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STEPPING-UP? THE EFFECTS OF AN INTERVENTION PROGRAMME ON WHITE WORKING-CLASS BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT IN A STATE SECONDARY SCHOOL IN THE NORTH OF ENGLAND

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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Abstract

This research investigates the experiences of ten white working-class boys, at a comprehensive school in the north of England. It mobilises Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, cultural capital and symbolic violence to consider the consequences of their participation in Step-Up, an intervention entailing withdrawal from multiple GCSE subjects to undertake an alternative curriculum of modular learning on a variety of personal, social, citizenship and health topics. The research seeks to both tell the individual stories of the ten participants and contribute to our understanding of working-class boys' achievement.

Bourdieu's ideas of habitus, cultural capital and symbolic violence are used to understand how Step-Up was experienced by the participants. Students were interviewed three times over the course of the study. The data suggests that the field of school was a difficult one for them to navigate and their changing expectations, sense of identity and future options were negatively affected by their school experience, both directly and indirectly by the intervention. In Year-9, the boys were viewed as a collective group by many others in the school, and although initially excited about the intervention they displayed feelings of personal isolation. An egalitarian habitus began to emerge in Year-10 as the boys began to consider what were the best and worst-case scenarios within the limits of the possibilitises they felt were open to them, until the emergence of a habitus clivé which was experienced individually in Year-11. The shifts and changes which occurred over the three years of this longitudinal research showed that the boys' emerging understanding of class was felt in some collective ways. However, as they came towards the end of their compulsory schooling, the boys felt the symbolic violence of Step-Up alienated and disadvantaged them in deeply personal ways. Step-Up inadvertently affected the boys' performance in Maths and English negatively. Surprisingly, there was a divergence between the boys' collective identity as the intervention continued. Ultimately, the participants felt isolated and lost within the field of school in disparate and individual ways.

Acknowledgements

This doctorate required dedication, commitment, hard work and resilience. I would like to personally thank Professor Robin Simmons for his expertise, guidance, support, good humour and friendship. You kept me on track, always gave of your time and knew the encouragement needed when I was struggling to see a way forward. Thank you.

I am immensely grateful to the students whose experiences of Step-Up are detailed in this research. They brought individual views that were sometimes difficult, tragic, inspiring, humorous and angry; but they were always honest and true to their own lived experience.

For my late loving father, Trevor. As a working-class lad yourself, you always valued education and instilled in me the desire to keep on learning, whilst doing so to help others as the primary goal. I cannot repay you for what you have selflessly done for me, but I know that completing this doctorate would have made you proud. I'm proud of you and eternally thankful to you for being my Dad.

To my loving mother Beverley, my twin brother Michael and my sister Trish, thank you.

To my loving wife Suzie, who deserves gratitude and immense thanks for her patience, encouragement, cancelled holidays and enduring my successes and frustrations in completing this research. Suzie, we've been through so much together and we continue to push each other on to do and be more. You've been there throughout every moment of this doctorate journey. Thank you. Thank you also to our pups Molly, Mitch and Poppy for reminding me that joy is a daily occurrence; I am deeply grateful for you all.

For Dad and Molly
x

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RESEARCH AIMS:

1) To identify why white working-class boys underachieve at Hillside High School.
2) To identify if and where inequalities affecting the achievement of white working-class boys are present in school practice.
3) To critically assess a specific school-based intervention intended to raise the attainment and achievement of white working-class boys.
4) To contribute to theoretical conceptualisations of white working-class boys' achievement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

RQ1) What is the current pattern of achievement of white working-class boys in the school compared to other students?

RQ2) To what extent do white working-class boys' conceptualisations and ideas about social class affect their achievement?

RQ3) Do the white white working-class boys in Step-Up share characteristics that influence their achievement?

RQ4) What are the effects of Step-Up (an intervention in which white working-class boys happened to be over-represented)?

RQ5) To what extent can school-based initiatives meet policymakers' expectations about raising the attainment of white working-class boys'?

RQ6) How might initiatives, which aim to raise white working-class boys' achievement, be designed so that they are effective?

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

At the time this study was carried out the school examination system differed to the current one (2021) in various ways. The GCSE grading system was A*-G, many subjects still retained a coursework element and school accountability measures were based on attainment and achievement, often referred to as *progress*. With this in mind, there was still a value in helping as many students as possible over the 'attainment line' into grade C or above in English and Maths; both for school accountability measures and to help each student to have a greater range of options at the age of sixteen. In this sense, the system of measuring schools' effectiveness and success could be seen as mutually beneficial to both students and schools. The current accountability system is based on achievement progression.[1] At the time the research took place schools could propose that particular students would be examined in fewer subjects to give them a greater chance of gaining the grade C attainment threshold in English and Maths.[2]

Hillside High[3], the school I worked in at the time of this study, faced difficulties with particular sub-groups of students. I was employed as a Deputy Headteacher and the performance of white

[1] This is measured from the starting point of Year 6 SATS tests, much of which is teacher assessment, to GCSE performance in a suite of approved 8 subjects. Arguably, the current system is less mutually beneficial to both an individual and a specific school, as a students' options at post-16 are still judged on attainment (whether students have gained at least a grade 4 in English, Maths and three other subjects) whilst a schools' performance is largely based on the rates of progression of 8 subjects, referred to as a school's P8 score. There is a double-weighting for English and Maths which might encourage some schools to withdraw students from optional GCSE subject to focus on English and Maths, but this is approach has significantly reduced under the current system, as every student who is certificating in less than 8 subjects counts as a grade zero on a school's figures. Therefore, schools are now incentivised to enter students for more examination subjects, not fewer.

[2] A common way to consider schools' performance at this point was to refer to the percentage of students who have gained 5 A*-C grades, including English and Maths. It could therefore be argued that what is right for an individual student potentially becomes a secondary consideration. Ultimately the number of students who achieve on or above their target grades and progression rates into post-16 education, employment and training still constitute the majority of a school's Ofsted judgement. Ofsted do consider the quality of education (meaning both the breadth/depth of the offer given to students and the appropriate challenge within lessons) as a major driver in school gradings, but this principally would be informed by whether such pedagogy and school organisation yields the appropriate results for individual students and specific cohorts which are tracked as being of key importance. Potentially then any consideration of the quality of pedagogy in the classroom is secondary to exam outcomes.

[3] Pseudonym for the school in which the research was carried out.

working-class boys was significantly below every other sub-group in the school. This was emphasised by the fact that the school had a 42% intake of students described on the census as being of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi heritage and generally Asian students performed better than their white counterparts. Within the sub-group of white working-class boys there were 23 students who were deemed to be at risk of potential permanent exclusion. The school struggled to engage this cohort and many had failed 'managed move' trials at other schools. Nine of these students did not start at the school in Year-7, like most pupils, but had been placed at the school after being excluded from another institution.

The school had been judged as having capacity to take extra students; due to four portacabin classrooms being repaired. The PAN (pupil admission number) had been raised to include up to 15 additional students in each year group. This meant that pupils excluded from other schools could be placed immediately at Hillside High, or after an appeal hearing panel. Placement panel meetings often took place during school holidays when it was not feasible to ask the Assistant Headteacher responsible for admissions to attend.

This study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of a selection of white working-class boys who were placed in a particular intervention called Step-Up. Step-Up reduced the number of GCSEs participants sat, allowing them to complete certificated skill modules and Personal Social Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE) topics deemed more relevant to their post-16 destinations. There was also tacit understanding that modules on behaviour and responsibility might help address a range of social and cultural deficits related to the boys' home lives.

The boys' difficulties within mainstream education were labelled as deriving from a lack of respect, poor parenting and a desire to rebel against an institution that sees itself as offering them life chances. Step-Up was then presented as beneficial because it reduced the number of subjects being

studied and focused time on securing Maths and English. It arguably also benefitted other students by reducing disruption and behavioural issues in many classrooms. Consequently, most teachers were broadly in favour of the withdrawal of the ten boys, who took part in this study.

The participants in this research were selected from the 23 boys taking part in Step-Up. Some parents would not give consent for their sons to take part in the study. There were 6 girls in Step-Up, but they were there for different reasons, due to absence and mental health concerns. Others did not respond to the request for permission. From the 13 students who gave individual and parental permission I selected 10 boys, the other 3 students had additional learning needs that meant they would have further Special Educational Needs input when not in the Unit. Being selected for Step-Up acknowledged their weak performance in academic subjects and it was hoped that by taking part in this programme these boys could attain highly enough to have some post-16 choices available to them.

The national picture of post-16 education has shifted significantly over the twenty years I have been a teacher. At the time of the study, a local sixth-form college had launched several new alternatives to A-Levels and had notable success in recruitment. This was, in part, a response to a reduction in local apprenticeship programmes. I recall interviewing Terence (participant 6) when he was in Year-11, about preferred post-16 destinations and he said he wanted to apply for a plumbing apprenticeship. He also said he had a relative who could offer him the two days per week employment placement and that he needed to find the three-day college education place. I was shocked to see that only nineteen places existed for apprentice plumbers for school leavers from twenty-three secondary schools across the local authority. However, by the time the boys reached

Year-11, the majority of the boys were looking at immediate employment or BTEC level 2 or 3 courses.[4]

When they were initially selected for Step-Up, most of the boys who participated in this research did not express particularly strong opinions about post-16 options. Perhaps anything was preferable to permanent exclusion, or even than continuing with the mainstream curriculum? However, the school's decision to run Step-Up was also made because the school was under financial strain and unable to repay the AWPU (the amount paid to the school per pupil), along with a financial penalty, if a student was permanently excluded.

There are numerous ways in which these boys' perceived educational failure could be explained. It could, for example, be:

- conceptualised as a learned disinterest borne of not achieving or succeeding in the past;
- viewed as a deliberate disconnection from perceived opportunities within the changing labour market; where the employment opportunities on offer simply do not appear worth the effort;
- seen that a malaise in the attitudes of boys is because they want something for nothing;
- that the boys were displaying what agency they could in choosing to not 'play the game' of education;
- due to an act of symbolic violence on a vulnerable group, struggling to find its own semantic space of identity.

However educational failure is understood, it is important to remember that whilst the underachievement of white working-class boys may be seen as a collective failure, it is often felt in a

[4] Two particularly popular post-16 choices throughout the study were BTEC awards in *Computer Games Design* and *Uniformed Public Services*; these were offered by local Colleges.

deeply personal way. When students are subject to various interventions in schools, the focus is largely on improving their attainment or reducing the number of subjects they will study so that they will supposedly have a higher chance of success in the remaining subjects. However, in my experience, the focus has never been based on a critical consideration of the experiences of students who undergo them.

Hillside High: Context and Practice, Background and Purpose

Hillside High is a larger than average 11-16 school with a traditional subject-based curriculum, low-staff turnover and an increasingly 'disadvantaged' intake. At the time, 34% of students came from ethnic minority backgrounds, mainly of Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage. The rest of the school population was white, with the majority broadly identifiable as working class. Over time, the school had seen a significant drop in the achievement of white working-class boys in particular. The school's involvement in this cohort's pastoral issues had become wide-ranging and complex, whereas previously students who displayed challenging behaviours were moved to alternative provisions or excluded outright. This led to the school attempting to resolve behaviour issues that had occurred at the weekends, evenings and in the school holidays; such as senior colleagues joining the Neighbourhood Community Police patrols to providing evening activities for targeted groups of students. Such actions arguably contained some problems but did not resolve them. Consequently, a group of underachieving white working-class boys emerged as displaying anti-social and challenging behaviours, who were all potentially on the brink of permanent exclusion. The school could not afford the local authority fine and funding charge that came with such exclusions. Under this climate the school sought to identify a pathway for students who were at risk of permanent exclusion. Step-Up was not an intervention solely designed for white working-class boys; it just so happened that the Step-Up cohort consisted mainly of white working-class boys.

Step-Up was designed to raise achievement for these students and to ensure that they had viable options at the end of their period of compulsory schooling.[5]

Education, Disadvantage and White Working-Class Boys

Successive governments have tended to see the underachievement of white working-class pupils in simplistic binary terms. Various initiatives have been launched to address underperforming cohorts with short and medium-term plans to tackle it. It would be highly controversial to racialise this in term of 'whiteness', this is perhaps why the 'pupil premium' was launched which does tend to cover white working-class pupils as well as others in lower socio-economic groups. Specific funding is given to schools as a pupil premium; this money had to be carefully accounted for and reported on at every level of governance, with regularly funding reviews having to be continuously available on a school's website. This money differs from additional needs funding for statemented children where individual parents can direct how the money is spent. With schools receiving a specific amount of money they were then charged with spending it so that it had an impact on the achievement of these pupils; schools had to itemise the spending of these funds and demonstrate impact.

