemed to typify the sense of total acceptance in relation to their status as well as why this might be the case:

> It doesn't bother me that we are sometimes called the 'the gamers' or that we're not the cool kids in the year group. I dunt want to be cool anyway if that's what it's supposed to be (good at fighting or sport). I actually don't mind school now to be honest, especially when we're all together in lessons like we are nar. (Stevie: Year 10 Participants Group 1)

As an extension to this, the Participants did seem aware of their status, but were happy to compare their seemingly more optimistic future compared to that of the Problematics in particular:

> Oliver: It's like well you're (the Problematics) just going to be on t'dole and I'm going to have a good job and be happy so…being hard [good at fighting] dunt pay your mortgage. (Focus Group: Y10 Participant: 2)

Overall, therefore, the Participants were the group of lads at ACS who were less constrained in their actions (both in lessons and around school generally) than any of the two other groups as part of their school-based figuration. Whilst they were not directly constrained by a working-class expectation of being a 'real' working-class lad as were the Problematics, they were also not seemingly constrained by the level of pressure and expectation imposed on them by the complex and wide ranging figuration of which the Performers found themselves a part. Overall, therefore, the school-based figuration of which the Participants were a part was comparatively less complex and, therefore, much easier to control as result of this isolation from both expected masculine actions (Problematics) and accentuated academic expectations and pressures from peers, family and staff (Performers). Not only was this something that the Participants acknowledged and accepted as part of their school-based figuration, it was also something that they valued in order to remain

focused on their transition towards FE education and more 'secure' future employment and lives. As, all three lads groups (including themselves) were aware that the Participants possessed no obvious socially valuable skills (ability to fight) or strong academic abilities, the evidence suggested that the Participants were arguably the most content with the school's academic banding system. This was due to the fact that they were able (and content) to indulge in the types of behaviours that may well have led to reprisals and mimicry from peers (e.g. role-play gaming and over-conformity in lessons) and subsequently 'get in, get through, and get out' of their time at ACS with a relative amount of contentment and success.

Discussion

On a general level, it was evident that separating pupils by ability had become a normal and embedded feature of these pupils' educational lives (Taylor et al. 2022) and that the allocation of male pupils to top, middle and bottom academic bands had led to certain behaviours, attitudes, and outcomes being created and facilitated during their time at ACS as a direct result of the school academic banding system. For the Performer group specifically, there was evidence that the content and pace of lessons had been adapted to better suit their needs (Buttaro and Catsambis 2019), that the expectations imposed on them in terms of behaviour, engagement and attainment were high (Wang, King, McInerney 2021), that they were more likely to be taught by 'better' teachers, and that the Performers were more likely to receive additional opportunities at school (e.g. university taster days) (Burris, Heubert, and Levin 2006) – all factors that also supported claims that the top groups were generally more confident in their current and future academic success (Francis et al. 2020; Francis, Taylor, Tereshchenko 2020). Another finding related to this (and certainly worthy of further study) was the manner in which the top group competed between one another in order to 'keep up' with peers although this desire was less due to an intrinsic motivation towards education per se, and more the pragmatic approach to education as a means to an end outcome that would (hopefully) lead to the apparent goal of 'nice house, nice job, nice car and nice wife'. In short, it did seem that the Performers were extremely keen to 'do what they needed to do' in their isolated classroom environment before reverting to type amongst their peers outside of lessons and school generally.

For the Problematics, it was apparent that the current academic streaming system at ACS served to widen the existing attainment gaps (Berends and Donaldson 2016; Capsada-Munsech and Boliver 2019; Hanushek and Wößmann 2006) as a result of lower teacher expectations (Campbell, 2014, 2017; Ireson and Hallam 2009; Timmermans, Kuyper, and van der Werf 2015), a reduced school curriculum 'offer' (Hallam and Ireson, 2005; Jaremus et al. 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2020) and more restricted opportunities to academic progression (Buttaro and Catsambis 2019). Indeed, there was certainly evidence that the banding systems at ACS was the 'personification of a self-fulfilling prophecy' (Ball, 1981 39–40) due to the courses that they were offered, the curriculum they received, the peers with whom they learned, and the teachers who provided the instruction (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, Olszewski-Kubilius 2016). However, there was no obvious evidence that these processes and outcomes had come to have an impact negatively on their self-confidence as has been the case in other studies (Francis et al. 2020; Houtte, Demanet, and Stevens 2012; Ireson and Hallam 2009; Muijs and Dunne 2010) which seemed to be due to the fact that the Problematic lads had resigned themselves to the fact that their attitudes, actions and future aspirations stood at

odds with those expected at school (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall 2007; Ingram, 2009; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Reay 2004b) and any academic expectations imposed on them by school staff were low (Demie and Lewis 2011). Instead, the Problematics viewed their individual identities and status in the year/peer group as being a much more important social aspect (Bromnick and Swallow 1999; Güneri, Sümer, and Yildirim 1999) which meant that a sense of 'masculine honor' took precedence over academic ability and achievement (Connell 2008, MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Driven by the strong influence of hegemonic masculinity present in all areas of their lives (Tischler and McCaughtry 2011) and perpetuated by their regular presence at college to undertake 'suitable' trade-related courses, the Problematics were much more likely to gain status from (and therefore value) specific attitudes and actions (Connell 2008) associated with being a 'proper' working-class male (Evans 2007; O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000). Notwithstanding this, however, the Problematics were clearly still influenced by the inextricable link between the changing nature of the British education system and the increased need for a minimum level of qualification to train or be employed – an outcome that meant that even the most problematic Problematics were well aware of a need to 'toe the line' at school in order to progress.