The dominant discourse is that a student in receipt of the pupil premium is 'disadvantaged' and more likely to be 'working class'. However, the idea of disadvantaged students does not necessarily equate with social class, as a number of criteria are used to determine which students receive funding. One of them is the EVER 6 model, where if free school meals have been claimed within the last six years then extra funding is available for that student. One of the main judgements of a school's effectiveness continues to be the reducing of the gap between the achievement of

[5] Other small cohorts were also involved in Step-Up after it was set up. Their involvement was decided on an individual basis. This included boys and girls of Black and Asian backgrounds. By the far the largest group in Step-Up was white working-class boys though.

disadvantaged students, compared with the achievement of other students. It cannot be a surprise to see that in most schools there is a sizeable gap. Social class could be seen as notably absent from discussions in schools 'disadvantaged student funding'. The intention is for schools to remedy differences in attainment for pupils from different backgrounds.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) attest that "the most hidden and most specific function of the educational system consists in hiding its objective function, that is, masking the objective truth of its relationship to the structure of class relations" (p. 208). This suggests that there is a wilful misrepresentation of how the field of school operates and its wider implications. Meanwhile, Reay (2006) suggests that "classrooms are routinely presented as classless" (p.290). In this sense, it could be argued that social class has never been adequately defined or understood by schools or successive governments. The prominence of a national policy discourse of the forgotten white working class, notably a racialised group rather than a socially-disadvantaged one, has not been entirely welcomed. The Education Committee Report (2014) paraphrases the ASCL's (Association of School and College Leaders) argument that a focus on white working-class children "could lead to other groups falling back in turn" (p.11). This is perhaps a moot point, as it implies that there should be focus on all groups all of the time. The ASCL argues that decisions about which groups of students receive interventions must be made at a local level to "strike a balance in their particular area" (p.11-12). But devolving such matters to schools ignores the structural roots of inequality. It could be that, a discussion about the disadvantaged, and logically the advantaged, is too simplistic. Little is ever said about the 'advantaged', arguably because this might mean greater redistribution of resources. Perhaps a paradox exists here, as middle-class children may fear falling behind those with access to "greater cultural and social capital" or not matching or exceeding the educational aspirations of their parents (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013, p.29).[6] The entire concept of class is rooted in recognition and membership, whether applied or denied. It is necessary to consider whether the

[6] Also see Ball and Vincent's (2006) analysis of middle-class children and parenting (p.97-98).

social networks students belong to are “endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed” (Bourdieu, 1997, p.51). Within institutions social capital may be recognised as a “kind of credit upon which individuals can draw” (Moore, 2004, p.85).

Interventions take many forms in schools. From extra scheduled classes to after-school catch-up sessions. Due to the significance of students gaining the threshold grade of C, (now grade 4), in GCSE English and Maths, many schools operated a policy of student withdrawal from subjects where performance was low. This has now been legislated against by the introduction of ‘Progress 8’, a measure where a school is penalised if every student does not sit eight GCSEs. At the time of this study though, the withdrawal of students from optional subjects, such as languages, humanities and the arts, was commonplace.

Interventions are essentially a form of compensatory education inasmuch as they acknowledge or imply that some failure has occurred or a deficit exists. This is a simple reading perhaps, but many interventions are repetitions of material or skills that were meant to be secured in curriculum time. Other issues with interventions are the personal consequences for a student labelled as substandard. Paradoxically, schools often take actions in order that it can be seen that they have tried to do something about the underachievement evident in the school. The intervention therefore becomes not just specific help for particular students, but also a way to show that the school has attempted to address deficits, whether real or imagined.

Such interventions had not however yielded a rise in outcomes over the last three cohorts at Hillside High and Key Stage 3 progression rates for white working-class boys were the lowest in the school across all three core subjects. Preston (2003), in his ethnographic study in a further education college, assesses how a particular institution’s activities “selectively accommodate cultural forms of resistance employed by working-class vocational students” (p.6). Perhaps this was true of Step-Up,

as it meant engaging in fewer academic subjects and spending more time on modules of work that were less demanding and potentially therapeutic. There are long-standing debates about the value of well-being and therapeutic education in learning (see Eccleston and Hayes 2009 and Hyland 2011).[7] At Hillside High it was common to find students of all abilities and backgrounds in intervention programmes. Many interventions were opportunities to practise and reinforce academic subject skills. The interventions, that included the majority of white working-class boys, were either based on the completion of 'mini-qualifications' that could count in school league tables, such as BTEC awards in Sport, or they were designed to rectify certain behaviours and attitudes deemed socially and educationally problematic.

Educational inequality has been predictably reproduced in England's secondary schools. Schools attempt to act on this inequity with various interventions. Critics do not, however, wholly agree on how inequality is reproduced. Bowles and Gintis (1976), for example, see inequalities as deriving primarily from the capitalist economy, whilst McLaren (1989) argues that disadvantage is manifested in students' mindsets; having collective and individual consequences. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) suggest that social and educational reproduction is a complex multi-faceted process consisting of: "cultural habits …and dispositions" (cited by Smyth and McInerney, 2014, p.43). Moore sees "different kinds of education associated with different degrees of status" (2004, p.83). This does not, however, reconcile the position of class within education beyond an agreement that particular types of education are conferred with differing statuses, rendering one as more desirable than another. Calhoun et al. (1993) and Moore (2004) explore how Bourdieu attempts to interrelate class and status. Bourdieu does this by inter-relating the capitals and their reproductive relations through a process he calls *transubstantiation*. Bourdieu (1997) argues that "disguised forms of economic capital" produce effects that are "not entirely reducible to that definition" therefore "they conceal …

[7] Eccleston and Hayes (2009) argue that education should purely be about knowledge and learning and that it is not the place of education to heal or change children's circumstances. Hyland (2011) argues that children cannot learn effectively unless the problems that they face are addressed first.

their root" (p.54). He does this particularly by considering 'disinterestedness' in its many forms; an economic self-interest promotes particular tastes which present the relationship between class and status. The educational process arguably consists of exchanges, albeit the "social and symbolic forms" in addition to, or perhaps because of, monetary economic ones (Moore, 2004, p.84).

Preston (2003) considers that white working-class communities are "accused of possessing too much 'bonding' rather than 'bridging' social capital" (p.10). In other words, they retract within themselves in an insular way. To some extent, this may be seen as a form of resistance which acts as a definition or counter-point to a sense of belonging. Schools have either failed to identify the specific issues that white working-class boys bring to the classroom (such as laddishness, particular aspirations or certain forms of cultural identity), or that they simply cannot compensate for society's inequalities (see Bernstein, 1970). At Hillside High, teachers often talked about how the white working-class boys stuck together, tried to act tough and assumed an oppositional stance so that they could hold some power. This is an oversimplification of a more complex situation, but the idea that a collection of individuals with some identifiable homogeneity, at least between themselves, seek out some agency, even if that agency is a disavowal of the education process, is potentially powerful. But why does this seem to be a white working-class issue? The Education Committee Report (ECR, 2014) discusses the 'immigrant paradigm', whereby it is argued that migrants work harder to succeed because "they have made big efforts to get where they are" (Q324, p.37). The implication here is that the 'indigenous' working class do not try hard enough, but it does not acknowledge either the far-reaching structural changes in the UK economy or the decline in class-consciousness that has taken place over recent decades, especially which once characterised working-class life.

A confusing discourse surrounds the impact schools can be expected to make on outcomes and life chances for white working-class children. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation attests that "14% of the incidence of low achievement is attributable to school quality" (ECR, 2014, p.32), which suggests

that the majority of it is not. Such agencies come to this conclusion based on positivist principles, for example 'if funding was used in the right way then there would be educational and achievement equality' (see Barber, 2011). Teachers may feel that it is easier to lay the blame at the door of lesson quality and, in my experience, the impact of an individual teacher on the educational outcomes can sometimes be transformational. An Institute for Public Policy Research Report (2012) found that "about 20 per cent of variability in a pupil's achievement is attributable to school-level factors, with around 80 per cent attributable to pupil-level factors" (IPPR p.4). The euphemistic language of 'pupil-level factors' is unhelpful. The phrase could almost suggest that an individual student has agency over the broader societal factors that affect them. There are few answers available to schools. The illusion that achievement becomes dependent on which school you attend disavows the systematically structured nature of opportunity and inequality. Ofsted has argued that schools "can do much to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils but only so much" (Ofsted evidence given to ECR, 2014, p.32). However, it also states that it is harder for a school to be judged good or outstanding "where the achievement of disadvantaged pupils is below that of other pupils" (Ofsted, 2014, ECR, p.40). The focus on the underachievement of disadvantaged students, specifically those who attract pupil premium funding is perhaps too simplistic. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, however, reports that "nearly two-thirds of students not getting English and Maths GCSE grades at grades A*-C are ineligible for the pupil premium" (SMCPC 2013, p.22). This is significant as it suggests that the specific groups that policy makers have focused on are not the ones that necessarily suffer from educational underachievement, or there are other forms of disadvantage that are not covered by the pupil premium.

For Bourdieu, knowledge is always constructed "through the habitus" and our interpretations, attitudes and values towards things are due to the disposition of our "cultural trajectories" (Webb et al., 2014, p.38). Reay (2004b) suggests that habitus can also be conceptions of self, family and class.

It is therefore "a multi-layered concept, with more general notions of habitus at the level of society and more complex, differentiated notions at the level of the individual" (p.434).

Whilst labelling a student's 'class' may appear innocuous, along with 'white', 'poor' or 'apathetic', I am interested in the dangers, traps, problems and emancipatory possibilities such labels present. Essentially, such labels could be seen as acts of symbolic violence, as schools attempt to remove students' perceived disadvantage, they are utilising ideological labels in an attempt to equalise achievement. The current target-driven culture has been seen as casting teachers as facilitators of a government agenda where a remedy to underachievement exists and can be administered (see Barber, 2011). Within this, schools are encouraged to adopt an 'improvement culture' based on student voice; but asking students to direct activities is arguably flawed as the problems that lie behind educational achievement are deep-rooted, complex and extend into broader social inequalities. If schools are to provide opportunities for all students to achieve well then teachers must have an understanding of social class and how schools may be reinforcing the symbolic violence prevalent in the demonisation of the working class.[8]

[8] (see Jones' polemic, 2012)

BACKGROUND

National Context and Discourse Concerning White Working-Class Boys

The educational achievement of students receiving the pupil premium, which disproportionately includes white working-class boys, has now been identified as a measure of a school's effectiveness (ECR, 2014). Dominant discourse suggests that the social and economic changes which have taken place since the 1980s mean that white working-class communities have somehow been left behind and disproportionately affected by the loss of traditional industries (SPERI, 2018). The economic changes were framed as neoliberal market forces which could be seen as disenfranchising and marginalising these working-class communities. This led to a steep economic decline in specific towns and cities and arguably a crisis of definition in what it meant to be working class (see IPPR, 2012).

Arguably, 'working-class' is a now a moniker to be disavowed and defined against rather than be defined with. Such change in communities and in how people identify themselves have sometimes been presented as a natural or organic response to social change (see Bourdieu, 1986). Arguably, three particular circumstances allowed far-reaching social and economic restructuring to be recast as natural and organic rather than as act of symbolic violence or class warfare (see Chomsky, 1995). Firstly, the population has changed over time inasmuch as the working class used to be predominantly white, whereas Britain is now a much more multicultural society. Secondly, market forces have dictated that the working class in traditional industrialised communities have been left behind by changes to the labour market, especially by the decline in UK manufacturing (SPERI 2018). Finally, the neoliberal racialised discourse where the white working class have been labelled pejoratively, where particular factions have been problematised by labels such as 'chav', 'white

trash' and 'scum'.[9] In these terms the notion of working-class has become pejorative. It is ironically used as a remote definition that encompasses vulgarity and fecklessness.[10]

In a 2014 Parliamentary Hearing, there was a shift in how underachieving white working-class students were conceptualised. The label 'disadvantaged white children with low aspiration' replaced 'working-class children'. Such a shift would seem to suggest that disadvantage is only as much a problem as an individual student allows it to be. The cementing of this particular phrase occurred in a hearing held on the 'underperformance of white working-class kids' and in the ECR (2014). However, such students' results are still not yet measured separately in school performance data as a particular group, although white working-class boys are disproportionately represented within the pupil premium cohort. In these two documents, the term 'disadvantaged' is used as proxy for those who have claimed free school meals for their children in the last six years (FSM EVER 6).[11]

The reasons for claiming free school meals are, however, multitudinous and are not wholly predicated in terms of how individuals are disadvantaged. For example, a child whose parent(s) struggled financially at some point in the last six years may not be in the same economic circumstances now. The ECR (2014) focuses purely on white children whose parents have claimed FSM. White British children do constitute 64% of the national FSM group though. However, the report claims that using these terms is valid as they are "so highly associated with other characteristics of that status" (p.7). In this sense, the report uses the label 'poverty' interchangeably

[9] See McDowall (2011), where she argues that employment changes have made traditional forms of masculinity redundant. This idea will not be pursued in the thesis but could be a further line of enquiry when considering the educational achievement and school experiences of white working-class boys.
[10] See Mondon and Winter (2019) for a discussion of the racialisation of the working class as 'white' and furthermore characterised as 'left behind' within the modern context of British and American politics. Also, see Gillborn (2010) for a discussion of the intersectional qualities of racial and class inequalities; this is linked to the 2008 global financial crisis which, it is argued, presented an immoral and barbaric underclass as a threat to social and economic order.
[11] Arguably, disadvantage is not simply an economic phenomenon. Whilst different forms of capital could potentially be seen in economic terms, forms of capital also dictate opportunities, interactions and access to resources.

with 'class'; despite the problematic relationship that exists between these two terms. Indeed, according to Government statistics, around 700,000 children are living in poverty but they are not entitled or do not claim free school meals. David Gillborn, in his evidence to the Education Select Committee, states that using FSM as a proxy ignores "huge inequalities in other parts of the system" (ECR, 2014, p.12).

It could be argued that the policy discourse which describes social class solely in economic terms disavows other aspects of class experience. Being working class has repeatedly meant educational disadvantage.[12] However, being working class is arguably not just a particular set of objective circumstances; it is also comprised of an individual's tastes, dispositions, experience of life and the collective cultural discourse with which they feel affiliation and identity. Bourdieu (2002) sees that whilst some of these cultural trajectories are felt as factual and undeniable, many of them are in a constant state of flux; the habitus

> "may be changed by history, that is by new experiences, education, or training (which implies that aspects of what remains unconscious in habitus be made at least partially conscious and explicit)" (p.29).

The reflexivity in how habitus is shaped by the past, present and thoughts about future possibilities means that white working-class boys are in a constant state of flux in judging where they individually fit into their schooling. Stahl (2015a) suggests that white working-class boys are often resentful of discussing class, in order to make its "significance negligible" and to "reify … self-worth" (p.89). Thus, the label working class is nevertheless contestable, as it suggests a cultural homogeneity, whereas arguably individual working-class students are shaped by their own experiences, dispositions and

[12] Whilst the focus on the achievement of the white working-class has emerged as an important one for schools and for the way that the efficacy of a school's work is judged – no 'best practice' documents or guidance have been issued from Ofsted to schools.

viewpoints. Another issue which educational discussions on disadvantage have struggled to resolve is that of self-definition. The Centre for Research in Race and Education (CRRE) reported in 2012/13 that 57% of British adults defined themselves as 'working class', whereas the FSM measure would identify only 15% of students as such. Many think tanks avoid the use of the term 'working class' as it is primarily based on employment distinctions which, some believe, are "outmoded and misleading" (ECR, 2014, p.8).[13]

The national focus on the achievement and attainment of boys has spread to include class. However, Ofsted's former Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw publicly attested that working-class educational underachievement is not a gender issue: "poor, low-income white British girls do very badly" (Wilshaw, 2013, p.4). In fact, the gap between the disadvantaged and others is higher for girls than it is for boys. The underachievement of boys is nevertheless lower in terms of thresholds measures as other groups of boys fare worse than the same group of girls.

Policy Discourse – What Should Schools Do?

Educational discourse has, over time, become increasingly politicised and outcomes are seen in mainly economic terms (see ECR 2014 and CBI 2019, both reports quantify educational efficacy in terms of employment and earnings). Lipman (2004) argues that the political economy of neoliberal education reforms and the cultural politics of race mean that such ideas are strategic. She suggests that such discourses exhibit social control and seek to change students' tastes and dispositions so that they see the value of adopting the taste and dispositions of the middle classes. The links between education policies and economic growth are also explored by Barro (2001) when he attests

[13] It is worth noting here that, according to Ofsted statistics, middle-class boys do not underachieve to the same extent.

that human capital is a concept that incorporates both social capital and economic capital. Bourdieu (1986) sees the capital of education as something more complex:

> It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory (p.242).

He sees the economic capital of educational qualifications as being an "institutionalised" form of cultural capital (p.242). According to Bourdieu, this operates by such qualifications being embodied with prestige due to their perceived economic usefulness to the individual. When opportunities for further education, qualifications or specific routes of employment are dependent on these qualifications then schools are complicit in the status-quo.

With New Labour's 1997 election victory came a promise of putting education at the heart of public policy (Blair, 1997). Arguably, this significantly intensified the performative nature of state education; in order for social change and social justice to be enacted then students would, it was claimed, have to be given the necessary tools to perform academically.

If a deep-rooted pattern of educational underachievement is evident then the Government of the day will likely ear-mark public money to address the issue. Consequently, the resulting impact will need to be measurable and provide an observable fix. Sir Michael Barber[14] has described such an approach as 'performativity'; where a particular philosophy of pedagogical actions are implemented which will predictably improve student outcomes. Whilst some teachers would scorn this, perhaps due to its rejection of how positive classroom relationships can improve educational attainment, it is

[14] (Chief Education Adviser to the DfE in Blair's government, Chief Education Adviser for Pearson Examinations until 2017, now an associate at the Institute for Government.)

central to much education policy. Such 'fix-all' approaches are deemed appropriate to raise the achievement of all cohorts, but they possibly also benefit students who are already successful learners to prepare for stringent and rigid academic examinations.

By identifying the white working class as a 'raced' group the discussion has moved from the educational inequalities of ethnic minorities to a section of the 'indigenous' white British population. It is a very sensitive issue and to specifically proportionate funds to improve the educational outcomes of white students would be politically controversial, even if white working-class students have much in common with groups who have attracted extra school funding. The ECR (2014) states that "it is clear that schools can and do make a dramatic difference to the educational outcomes of poor children" and the expected "increased attention on this group" will benefit white working-class children most of all (p.3). This "increased attention" is not, however, defined, except to say that this group will be considered during inspections when judging the quality of a school's work. Senior leaders I worked with at the time saw this approach as a 'fudge'. The Educational Endowment Foundation (2021) notably suggested that expensive interventions do not have the impact that justifies their cost. It claims that the greatest impact, especially for disadvantaged pupils, comes from the relatively low-cost action of regular feedback. This is deemed low-cost as such actions could be reasonably termed as part of a teacher's normal duties.

Several policy documents have focused on the impact of interventions, especially those that schools undertake outside of the traditional classroom timetable.[15] There are, however, inherent risks in providing particular groups with interventions inasmuch as they can, it is claimed, sometimes "lead to other groups falling back in turn" (ECR, p.11). Schools seem to be on a perpetual journey of intervening for all children to equalise opportunities. However, as Gillborn states, "ethnic minority

[15] See DfE Report (2011) on Parental Engagement and Interventions; see also Ofsted's Report (2009) on the evaluation of National Strategy Intervention Programmes. Additionally, Demie and Lewis' (2014) Lambeth Council Report on Strategies to Raise White Working-Class Pupils' Achievement.

acceleration of performance has not pushed white working-class boys' attainment down" (ECR, 2014, p.10). Although, this viewpoint is contestable as school performance data reports on outcomes that are norm-referenced and have fixed pass rates.[16] According to the 2013 Education Committee, one of the ways schools can raise outcomes for white working-class boys is by "raising the quality of teaching" (Great Teachers, paragraph 154). This is paradoxical as improving the quality of teaching would likely yield higher standards for all rather than disadvantaged students explicitly. This can be problematised as the judgements and grading of teaching in schools are mainly based on student outcomes; therefore, the best teaching is inadvertently based on the needs of the institution to bank higher results. This potential paradox abounds in schools: that higher quality teaching leads to better outcomes.[17]

Paradoxes of Practice and Theories of Reproduction: Social Class in Schools

'White working class' is a composite term incorporating an acknowledgement of both social class and race. Until recently literature has focused on class reproduction or the interaction of class with gender, "whiteness as a racial category is implicit, but rarely commented upon in terms of its interaction with social class" (Preston, 2003, p.6). Preston explains that there is relatively little literature which "examines … how whiteness(es) are implicated in class formation" (p.6). He continues that 'whiteness' is a "continuing, process of racialisation" (p.7). It could then be argued that a particular group is racialised in order to problematise them. Such actions are predicated around the discourse that such groups have various deficits and have failed to grasp the opportunities available to them. This is presented as innocuous, but as Preston identifies there is

[16] This means that outcomes are broadly calculated to match previous years. As it stands in 2020 around a third of all GCSE entries will be below grade 4 (essentially a fail below grade C).
[17] A paradox because if all students received 'high-quality teaching' then, under the current system, a third of all grades would still be below grade 4 / grade C. The only potential difference is that the criteria used to delineate students would be finer and even more subjective.

then little validity in the actions that are taken as the group have been misrecognised or misunderstood. Therefore, actions have consequences that cannot always be predicted.

Schools are under pressure to identify such pupils in order to show they are engaging with dominant political discourse. Schools identify 'disadvantaged' pupils, perhaps due to social difficulties (such as single-parent families) or low income. Smyth and Wrigley (2013) describe poverty as being a "consequence of exploitation and marginalisation" not as a result of "personal or cultural inadequacies" (p.196). They also discuss the cultural, emotional and psychological effects of feeling powerless. The participants within my research certainly reported feelings that displayed crises of identity within the field of school. If such groups are exploited and marginalised by the wider system then it is perhaps understandable why schools and teachers seek to provide therapeutic or compensatory forms of education which the individual students see as more relevant.

In placing students in an intervention group, there must be an acknowledgement that, whilst their individual learning needs differ, there are some homogenous factors within the group, unless it is one-to-one tuition. School interventions designed to target underachievement may include one or a mixture of the following:

- a different pathway of study;
- withdrawal from specific subjects to focus on other subjects as the priority;
- specific after-school sessions on identified topics or exam questions.

One of the main issues which arises here is that white working-class students may underachieve for a complex range of reasons; yet the menu of school-based interventions is narrow and either involves re-teaching content and skills or compensatory forms of education, such as different educational pathways, a reduction in the number of qualifications studied or qualifications that are less challenging and inadvertently limit a student's post-16 options.

Schools may, either by accident or design, meet the expectations of central government policies as they "produce and reproduce class-based inequalities" (Lingard, 2013, p.ix). Smyth and Wrigley (2013) emphasise the term 'reproduction' to explain the harm that schools inflict in their pursuit of equalisation (p.2). This is problematic in that some of the responsibility is levelled at schools which may be paradoxically reinforcing inequality by taking actions which purport to reduce inequality. Perhaps it is wider than this as reproduction largely takes place away from schools. It could be argued that a school is a microcosm of wider society, inasmuch as it is presented as meritocratic (see Collins, 2009).[18] By providing a student with the opportunity to achieve and engage in employment thereafter, education could be seen as a chance that is either taken or not taken, with all the implications of blame if this opportunity is missed. This *zeitgeist* presents society as meritocratic and presumes that inequalities are caused by individual agency. It disavows the fact that inequality and disadvantage are reproduced across generations. Despite these possibilities, education is often presented as a vehicle for social mobility to allow students to attain a better future than their parents (see Sutton Trust 2013).