For the Participants in the 'middle', this group of male pupils seemingly saw qualifications as a conscious attempt to take control of their future lives (Brown 1987) by placating teachers, adhering to school rules and expectations, and aiming to pass formal examinations in order to pursue and achieve personal 'success'. A key difference here, however, and a contribution of this paper, was that the isolation afforded to this group as a result of the school banding system meant that the need to conform to the social expectations of their working-class peers was lessened. As an obvious extension to this, observations and verbal responses highlighted the direct and indirect awareness and influence of the hegemonic, working-class masculinity ubiquitous at ACS. For the Participants (in much the same way as the Performers) therefore, the opportunity to become metaphorically and literally isolated from the expectations of hegemonic masculinity with like-mined social groups in year 7, 8 and 9 and the formal allocated of academic banding groups meant that Participants could be free (in lesson time least) from the external pressure of needing to be a 'proper' working-class lad.

From a figurational perspective, there was evidence that the 'traditional' working-class culture still present in Ayrefield had led all lads attending ACS to develop a common habitus as a result of similar experiences with their peers brought up in and around the local area. This 'automatic blindly functioning' outcome of social learning (Elias 2000, 368) that grows out of the common language which the individual shares with others' (Elias 1987, 182) meant that (to lesser and greater degrees) the lads that attended ACS were well aware of, and influenced by, the social expectations of what it is to be a 'proper' working-class male – including the ubiquity of an ever present hegemonic form of masculinity that also impacted on the lads lives. However, a key finding of the paper when examined through the work of Norbert Elias, was the acknowledgement that a person's habitus is 'affected by his changing relations with others throughout his life' (Elias 1994, 455) which vary as the structure of a society varies (Elias 1994, 2000).

In this regard, the school banding system at ACS evidently built upon the emergence of informal social groups that first emerged in KS3 as result of perceived and actual types of behaviour and academic and then created more formal school-based figurations in Y10 as part of the assignment of pupils to isolated, attainment-based groupings. As a result, these

groups of 'mutually orientated and dependent people (Elias 2000, 316) came to evolve into school-based figurations that were made up of increasingly diverse and wide- ranging groups (staff, college tutors, peers, friends, family) that involved multi-polar relationships between a range of interdependent people in a variety of different ways' (Dunning and Hughes 2012, 67). Not only did this mean that lads in the three distinct groups become part of different social relationships as part of their school-based figurations, but that they were influenced by the differing pressures and power relationships that these created. Put simply, because figurations are not 'timeless static states' (Elias 1978, 112) the lads involved in their specific school-based figuration at ACS became interdependent with a much greater range and number of different people (Goodwin and O'Connor 2006). This not only meant that these school-based figurations became longer and more complex over time (Elias 1978; Goudsblom and Mennell 1998), but more importantly, the outcomes related to these increasingly varied relationships became 'much more opaque' and, therefore, more difficult to control (Elias 1978, 68). As a result, the isolated, classroom environment of the school banding system at ACS that involves very different relationship and pressures led to the lads in their respective groups acting in a way within their school-based figurations that they would not 'except under compulsion from [these] other interdependent people' (Elias 1978, 94).

Conclusion

Ultimately, therefore, despite the fact that the academic banding system in KS4 at ACS appeared to help generate, perpetuate, and accentuate the self-fulfilling expectations of specific male pupils at ACS, the banding system also appeared to provide these pupils with a largely positive opportunity to achieve their own academic aspirations within a temporarily isolated environment. Problematic lads were able to maintain much of their 'natural' behaviours with little academic expectation imposed on them in order to progress towards trade-based college courses. Performers were provided with an environment that promoted and facilitated more formal academic success, free from the range of pressures often imposed on them in other areas of their lives, and the Participants seemingly enjoyed the isolation from both social and academic pressure to achieve the goal of achieving sufficient qualification to progress into further education. Put simply, in all three school-based figurations, all those involved were pulling in the same direction to promote 'success' but in distinctly different ways in order to reach rather different destinations.

Notes

1. A 'typical' case is one that epitomizes, and therefore comes to represent, a much broader range of cases (Bryman 2012).
2. White people is a racial classification specifier, used mostly and often exclusively for people of European descent; depending on context, nationality, and point of view. In this case it refers almost entirely to White British members of the population.
3. A geographic hierarchy designed to report statistics for small, specific areas of the UK (typically involving 1500 people).

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