The idea that a school reproduces class-based inequalities requires careful consideration; it certainly went against the instincts of the Hillside High teachers I spoke to, who saw their actions as benevolent and altruistic. Bourdieu's (1977 and 1984) theory of social reproduction suggests that cultural capital plays a significant role in the links between a family's social class, school's actions and students' educational outcomes. Tzanakis (2011) argues that within Bourdieu's theory "cultural capital is assumed to be one of the central family-based endowments whose social class value impacts … intergenerational educational probabilities unequally" (p.76). Tzanakis argues that if this were true then schools can only do so much. It is important to acknowledge that decisions about the

[18] Collins (2009) argues that schools are not institutions of equal opportunity but mechanisms for perpetuating social inequalities.

curriculum and examination topics are not made by schools; therefore, schools have to deliver specific forms of cultural capital, regardless of whether or not they are of interest or benefit to individual students.

Education, Class and the Purpose of Education: What is Education for?

What it means to be educated is a complex debate. Dewey (1959) welcomes such complexities as a necessary debate: "It would not be a sign of health if such an important social interest as education were not also an arena of struggles, practical and theoretical" (p. v). Brighouse (2006) addresses whether education should produce workers or educate future citizens, finding criticism for those who place the interests of the economy before those of children. Ball (2017) unpicks the tension between the role of education policy to ensure economic productivity and competitiveness, along with debates about worsening social inequality. Halstead and Taylor (1996) take a 'values-driven' approach, tracing how social change and diversity has led to a crisis in the purpose of modern education. If education is to be used as a vehicle for social mobility predicated on economic prosperity then it clearly requires specific skills and knowledge to be held as valuable, whilst others are not. Webb et al. (2014) summarise Bourdieu's overall position on the tensions of the purpose of education as follows:

> is education the most effective mechanism for promoting social change and giving opportunities for less privileged groups to better themselves; or, on the contrary, does it tend to keep in place existing social divisions, and maintain the relative disadvantage of certain groups? (p.106).

Bourdieu believes that education tends to reproduce social divisions, thereby challenging "all interested parties … to make moves within the field that might bring about change" (Webb et

al., 2014, p.107). This suggests that social actors within the educational field either navigate the system skilfully or risk being disadvantaged by it.

In terms of this study, I defined 'white working-class boys' as the group of students in school who were white (in terms of self-definition on the school census), male, classed as 'disadvantaged' in terms of pupil premium funding, with (a) non-degree educated parent(s) and underachieving in core GCSE subjects. These students were all subject to programmes of various subject-led interventions and behaviour programmes. Academic interventions at Hillside High had not yielded a rise in outcomes over the last three cohorts. Similarly, the Key Stage 3 progression rates of white working-class boys were the lowest in the school across all three core subjects. At Hillside High there clearly was a disconnection between what the school was trying to achieve and the actual outcomes of these interventions.

Reay (2006) attests that teachers often don't understand issues around social class conceptually or practically so they cannot skilfully address matters such as white working-class boys' underachievement. In the field of education, class analysis has been "reworked" to consider perceived gulfs in opportunities, relative poverty and disposable family income (Reay, p.289).[19] However, these issues are possibly too enormous and amorphous to expect schools to equalise disadvantage.

Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2014) attest that low achievement can be explained within two concepts:

[19] Reay (2017) in *Miseducation* characterises the educational and social mobility struggles of working-class children as "struggling up ladders, falling down snakes" (p.103).

- "educational disadvantage", defined as "systematic differences in educational experiences or achievement between social groups" that may arise as a consequence of "individual characteristics;
- and "educational disaffection", defined in terms of "visible" and "less visible forms" constituting "subjective and ideological" facets, often "transmitted between generations" (p.168-9).

Disaffection may lead to lower expectations from teachers in an attempt to engage students with learning. This may manifest itself in teachers feeling that the demands on students are too tough, so that an alternative version of learning is offered. Teachers at Hillside High said that many of the participants in this study responded poorly to being pushed and challenged, and so teachers sometimes set them tasks that 'keep them quiet' or allowed them to put less effort in as long as they did not present challenging behaviour.

A significant debate in both research and policy circles is about the extent to which social class influences, constricts or limits individuals, and how can schools can attempt to equalise achievement and opportunity. Research often seeks to understand, whilst policy often seeks to remedy. Reay (2006) refers to social class in schools as a "zombie" and in terms of an "absence presence" (p.290). This attestation is based around schools, in particular teachers, not being fully aware of "cultural struggle" or of how educational practices are aligned with the "normality of the middle classes" (Reay, p.289). However innocently enacted, there seems grounds to suggest that schools could be perpetuating and enacting symbolic violence against particular groups. This can be seen in terms of assessment practices, setting, interventions and resource provision. Arguably, language in itself is a form of domination.[20] Bourdieu (1990b) attests that: "the names which construct social reality as

[20] See Schubert (2008) for a full analysis of how Bourdieu's work may illuminate the suffering enacted by social hierarchies.

much as they express it are the crucial stakes of political struggle" (p.134). He highlights that the language used to describe educational deficits also reinforce those deficits symbolically. This suggests that the specific ways of describing achievement, deficits and actions in schools have potentially significant implications for learner identity.

'Working-Class Boys' in the School Context

Much discourse on schooling working-class children focuses on deficit. Lingard suggests that this leads to the notion that "individual deficits", "family defects" or "community dysfunction" are the causes of working-class underachievement (Lingard, 2013, p.ix). Wilshaw (2013) cites a "poverty of expectation" and "in particular low expectations of others" when discussing how inequalities can be tackled by schools (ECR Report p.29). But if we agree that the education system contributes to state formation and that the value placed on cultural capital within the education process is mediated by other forms of capital, then a simplified explanation that such children should have their expectations raised is too simplistic. One of the main difficulties with a relational approach is that class is a social construction; it draws upon material differences as well as cultural factors. It would not reasonably be expected that schools could equalise or normalise material differences. However, schools arguably have a role to play. Terminal examinations may well dictate the cultural capital, tastes and dispositions that must be promoted by secondary schools; however, schools arguably do not seek to educate a cohort but to educate individuals. To promote specific forms of cultural capital over others, regardless of the experiences and habitus of their students could possibly be seen as an ideological attack on a collective class-consciousness.

Bourdieu (1977) suggests that in the cultural fields of struggle the resources are "cultural capital" and "symbolic profit"; the former being symbolic abilities, tastes and dispositions, the latter being social honour or prestige. (p.178). Arguably, schools are in a difficult position where they follow the

policies and performance measures of the time, which arguably advantage some students over others, whilst promoting equality of opportunity for all so that a value is placed on education. Bourdieu (1990b) suggests that "culture legitimates class by furthering a misrecognition. Symbolic behaviour displays class differences in a recognizable form, but one that diverts attention from their true origins … by making them appear as differences in individual worthiness" (Gartman, 1991, p.426). If the white working-class male participants featured in this research were undergoing symbolic struggles within the field of school then Step-Up was intended to lessen them. The resulting consequences were, however, quite different.

Whatever being or becoming educated is, whatever is being done must arguably be done in "more socially just ways" (Lingard, 2013, p.ix). Becoming educated increasingly means overcoming social division to equalise and normalise the "correlation between social division and academic achievement" (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013, p.1). In this sense, attaining examination grades is given symbolic capital, which is also valued in terms of economic capital, as education is presented as an opportunity to acquire economic capital through aspirational employment. This has led to examination league tables being a major marketing tool for some schools. This is part of the discourse that schools must compete with each other to drive up standards. This competition exists in attracting students and competing for higher examination results.

Some evidence exists that it is predominantly middle-class families that use attainment data when making a school choice (Sutton Trust Report, 2013). Whereas working-class families are more likely to send their children to the local school regardless of perceptions about quality or the other options that may available. Reay and Ball (1997) focus on the "painful accommodations parents have to make …infused by ambivalence, fear and a reluctance to invest too much … where failure is still a common working-class experience" (p.89). This suggests that a lack of working-class parental

engagement in school is an act of resistance due to the predictable patterns of educational failure; the history is essentially haunting the present.[21]

With the Progress 8 measurements schools are now required to enter all students for the full suite of subjects including a Modern Foreign Language and Humanities. But, until recently, "a classed distinction was made between those students capable of taking academic and those capable of taking vocational qualifications" (Preston, 2003, p.11). In some cases, this led to the needs of the institution taking precedence over those of the student. Due to the ways in which schools were measured at the time of the research, some schools were making decisions, such as multiple subject withdrawal, based on attaining favourable outcomes in terms of external school measurements. It could be seen that the way schools were being measured provided a perverse incentive to take some students away from the traditional curriculum. As Hillside High was unable to run a suite of vocational qualifications, due to financial constraints, Step-Up was an attempt to provide an alternative curriculum for specific students who were at risk of permanent exclusion.

Reay advised the government in 2014 that they should offer the "white working-classes subjects they want to learn, introducing a greater degree of choice and voluntarism into the curriculum" to ensure that relevance to real life was clear (ECR, 2014, p.32). It is, however, important to consider what is meant by 'real life'. It could refer to the aspirations and perceived employment opportunities of such children. Wolf, however, refers to such pathway decisions (academic or vocational) as having "strong perverse incentives" which favour a school's accountability measures rather than students or potential employers (ECR, 2014, p.32). The principles of current educational reform likely see education as an opportunity to further Britain's national and international mercantile exchanges. The Government's DfE and FCDO Education Policy (2018) claims that "each additional year of

[21] See Simpson and Simmons (2019) for an analysis of social haunting and the educational inter-generational experiences of Primary school pupils in a former coalmining community.

schooling typically results in a 10% boost in earnings and human capital underpins national growth". Bourdieu (1993), however, argues that the fundamental effect of restricting 'exchange' to its mercantile value denies the self-interestedness and root of economic value within other forms of exchange (p.29). Therefore the purpose of education is perhaps being reduced to economic capital.

The National Union of Teachers' report (2009) '*Opening Locked Doors – Educational Achievement and White Working-class Young People*' argues that the UK economy has witnessed the "end of manufacturing and industrial employment", and that jobs that were the "bedrock of white working-class family life …have vanished" (p.38). This suggests that working-class students do not have the same opportunities of previous generations; instead the opportunities lie in adopting a middle-class habitus so that they can navigate the field of school successfully. Bourdieu (1990a) states that the middle classes "need not engage in rational computation in order to reach goals that best suit their interests" (p.108). Ball et al. (2002) state that those from less-advantaged backgrounds face "doubts, ambivalences, and very deliberate decision making" (p.57). Whilst this statement appears paradoxical, Ball attests that working-class children must make deliberate decisions to navigate the fields of school within the context of individual risk and feelings of isolation. This would appear to characterise a narrative of symbolic violence against those who are unable to navigate the field of school, leading to individually-felt uncertainty and marginalisation. Ball (2016) also argues that the direction of travel of education policy has "harmfully changed the subjective experience of education" and has altered "social connections and power relations to less democratic and caring forms" (p.1). This suggests that the acknowledgement of an individual student's history is admonished in favour of performativity within exams, in an attempt to confer some prestige on individual schools within performance measures. It could be reasonably assumed that those who enter the field of school already disadvantaged are likely to suffer the most.

Gerson and Horowitz (2002) assert that “macro-social trends … provide the starting point for formulating a research problem” (p.201). Hillside High had seen a notable two-year decline in the attainment of students who would be classified as ‘disadvantaged’ compared to others. The achievement of ethnic-minority pupils had, however, remained stable, whereas the results of white boys fell significantly (from 71% 5 A*-C including English and Maths in 2011, 63% in 2012, 58% in 2013 and 51% in 2014). The biggest decline being amongst those classified as disadvantaged (from 58% 5 A*-C including English and Maths in 2011, 49% in 2012, 45% in 2013 and 41% in 2014). The government RAISE document (Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation) included a deprivation indicator which showed that the school’s cohort had changed in socio-economic terms. There were multiple factors at play here: a nearby publicly-funded grammar school was increasingly taking highly-attaining local primary school students; there had been an increase in private schools offering scholarships; and there was a smaller local comprehensive school nearby due to become a ‘through school’ (5-16 years).

Moore (2004) attests that social stratification plays a significant role in determining which pupils attend particular schools and how “schools respond to pupils of different types” (p.111). The nature of schools’ cohorts is, however, increasingly complex and variable. Whilst it may be seen as advantageous to specialise schooling for the highest-achieving students this means other institutions either specialise in schooling lower-achieving pupils or they generalise in teaching the range of abilities. However, the reality at Hillside High was that a small cohort of white working-class boys were not engaging with their education. These boys were judged, by the Headteacher, to require a specific intervention that was deliverable within the financial constraints of the school.

Step-Up

Step-Up was the name assigned to the CERTA Diplomas in Skills for Further Learning and Employment at Hillside High. These qualifications were recognised by the QCA and had some, albeit very low, GCSE point equivalencies. Employers were asked to recognise them as equivalent to other CSE and BTEC qualifications at the same level; however, their labour-market value was contestable as the courses were:

- not well known by employers or colleges;
- not offered by any of the alternative provision routes.

CERTA Diplomas were initially launched in special schools for students who could not access level-2 courses. There were 5 pathways available, from entry level to level-2 (notionally GCSE equivalent). Step-Up students at Hillside High studied modules for the level-1 award.[22]

The level-1 award consisted of several modules, ranging from 'Alcohol Awareness for the Individual' to 'Introduction to Hospitality' and 'Time Management'. It required a minimum input of 383 hours. Some students could progress to the level-2 award if they passed level-1 with a 'distinction' and then completed further modules.

Hillside High began the CERTA Diplomas in September 2013 due to numerous external courses, placements and alternative provision being cut. At the time, the cost of sending a student to an

[22] For context: Entry Level 1 had 438 module courses for the entry level 1 in Skills for Further Learning and Employment. These ranged from 'Skills for Shopping', 'Behaviour in Conflict', 'Customer Service', 'Skills for Lip Reading', 'Volunteering', 'Using E-mail' to 'DJ-ing Skills'. This course required a minimum input of 30 hours. Entry Level 2 had 461 module courses. The courses ranged from 'Budgeting', 'Eating Disorders', 'Hygiene Skills for Hands and Feet' to 'Sex and Relationships Education'. This course required a minimum input of 183 hours. Entry Level 3 had 459 module courses. The courses ranged from 'Accessing Public Transport', 'Assertive Living', 'Introduction to the Leisure Sector' to 'Washing a Car Exterior'. This course required a minimum input of 360 hours.

alternative provision placement was the APWU[23] and a further £10,000 per Year. Such placements also potentially damaged progress scores in school league tables. There had been a practice previously at Hillside High of 'off-rolling' – moving Year-11 students' exam results to Year-10 so that the impact of these transfers could be shared out in following years.[24] The narrative amongst school leaders at that time was to protect the overall school results year-on-year. The tension between what the school provided and did for its students compared to protecting itself in performance tables meant that the needs of the individual learner may well have been in conflict with the school's overall performance. Hillside High settled on Step-Up as a response to alternative pathways closing down and those remaining becoming much more expensive.

Step-Up consisted of particular modules based on the expertise of the programme leader and other tutors responsible for delivering the course. This was largely around functional ICT literacy and vocationally-applied Science, although they were clearly not equivalent to the ICT and Science provision across the rest of the school. Hillside High decided to only enter students for the level-1 award due to the cost of running multiple courses, the logistics of delivery and the belief that students would have a more recognised qualification at level-1 that was not to be confused with GCSE equivalent qualifications. It was expected that a small number of students were likely to be eligible for a level-2 award by the end of Year-11.

The purpose of this offer for these particular students (which included all ten boys who took part in the study) requires some discussion. All students involved in level-1 Step-Up were withdrawn from two GCSE subjects. The ten participants, although having not yet begun Step-Up at the beginning of this study were already partially or wholly removed from all non-core lessons by the beginning of Year-9 and were doing extra English and Maths in the provision known as the 'Unit'. By the end of

[23] Age-Weighted Pupil Unit (the funding received for each pupil).
[24] 'Off-rolling' has come under strict scrutiny from Ofsted since 2019, where such practice is seen as a 'red-flag' in an inspection where the institution's decisions are not in the interests of the individual students concerned.

Year-8, six of the ten participants in this research were on reduced timetables, ranging from two afternoon absences to the equivalent of 2.5 days per week by just attending mornings. The time out of school was justified by a requirement that they attend a vocational course at the local college, although in reality they did not go regularly. This arrangement was cancelled when Step-Up began. Many teachers felt that selection criteria for Step-Up was based on attitude rather than academic ability or a particular interest in the modules offered and that it was rewarding bad behaviour.

I did not formally interview staff, but they would often comment on the students and Step-Up in sometimes illuminating ways. The staff included the participants' core-subject teachers, Step-Up teaching staff, the Unit Manager and the Behaviour Support Worker. They offered comments such as:

- "these students get whatever they want" (English teacher);
- "keeping these lot in school and happy seems to be the thing" (Maths teacher);
- "at least they have a chance to finish school doing this [Step-Up]" (French teacher);
- "There's some interesting stuff in these modules, it'll speak to the lads better than doing more academic learning" (Step-Up teacher / ICT teacher);
- "I don't think most staff know how hard these kids have it, a lot of them have home lives that most staff don't know about" (Behaviour Support Worker);
- "It's either Step-Up or bust for some of these lads. I hope that reducing their subjects puts these everyday problems on ice" (Unit Manager).

One of the Step-Up tutors said he felt the course was "providing a flexible approach to learning in small bitesize pieces which were more suited to students' interests". He also stated that "it wouldn't be fair to force students to do certain GCSEs where they have already missed so much from being removed, excluded or poor attendance". Harvey (participant 3) stated that he:

> "enjoyed Step-Up 'cos it means that I can pick some stuff that I like, but I know I won't have a big exam at the end".

Whilst Sam (participant 9) stated that Step-Up was:

> "easy to do alright and there's no pressure with the folders of stuff … I'd hate doing two more GCSEs, it would be too much and I wouldn't go".[25]

Expecting less or expecting different things of particular students in order to engage them is not a new idea, but the feeling that students had already missed too much to catch up perhaps made such a pathway inevitable; especially when the subject content had left these students behind. The Unit Manager, where Step-Up was taught, reported that:

> "Whilst it often gets difficult and tricky down here, I keep telling myself that having some of our kids down here with us means that they're not knackering things for the other kids who want to work. I regularly get called to remove some of my lot in the first 10 minutes of the class. I sometimes feel like they push a teacher's buttons on purpose. We're really trying to not have it feel like being down in the Unit means that they don't have to work or that is the easy option."

He was reporting on removals from the GCSE lessons which students attended in the main school. The Unit Manager and the rest of the Step-Up staff saw this as problematic and felt that a further dividing line was being drawn between the main school and the Step-Up cohort.

A particular standpoint here could be that treating students equally doesn't help, but treating students equitably gives an opportunity to at least address some of the symptoms of disadvantage. Arguably studying 10-12 GCSEs when a student's basic Maths and English are poor, their behaviour is

[25] A full biography of each participant, with pseudonyms, is given at the beginning of the Data Analysis section.

disruptive, their academic ability is limited, or significant periods of absence have occurred, is problematic. However, Step-Up was arguably problematic in a different sense. Although the range of Level-1 modules selected, such as 'data handling', 'environmental science', 'building a website' and 'Writing a CV' could be seen as providing skills that might not be taught within a traditional school curriculum, the majority of them were based around life skills and awareness that might normally be provided by life experience or parental conversations, 'budgeting' and 'self-hygiene' for example. The Unit Manager was concerned that such modules would be seen as patronising and irrelevant by the Step-Up students but it could be argued that the simplicity of the modules would ensure that students would be able to complete them and they might see the completion as some kind of success.

The function of a school intervention is, at least officially, to help a student or cohort where underachievement is evident. By putting resources into such interventions, the aim is to address identified gaps in learning in a time-limited way so that the intervention's effectiveness can be judged. Arguably, Step-Up lies outside of these parameters as the students had to persist with the modules or have a further reduced timetable; they could not go back to their full set of mainstream GCSE options. Here Step-Up could be seen as compensatory or therapeutic education that attempted to address some of the students' perceived social deficits. However, by removing then from GCSE subjects, the school could be seen as being complicit in further inequity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Habitus, Capital, Agency and Class

In this research, selected Bourdieusian concepts will be discussed alongside the data, but it is important to note that students' experiences always have a context, both in school and in the wider social world. Bourdieu (1986) sees the social world as "accumulated history" made up of "capital …accumulation and all its effects" (p.241). He sees participants in the social world as agents who attempt to navigate objective and subjective structures that contain "underlying …immanent regularities" (p.241). He attests that 'capital' is a necessary concept to attempt an understanding of the multiplicity of the social world:

> Capital, which in its objectified and embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible (p.241).

Bourdieu suggests that whilst specific facets of capital may be observed in the social world, its ability to expand and reproduce ensures that many of its inequalities lie hidden or are seen as the naturally occurring order of things. Bourdieu takes this further by suggesting that whilst forms of capital may be traduced to the purely economic, it is also presented in "immaterial form" within cultural capital and social capital (p.241). Bourdieu sees cultural capital existing in three forms:

- the embodied state (long lasting dispositions of the mind and body);
- the objectified state (cultural goods);

- the institutionalised state (objectification conferring original properties on the cultural capital it is presumed to guarantee) (p.242).

Bourdieu's work offers a framework in which some of the processes that affect the lives of white working-class boys can be understood. Firstly, the Step-Up students were selected for the programme in an attempt to maximise their grades in a smaller number of academic subjects and to provide some vocational and PSHCE learning to equip them for adult life; it is important to note that whilst the students selected for Step-Up shared some characteristics, such as behavioural issues, a lack of motivation and a disinterestedness in much of their learning; the participants in this research (white working-class boys) shared other characteristics, such as being close to permanent exclusion, being from single-parent homes and experiencing significant educational underachievement. However, it is notable that whilst the concept of being 'white working class' may suggest some homogeneity – or a collective habitus surrounding a recognisable "accumulated history", their experience of Step-Up was not a collective one. Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital, habitus and symbolic violence were selected to attempt to illuminate the experiences of these participants and to look for manifestations of the theory in the lived experience of these boys.

Bourdieu terms the embodiment of cultural capital as habitus. Habitus is a multi-faceted concept which incorporates not just the ways in which individuals develop attitudes and dispositions, but also how they engage in practices. The concept of habitus was also Bourdieu's attempt at resolving the relationship between structure and agency (Moore, 2004, p.83). It can be understood as "the historical and cultural production of individual practices …and …the individual production of practices" (Webb et al., 2014, p.15). Habitus has been criticised by De Certeau (1984) as a "prison house" where the term is often mobilised in an axiomatic way to describe taste and dominant ideologies that maintain power. Habitus can be seen as an individual or group disposition, but it is

problematised by its non-mechanical response to the rules of the field; therefore, if we see habitus as partially negotiated through face-to-face interactions, then an individual's habitus cannot be homogenised to a particular social group. Webb et al. (2014) suggest that practices "cannot be understood simply in terms of the narratives, rules, values, discourses and ideologies of a field" (objectivity) nor "in terms of individual un-contextualised decision-making" (subjectivity) (p.58). In this sense, habitus is constructed from "inclinations, values and rationales acquired from various formative contexts, such as the family, the education system, or class contexts" (p.58). Habitus may exhibit itself in body language, dispositions and attitudes, but it is much more complex than observable manifestations.

There is interplay here between habitus and aspirations. Schools are charged with raising the aspirations of students. Aspirations are essentially a judgement of the social or economic position surrounding someone with an estimation of where they could be in the future. Such attitudes and behaviours may not be conscious and could "leave unjust social relationships unchallenged" (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013, p.26). Bourdieu (1989) suggests that the collective habitus of groups can also be expressed through "innumerable mundane practices" such as habits, attitudes to learning, and punctuality (p.115). It would, however, be reductive to suggest that the habitus of white working-class boys is impoverished as it has little reference to a subjective personalised history. This is because although habitus-driven behaviours and responses may not operate with a "strategic intention" in the field, what they do has "more meaning than they realise" (p.115).

De Certeau (1984) sees this as a "cleverness which does not recognise itself" (p.56). Sayer (2005), however, insists that "our habitus can be modified" (cited by Smyth and Wrigley, 2013 p.27). This is a challenge to a fatalistic attitude of the "unconscious nature of habitus" (p.27). Sayer sees Bourdieu's attestation that social actors adapt their habitus to circumstances as an exaggeration of an "actor's compliance with their position" (Sayer, 2005, p.23). The arguable consciousness of

habitus raises questions of inevitability, liberation and resistance. Smyth and Wrigley (2013) term such activity as “shared messages of resistance among peers” (p.199). This raises the question of interplay between habitus and agency; namely, the extent to which individuals are equipped with the ability to understand and control their own actions, regardless of their circumstances. This however disavows that a students’ socio-economic background and family history may directly impact the reflexivity of the habitus.

Reay (2006) cites the 2004 Office of National Statistics report’s findings that, in the UK, the “socio-economic background of students had a high impact on student performance compared with the other 31 countries in the study”, in that disadvantage shaped a student’s achievement to a greater degree than in comparable outcomes, and conversely, socio-economic advantage led more often to high achievement (p.294). However this is interpreted, there is a struggle between what is intended and what occurs. But why is there a debate around a cultural struggle in schools? Simmons, Thompson and Russell (2014) summarise Bourdieu’s idea that the:

> function of the education system is to reward those whose habitus, and with it their accumulations of social and cultural capital, are best adapted to the dominant culture of the field, whilst convincing others that their exclusion from this culture is both legitimate and a matter of no great regret (p.11).

Bourdieu’s (1997) ideas around habitus, field and symbolic violence enacted within the field have gained prominence partly as a connection between theory and practice, although this is not the way Bourdieu views his theories. Bourdieu’s theories of capital are divided into the economic, cultural, social and symbolic. A lack of cultural capital means an inhibited ability to be “self-reflexive”,

understand “social rules and regulations” and an “ability to negotiate conditions and contexts” (Webb et al., 2014, p.57).

However, Smyth and Wrigley (2013) suggest that Bourdieu’s ideas can be applied to unequal exchanges of capital occurring regularly in the lives of working class children in schools. They use Bourdieu’s idea to attest that school inequalities are predicated by the “knowledge, discourse and behavioural style of children from higher-status families” and that “the lifestyle and knowledge and interests of lower-status families” are systematically overlooked, misunderstood or denigrated (p.198). Moore applies Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (embodied cultural capital) to the educational context, suggesting it “crucially begins in the home, but is expressed (and endorsed)” in the institutional form of education (Moore, 2004, p.85). As the process of accumulating and mobilising forms of capital is complex and undergoes transubstantiation, I felt it would be revealing to consider how particular views, beliefs and dispositions are regarded and how such subjective experiences and interpretations of the social world are situated.

The ECR (2014) states that a lack of social capital is “more significant than a lack of aspiration” (p.29). This suggests that the cause of white working-class boys’ underachievement potentially lies in an individual’s habits, experience and upbringing, rather than a lack of drive. The committee sees social capital as access to information, knowing the rules of the game enough to navigate the systems of society (Bourdieu, 1989, suggests the term *illusio*) and parental engagement in a child’s education. The NASUWT Report (2014) suggests that working-class families do broadly support the education of their child, but that differences lie in the level of expertise they possess. Whilst Goffman’s (1968) study looked at ‘total institutions’, Smyth and Wrigley (2013) broaden its scope to consider the daily transitions in and out of school as potentially “wearing and conflictual, especially where there is a wide gap between the culture of the school and the customs of the neighbourhood” (p.199). There is a possible conflict here in seeing schools as a service to their community whilst also delivering

education within philosophical and political constraints of what education is and what it should achieve; a struggle between transformation and reproduction. Critics such as Mills (2007), see Bourdieu's ideas about the capitals within the social world as having "transformative potential" rather than just being "reproductive" (p.79). Giroux (1983) believes Bourdieu's work on class and schooling to be an oversimplification of class cultures, whilst Jenkins (2002) sees Bourdieu's ideas as reproductive or even merely descriptive of the issues without agency to directly affect the inequity of educational outcomes for working-class children. Jenkins sees Bourdieu's ideas as a descriptive social universe which:

> ultimately remains one in which things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies (p.91).

However, Mills (2007) sees Bourdieu's ideas on schooling as "constituted by reproductive and transformative traits" which contains the "possibilities for the restructuring of students' habitus" (p.79). This suggests that Bourdieu's ideas, rather than just describing or explaining the processes of educational inequality, might also shape and inform practice so that reproduction is not an endlessly reaffirmed version of the status-quo. Discourse where schools are seen as a field for reproduction of inequalities, is perhaps an over-simplification and implies that schools can simply change their practices so that the reproduction is altered.

Webb et al. (2014) summarise Bourdieu's view that "educational institutions such as schools tend to reproduce existing social relations and inequalities (p.112). They also suggest a "hegemonic view of schooling", where "schools make students believe that the existing social relations are just and natural and in their interests" (p.113). This concept of 'stasis' is not as simple as suggesting that education seeks to protect middle-class ideas, interests, tastes, dispositions and knowledge. Reay

(2006) suggests that 'stasis' is focused on "cultural resources" influencing "engagement with schooling" (p.294). This could mean that the cultural capital of working-class students compounds such disengagement. This might be due to their habitus and embodied cultural capital formed outside of the school. In this sense, the tastes and dispositions of the working classes are subjugated as vulgar or unworthy as they are different to those associated with educational success. Such "cultural analyses" might be considered as areas where schools can focus their attention rather than simplistic and persisting economic understandings (Reay, 2006, p.295). Governmental notions that teaching can remedy such inequality suggests that teachers should try harder to tap into working-class students' potential. This is potentially more palatable than suggesting that the working-class students are failing to emancipate themselves or are not taking the opportunities offered to them in the meritocratic narrative of educational achievement.

The practice within schools, in terms of working-class students' education, suggests that "symmetry between theory and practice is constructed in a way that misrepresents what exists in reality" (Grenfell et al., 1998, p.153). This suggests that what is offered as academic research rarely finds its way into school practice, as those leading educational policy and the examination systems arguably do not engage with the practical realities of the classroom. When it comes to taking actions to ameliorate disadvantage within schools, there is little agreement on how or if it can be achieved.

Whilst academics theorise about the achievement of students belonging to particular social classes, this is not something that manifests itself in the daily practice of teachers. To some degree, the expectations of policy-makers and external accountability measures drive teachers to deliver good examination results and may enforce acts of symbolic violence within the field and more specifically on an individual's habitus. There is a further social class issue here too, as teachers are potentially ill-equipped to prepare working-class students for examinations and employment if they have little

understanding of students' habitus or background. This is further problematised by the potential symbolic violence being enacted by school practices.

Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence is not generally seen as a deliberate action, rather it is an unconscious reinforcement of the expected 'norm'. It is non-physical violence manifested in the power differential between social groups. Bourdieu (1979) presented the framework of symbolic violence as a furthering of Weber's (1920) work on domination and legitimisation of ideologies within society. Bourdieu makes a distinction between the material (or economic) and the symbolic. He sees the understanding of class analysis as much more than an "analysis of economic relations", instead seeing it as simultaneously entailing "an analysis of symbolic relations" (Weininger, 2002, p.122).

Weininger (2002) insists that social actors are distributed across the objective structure which "conditions whether the probability that any particular set of individuals will share the same lifestyle"; such as suggesting that white working-class boys share the same views and experiences of schooling. This would suggest that reproduction of inequality has some certainty within it which could imply that the patterns are predictable and known. However, he argues that Bourdieu (1984) also sees symbolic violence as having inherent risks to individuals:

> the differential possibilities that this structure generates can only give rise to social collectives if individuals are able to construct adequate representations of it … and … the boundaries that divide and unify them (Weininger, 2002, p.163).

This is potentially illuminating. Whilst symbolic violence may be enacted on a particular group, its effects are felt individually. They can only be felt collectively if constructions of it unify those who suffer. In terms of my research, as can be seen in the data analysis section, the participants were seen by others (students in the mainstream, teachers and external agencies) as having some homogeneity, in terms, for example, of their outlooks, backgrounds and attitudes to school. However, whilst the ten boys had some common characteristics the data shows that they increasingly felt isolated and lacked a shared accumulated history with the other participants.

Symbolic violence must always be considered within a context to attempt to understand the power relations that are present. Bourdieu's (1984) conception of the 'field' is a shifting term which encapsulates "social forces and struggles in which agents and institutions attempt to preserve or transform its configuration" (Thompson, 2011, p.17). Contained within this field are potential acts of symbolic violence. This has been seen as a particular attack on working-class culture (see Jones, 2012). Reay's (2006) reference to the "hidden injuries of class" could be seen in terms of ongoing symbolic violence; in that such structures or principles are "enshrined and perpetuated through educational policy" (p.299). They may be replicated in institutions as schools arguably have to be facilitators of educational policy; more broadly schools are seen as one of the dominant institutions that contribute to the values of society. This symbolic violence may be enacted unwittingly through "symbolic systems" such as language or lower expectations (Bourdieu, 1989, p.14). In order for symbolic violence to be seen as a natural occurrence of the way things are, it is necessary that agents do not perceive that they are being treated in an inferior way. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) state that symbolic violence "is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (p.167). Similarly, teachers may enact symbolic violence within their classrooms through the Bourdieusian (1988) concept of illusio where 'the game' of school, in this case threshold measures for school performance, is seen as "worth playing" (p.76). There is considerable focus here on

individuals within the field of school accepting the symbolic violence as normal, just and beyond question.

Step-Up could itself be seen as symbolically violent as it withdrew students from some educational opportunities that the school felt the boys were not valuing or utilising. Symbolic violence could be seen as not just the face-threatening acts that are enacted on individuals or the power relations that lie within the structures within a field, but also as the role that individuals and groups play in their own subordination, seemingly without force or coercion.[26] It could be seen as the natural order of things that specifically identified white working-class boys at Hillside High needed a compensatory form of education for themselves and to free up teachers to provide a higher-quality, more consistent education for other students. However, many of those who were underperforming academically were not removed from the mainstream to join Step-Up. It is important to note that when the boys were selected for Step-Up they saw it themselves as a logical step that might help them to stay in school rather than be permanently excluded, but their view at the start of the intervention was to see Step-Up as a natural extension of support that followed on from their precarious positions in school. It is worth stating that symbolic violence is not the same as deliberate manipulation. Rather it focuses on how individuals come to "internalise these particular forms of perception and appreciation, and thus how symbolic violence is played out in practice" (Connolly and Healy, 2004, p.16).

The research methods in this study captured, through semi-structured interviews, the boys' experiences of Step-Up. A study of this kind could have become too wide if focused on multiple institutions, therefore there was a rationale for focusing on one school. The study's contribution to knowledge was anticipated to be a demonstration of how such ideas can help educators understand

[26] See Connolly and Healy (2004) for a discussion about symbolic violence in the education and career aspirations of young boys in Belfast. Their work on 'attachments to locality' is especially informative.

white working-class boys' experiences of underachievement in this setting. The originality comes from mobilising Bourdieu's theories in this particular school context and setting at this juncture.

Bourdieusian Analysis of Compensatory Forms of Education

School interventions are used in addition to the first-wave teaching in classrooms, either to address gaps in learning or to deepen understanding, knowledge and skills. Some interventions can be categorised as compensatory education, where first-wave teaching in a particular set of qualifications is replaced with alternative learning. However, to implement an intervention based on social class would be highly problematic, rather it is that an intervention may be suited to specific students who are in a precarious situation in their education. Arguably the government's introduction of the pupil premium is such an intervention, where it involves a disproportionate number of white children but it does not specifically racialise the educational improvements the government are seeking. Step-Up happened to disproportionately include a specific demographic of white working-class boys at Hillside High.

It must be noted that large-scale intervention decisions taken by schools may have many different intended and unintended effects on individual students. It must also be remembered that education is shaped not only by academic content and testing but by social interactions. Simmons and Thompson (2011) argue that the learning process must be considered at both the "micro-level" and at the level of "institution or educational system" (p.156). In this sense, the role of a school is fraught with difficulties, as interactions and practices are influenced by learning cultures beyond the school's context and educational outcomes are partly shaped by what happens outside the school gates.

Bourdieu (1993) attests that no amount of formal instruction can compensate for some individual advantages; such as some students being able to navigate the field of school skilfully due to acquiring the naturalistic manifestations that lie beneath the surface of the process of education. Representing such transformations of economic capital into cultural capital naturalises and normalises privilege as common sense. Whether education reproduces the economic relations of society whilst attesting its distance from such relations is the broader question that requires critiquing. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) suggest that "pedagogic conservatism …is the best ally of social and political conservatism" (p.198). In this study, although the participants were not necessarily able to articulate ideas about disadvantage being reproduced by schools, they were conscious of perceived unfairness, 'otherness' or a perceived lack of opportunities. Moore (2014) states that one reason that these issues are so deeply contestable and problematic is because "educational and cultural fields are effective" in that they "reproduce class relations precisely to the degree that they appear to have nothing to do with them" (p.89).

To what extent schools and teachers enable the reproduction of inequalities or such transubstantiation of economic into cultural capital is debatable but if it is not understood then it cannot be addressed. Whilst schools do not possess great autonomy over the curriculum, Step-Up could be seen as an example of some agency, albeit within particular constraints. Additionally, the scope of knowledge and skills examined within the terminal exam system remains fairly narrow even if its depth has increased; therefore, teachers' pedagogical practice is held within expected norms. Bourdieu (1977) defines key agents of cultural and educational fields, such as teachers, as the subordinate faction of a dominant group and suggests they do not see themselves as involved in class reproduction but as producers of truth independent of maintaining class relations and existing economic interests. However, this is not the whole picture because it presumes that social actors understand the complexities of the fields they operate within. Bourdieu does not see developments in educational fields as mediated transformations of the economic field. He sees educational fields

as having much more individual micro-effects on communities and individual students. The concept of cultural struggle may be deemed as outside the sphere of influence of a single school. Schools are aware of the performance gap between pupils from richer and poorer families, but their agency to directly address these complex issues at a local level is limited.

Bourdieu's (1989) work is primarily concerned with the dynamics of power, especially in the ways in which power is transferred and conferred, and social order is maintained within and across generations. Cultural capital is a broad label that encapsulates some of the ways in which the education system reproduces class structures and membership, such as how the identified elite gain and retain cultural advantage. Schools, for their part, "generally value and reward those who exhibit that dominant cultural capital" (McLaren, 1989, p.198). In this sense, schools are culpable in reinforcing forms of working-class capital as inferior or irrelevant; generally referred to as 'misrecognition'. Whilst this might seem inevitable within a system that rewards a specific range of cultural capital, some schools may pursue specific ability-setting processes, where boys who exhibit challenging behaviour move down these ability-sets regardless of ability. In this example the cultural capital of specific students is deemed as inferior and unworthy through symbolic violence.

Smyth and Wrigley (2013) take issue with cultural and economic capitals having equal importance as it is a conscious decision to proffer cultural capital with an economic value in education. This is done by aligning opportunities with success in an examination system that disavows and debases working-class habitus, tastes and dispositions. A problem with seeing education simply as mercantile exchange, which either includes or excludes particular groups or individuals, is that particular forms of social and cultural capital are rewarded whilst others are not, meaning that much of the injustice is hidden.

Moore (2004) summarises Bourdieu's argument that the transformation of economic capital into cultural capital via habitus "disguises both the primacy of the economic field as the basis of cultural capital by 'naturalizing' what is in effect an economic advantage" (p.86). Many of my participants felt angry towards the school in general and some of the adults they had contact with specifically. The participants' narrative was broadly that they felt a sense of 'otherness' where school was a field that they could not or did not want to navigate. The general narrative of their teachers was that these boys refused the help offered to them as a form of resistance. The implication is that these boys have to become more like the types of students who succeed in the education system if they are to navigate 'education', as the system is not going to change for them.

Bourdieu (1986) suggests that capitals function partly in "maintaining classed (and racialised) distinctions between social groups" (Preston, 2003, p.10-11). In this sense, different forms of capital may be seen as maintaining differences. Preston attributes a conceptual strength to Bourdieu's framework as it seeks to relate "micro-societal processes to structural phenomena such as class" (p.110. Arguably, institutions such as schools have to legitimise the "exchange of arbitrary forms of cultural distinction for educational qualifications" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p.39). One of the problems is how different forms of capital interact to reproduce inequalities and to what extent a school can counter-act them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

White Working-Class Boys and Education: Defining the White Working Class

Beck and Earl (2004) contend that class-based inequalities have grown since the post-War period, especially since the 1980s. Critics do not wholly agree that social class and socio-economic circumstances are interchangeable. Socio-economic circumstances do not wholly account for an individual's or a group's habitus, aspirations or dispositions. Socio-economic circumstances can change, but that does not mean that people necessarily change disposition. This is further complicated by the slippery nature of class divisions, the movement of people away from the area their families grew up in, changing ideas about wealth and the demonisation of the working class, or at least a certain section of the white working class.

Dominant discourse about the white working class within media and policy circles is that such children are part of a meritocracy which they choose not to take advantage of. This potentially serves two purposes: first, that privilege is protected within the accepted ideology of merit.[27] A view of education, and indeed employment, as a meritocratic endeavour does not recognise the much-publicised gaps within reading and writing skills of working-class children when they begin school. Instead of working-class students chasing working-class jobs there now exists a sense of classlessness whereby an individual can purportedly elevate their status if they are willing to work hard. However, the market forces of neoliberalism have driven processes that have led to the loss of Britain's manufacturing industry and its replacement with service-sector employment (see University of Sheffield 2018 and Government Office for Science Report 2013). Secondly, a narrative of

[27] Tony Blair's (1997) mantra of 'Education. Education. Education' sought to increase university admission above 50% of all school leavers with the suggestion that it would enhance access and equality of opportunity. It was perhaps a blunt instrument or proxy as it arguably promoted the idea of social mobility without stipulating which social groups were under-represented.

denigration has developed with labels such as: 'chavs' and 'scuffers'; such discourse is used to create a sense of 'otherness'.

The moniker of 'white working class' is a relatively new 'raced' discourse; which arguably recasts a structural issue as a racial one. Since the advent of compulsory schooling, the education of the working classes has largely been seen in terms of preparing people for their position in society through employment. This perspective, where education teaches students specialist skills for work, along with notions of meritocracy – where education allocates people to the most appropriate job for their talents via public examinations is potentially alluring; conferring a sense of justice and normalcy onto the reproduction of inequality. Reay (2006) attests that education unknowingly still possesses "remnants of past elite prejudices" and that education is "made to serve middle-class interests" (p.293-4). In this sense, education could be said to retain a sense of elitism.

The white working class is a group that increasingly gains political and educational attention; not, however, in terms of dignity of labour or even an organised resistance, but as a group at the bottom of society to be derided and marginalised. Jones (2012) argues that the working class have been demonised to the point that a commentator would have to speak out as a "working-class self-identifier" due to the denigration and powerlessness associated with this stratification (p.xi). This contrasts with the extended emergence of post-modern labels of identity, where identities may be chosen rather than ascribed. In the post-modern sense, identity is a complex multiplicity of negotiations that is in continual process. Perhaps this is partly why academics like Reay (2006) see class as being in need of reclamation. Reay's position is that the effects of class are real and significant, but there is a denial or avoidance of class at the expense of other forms of identity.

Moore (2004) explains that class has taken a back-seat in terms of ideological importance as post-modern labels of identity, cultural membership and gender have gained significance (p.9). He

summarises that changes in the nature of work, family structures, the role of women and multiculturalism have all contributed to a "new social order" where, arguably, class seems increasingly irrelevant (p.9-10). He suggests a reductionist view has been employed by policy-makers, where relations between complex phenomena can be described in simpler and fundamental terms. Moore states that the marginalisation of women and the racialised discourse around ethnic minorities have replaced the discourse around social class, which is increasingly described as an out-dated concept.

Nowadays, discussions of class are often conflated with poverty, to the point that terms such as 'white', 'poor' and 'disadvantaged' are used interchangeably. Either way, a narrative has emerged which positions white working-class children as requiring particular attention, both within schools and in policy circles more broadly (ECR 2014; Runnymede Trust 2009). A move towards traditional curricular and high-stakes testing has arguably had a significant negative impact on how schools serve students from poorer communities (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013).

A key debate in the sociology of education centres upon the extent to which social class influences, constricts or limits individuals, and how schools can promote opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and groups (see Smyth 2011 and Reay 2017). However innocently enacted there seems grounds to suggest that schools could be perpetuating and enacting symbolic violence against particular groups throughout their schooling. This can be seen in terms of assessment practices, ability setting and resource provision. The chronic problem at Hillside High was that white working-class boys under-achieved in a highly predictable way, especially those in the precarious situation of the ten participants. These debates continue in 2021, with a House of Commons Education Select Committee Report (2021) stating that the education system has failed poorer white pupils by decades of neglect and a lack of targeted support. They also state that imported racialised American term of 'white privilege' is unhelpful in that it bestows the idea that white children are advantaged,

whilst the statistics show that only 18% of poor white British pupils (on free school meals) achieve good GCSE passes in English and Maths, with only 16% gaining a place at University (ESCR, 2021).

The dominant discourse surrounding school performance and disadvantage focuses, at least partly, on the role they should play in reducing inequality by improving poor white children's examination results. Notions of raising aspiration and reducing the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and other students means that schools are required to take particular actions. Increasingly, in the UK, education is presented as a vehicle of social mobility and wealth creation for the nation (DfE and FCDO Report, 2018). Yet, the UK is a highly unequal society and outcomes for disadvantaged students remain significantly behind those of their more privileged peers (see ECR, 2014).

In terms of compensatory education, Step-Up had to be presented as a suitable pathway for students to succeed in their schooling. It was striking that at the time Step-Up was launched, the boys saw it as more in-line with their habits and dispositions to engage in vocational and project-based learning rather than purely academic qualifications. Monikers such as Step-Up, 'intervention group' and 'foundation group' imply deficiency and disadvantage. Semantically, the focus is on what they lack and what they should try to become. Symbolically, the status of particular white working-class boys is derided. Schools generally discuss the economic consequences of achieving or not achieving in terms of training and employment, but the consequences of symbolic violence are largely unknown.

Compensatory forms of education tend to overlook particular forms of social capital which exist in particular communities; this is predominantly the case where all forms of capital are reducible to economic capital. This potentially sees working-class social capital as a hindrance and burden rather than as a form of identity. By affirming particular types of knowledge and skills as dominant other

forms of capital are disavowed, denied or discredited. To reproduce the discourse that particular forms of cultural capital are to be celebrated and shared whilst devaluing others is potentially an act of symbolic violence.

If a dominant culture is seemingly aligned to neoliberalism, then it can be presented as the natural order. The violence against working-class culture is then symbolic in that it becomes accepted and is seen as systemic, therefore it cannot be traced to the source. This operates in specific ways. If the exam system and curriculum is geared towards middle-class tastes, habits and dispositions, then working-class students are already at a disadvantage and are in the position where such an education may be perceived as an affront to their identity. This leads to interventions being put in place to at least give working-class students more practise at learning what the expectations of the exam system are. Intervention programmes are often unsuccessful in improving students' achievement, perhaps because they are often 'more of the same' or a repetition of unconsolidated learning. Perhaps the symbolic violence of this is subtle because classroom teaching is intended to assist students in making progress, but repetition could easily be construed by students as a punishment where the failure of learning means doing it over again. However, in schools, interventions re-covering content are commonplace and perhaps at least give the impression that the school is acting in some way to rectify the educational problem. Bourdieu (1989) states that:

> Legitimation of the social order is not the product of a deliberate and purposive action of propaganda or symbolic imposition; it results, rather, from the fact that agents apply, to the objective structures of the social world, structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident (p.21).

Bourdieu suggests that the reproduction of inequality is seen as natural, just and inevitable, whilst also surreptitiously hiding structures maintained by perceptions that were produced within the constraints of the structure of the field. This could be applied to schools as it essentially suggests that traditional structures and practices are enacted without being questioned.

Cultures of achievement in schools are partly dictated by tradition but also through students conferring some value on academic achievement, since the latter is the basis for school judgements of effectiveness and success (Webb et al., 2014 p.114). Therefore, the discourses which schools employ may treat particular groups of students differently to others. Dominant culture promotes particular habits and tastes; schools then promote these in particular forms regardless of their congruence or dissonance with working-class habitus. Evidence suggests that white working-class boys do not thrive within the dominant culture of most schools (see Parliamentary Hearing, 2014).

Sullivan (2002) summarsies Bourdieu's overall argument that the "education systems of industrialised societies function in such a way as to legitimise class inequalities" (p.144).[28] One of the most problematic aspects is that the term 'class' is largely absent from schools. According to Reay (2006), in the field of education, class analysis has been "reworked" as a term. She sees it as focusing on perceived gulfs in opportunities, relative poverty and disposable family income (p.289).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) attest that

> the most hidden and most specific functions of the educational system consists of hiding its objective function; that is, masking the objective truth of its relationship to the structure of class relations (p. 208).

[28] See Sullivan (2002) for a discussion on the usefulness of Bourdieu's theories for researchers.

Whilst Reay (2006) suggests that “classrooms are routinely presented as classless” (p.290). Schools’ practices, processes and interventions do not address social class as an intrinsic constituent of identity and therefore forego much examination, and possible understanding, of an important aspect of learning; unlike gender, race or ethnicity.

Whether education reproduces economic relations whilst attesting its distance from such relations is the broader question that requires critique. Step-Up was implemented as a supposedly radical alternative to traditional intervention strategies. However, it could also be viewed as a repackaging of a reduced curriculum where students are withdrawn from subjects in which they are deemed to be underachieving. Step-Up was problematic in terms of ascribing it with a specific ‘value’. It arguably had some value in terms of the modules covered, but it also removed these students from studying further GCSE options which limited their exposure to further cultural capital. As participants progressed through Year-9, Year-10 and into Year-11, the majority of them became aware of the lack of labour-market value that Step-Up offered.

Policy Analysis: What Claims Do Official Discourses Make?

The House of Commons Education Committee Report ‘*Underachievement in Education by White Working-Class Children’* (2014) considers definitions for the problematic term of ‘working class’ (it does not define the term ‘white’ beyond ‘white British’ and ‘white’ to include European ethnicities) and how successfully targeted ‘FSM’ funding (Free School Meals, now Disadvantaged funding) is in capturing such children in its remit. If seen as a proxy for class, then FSM is associated with poverty; this could imply that ‘working-class’ equals ‘poverty’. It is important to note that schools should never divulge to students or parents that they are labelled as ‘disadvantaged’ . Also, to suggest that a white working-class boy who is entitled to free school meals is identified by deficits is problematic. The ECR (2014) concludes that such a group is “not well-defined” and that such labelling has been

entrenched in parental "employment occupations" (p.7). Ofsted publications do not use the term 'working class' (although Wilshaw used this term verbally in 2013), but they do employ 'white' or 'white boys' when discussing school attainment. The ECR (2014) states that FSM eligibility is "more normally used as a proxy for economic deprivation" (p.7). This ignores the fact that not all white working-class children live in economically deprived circumstances. It implies that certain funding is allocated on an economic basis, although pupils from various ethnicities qualify for FSM.

Preston (2003) discusses "historical processes underlying racialisation" as being a way of understanding class in synergy with race. He suggests that a discussion of "sub-cultural resistance without reference to social class" means that much is disavowed from the discussion (p.15). In summarising Cohen (1999) and Skeggs (2002), Preston states that a pathologised narrative of what it means (or does not mean) to be white working class means that there are "few alternative discourses or real opportunities open" to those labelled (p.15). In this sense, resistance could be seen as an attempt to find an alternative discourse.

The ECR (2014) states that whilst a "large proportion of adults may self-identify as working class as a result of their parents' occupations", this does "not correspond well" with the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2004) classification of working-class occupation categories. Hence there may be a vulgarity in associating oneself with the 'working class' for some, whilst others associate with the 'working class' despite employment placing them outside of this group. The ONS (2004) report stratifies working-class occupations as being categories 6-8: "semi-routine occupations (6)", "routine occupations (7)" and "never worked and long-term unemployed (8)" (p.9). The parallel occupations of the parents of the participants in this research fell within the above categories. All came from single-parent households; six of the ten boys' parents were unemployed or stay at home parents with younger children. Three were employed in low-skilled casual work and one was a HGV driver.

It is significant that the Education Committee include category 8 as a working-class group, as this group represents a historical shift in stratification. The inclusion of this category as 'working class' is problematic, as the working classes had been traditionally characterised as those employed in manual work. Subsuming this category into the definition of 'working class' is divisive. Further symbolic violence has arguably been enacted when the current Head of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman (2018), commented that families of white working-class children "lack the aspiration and drive seen in many migrant communities". Such comments appear to place white working-class communities as the base of the class pyramid.

The research participants displayed various different levels of awareness of social class. The most common responses set them individually against other students in the school, with language such as "swots" being common. Step-Up grouped the participants together, even though, as can be seen from their biographies later in the thesis, they had individually different narratives.

Terrain of Post-War Education Policy

Post-war education policy (1944-1951) focused on constructing structures that supported an economic and institutional rebuilding of the nation. Education was presented as providing opportunities for all. The 11-plus examination was used to channel children into grammar, technical and secondary modern schools based on notions of aptitude and ability. The 1950s saw expansion of technical and FE colleges, before the expansion of university system from the 1960s onwards; such changes may have been seen as fulfilling the economic and labour requirements of the nation, but the 1958 Carr Report suggested that employers were overwhelmingly opposed to vocational instruction being provided by schools. The 1959 Crowther Report recommended raising the school-leaving age to 16 and questioned the value of day-release apprenticeship provisions which arguably led to the Beloe Report (1960) which recommended the introduction of CSE qualifications in 1965.

The system of grammar and secondary-modern schools, along with O-Levels and CSEs meant that many working-class students were streamed out of an academic pathway at the age of 11. Williams and Rosen (2017) present personal testimonies from adults who grew-up in working-class families. These adults bitterly recall their experiences of streaming and the personal consequences it had on them, as though they were streamed for opportunities and employment pathways when they were young children. Tomlinson (2005,) in tracing the effects of educational policy from 1945 onwards, states that the dominant theme of educational policy has been the "investment in human capital and the subordination of education and training to the needs of the economy" (p.7).[29]

It is notable that many Post-War educational developments are recognisable today. The school system has been in flux reinventing modes of assessment to respond to the changing nature of employment. But, whilst there have been many changes over time, the fundamental structures of schooling remain largely unchanged; in that most students are timetabled to follow a specific curriculum, regardless of their ability level.[30] All the participants in this study were studying a full range of GCSEs before commencing Step-Up. Had the school not offered Step-Up, the boys would either have been required to complete a full-suite of GCSE qualifications or be permanently excluded from Hillside High.

The 1979-1990 era of Thatcherism saw education reshaped education according to the structures of the market (see Tomlinson, 2005, p.29-31). Although these took time to take root, after the 1988 Reform Act, schools began to operate like businesses in a competitive market. The late 1980s saw many developments that affected working-class children's schooling. The 1987 consultation on the

[29] Tomlinson (2005) traces post-war education policy, from the social democratic struggles between 1945-1979, the market forces between 1980-87, the creation of competition between 1988-1994, the consequences of this competition between 1994-1997, New Labour's frameworks between 1997-2000, diversity / selection / privatisation 2000-2005.

[30] The National Curriculum was established in the late 1980s. This has been replaced by more stringent GCSE examinations that arguably dictate what schools teach much more prescriptively.

National Curriculum proposed that all pupils study a common framework regardless of school, background, aspirations or future employment. In 1988 the government rejected calls to extend and broaden the sixth-form curriculum, developed a compulsory youth training requirement for all 16 and 17-year olds not already in education or work, and introduced school league tables to drive competition between schools. The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced local management of schools (opting out of local authority control), parental choice and funding following individual students. This meant that schools were required to ensure that students completed courses and schools were judged on pupil outcomes.

Thereafter, the Parents' Charter (1991) gave parents explicit rights to information about schools' performance. This meant that school-entry patterns became more complex as parents were encouraged to apply to surrounding higher-performing schools rather than the local one. The majority of working-class families nevertheless continued to send their children to their local school. Arguably, they were not in the position to 'play the game' or perhaps they were not even aware there was a game to be played.

During the 1990s the majority of schools were removed from local authority control and post 2010 many became part of multi-academy trusts (MATs). Where there previously used to be collaboration there was now competition between schools to attract students and to achieve high examination results. It is, however, overwhelmingly middle-class parents who cite school performance data as a reason for choosing their child one school over another. In this sense, the working classes are absent from this marketisation debate when it comes to school choice, but perversely deeply involved when it comes to educational outcomes and employment opportunities (see IPPR 2012). Ball and Gewirtz (1996a) explored the dynamics of school competition over a longitudinal period and concluded that the competitive education market reinforces opportunity advantages of middle-class parents. Ball et

al. (1996b) argue that “choice in education is systematically related to social class differences and the reproduction of class inequalities” (p.89).

Since 2010, successive Conservative-led governments have pursued an education policy that has included the removal of many vocational pathways, the elimination of much coursework from GCSE and A-Level subjects, and the ‘strengthening’ of examinations to address claims that grades were being inflated and qualifications were not rigorous enough (Education White Paper, 2010). Arguably, these changes have advantaged students who are able to adapt to rote learning, perform well in examinations and have good medium-term retention of information. They arguably further disadvantage students who are already disadvantaged within the school system.

Reay (2004a) attests that a relentless focus on academic achievement has the potential to depreciate emotional capital while simultaneously augmenting cultural capital” (p.69). In other words, pursuing examination results as the measure of a student’s success has emotional consequences and confers a prestige on knowledge that excludes students of low-academic ability and those who reject this form of education. The barriers for white working-class boys may even be wider than that and predicate around their undesirability for employers where “their class, their accents, their performative masculinity are seen by employers as a challenge to the attributes required in a service economy” (McDowell, 2012, p.581). This suggests that even if white working-class boys were to ascribe to the discourse around ‘aspiration’ and meritocracy, then there are many other barriers to be faced.

Policy Discourse: Why Do White Working-Class Boys Underachieve?

Schools have long been scrutinised on student attainment measures. Until recently, this focused, among other things, on the number of students gaining GCSEs (grade C or grade 4), 'good' passes (grade C+/B- or grade 5) and 'higher' passes (grade A or grade 7+) in English, Maths and three other subjects. The system of numbered grades introduced in 2017 brought in progress measures for every subject. At the time of this study the attainment measure was operational with progress percentages showing the value-added from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4. White working-class children stood out in this measure as only 31% of this national 'group' achieved this benchmark in 2013, compared to 66% of all children (ECR, 2014, p.5). In measuring schools' performance by the exam results of disadvantaged students against those of all students, the narrative is that schools should be tackling inequality. Indeed, an attainment gap is already an issue when most children begin school, it "exists at age five and widens as children get older" (ECR, 2014, p.3). However, schools are expected to have some impact on either limiting that reproduction, instilling aspiration into students or developing dispositions commensurate with the school's culture of educational achievement. This could also be by conferring an acceptance of neoliberal ideologies or emancipation from a limiting habitus or wider social capital within individuals. The potential for symbolic violence here will be addressed later in the data analysis.

One of the dominant discourses in education policy is centred on aspiration. There is an expectation that schools can and should shape the individual aspirations of students (JRF 2007 and IPPR 2012). Stahl (2015a), however, attests that white working-class boys engage in "complex identity work" as a result of "tension between ...the neoliberal ethos" of schooling and their own reality, which leads to an "ongoing reflexive process of internalisation of possibilities. These aspirations are perhaps still in process when at school and multiple aspirations can be held at once" (p.133-4). This suggests that

such boys' navigation of the field of school and their judgements about the purpose of their schooling is a personal and difficult process.

However, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that aspiration and life trajectories are much more complex and problematic than a student having ambition or high or low aspiration:

> they have internalised, through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning, the objective chances they face. They know how to 'read' the future that fits them, which is made for them and for which they are made (by opposition to everything that the expression' this is not for the likes of us' designates (p.130).

This may explain why my participants held multiple aspirations that were sometimes disparate and contradictory. Such multiplicities could be seen as an active management of risk within the mediation of what is possible. In contradiction, the aspirations of white working-class boys are reported as "very high" by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007). What actually differs is the "strength of their belief" that they can achieve such goals (paragraph 3.10). This potentially brings the individual and schools into conflict, as pupils may not see school as important in achieving their goals, consequently reassessing what is deemed achievable or possible. Parental aspirations are also a consideration. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) attest that directly questioning parents or attempting to change parents' attitudes or aspirations does not have a noticeable impact on white working-class boys' educational achievement. They see this approach as wrongly suggesting that the answers to educational inequality lie intrinsically within working class homes. Instead they argue that the approach must be in "giving parents better information and access to appropriate support and advice" (paragraph 4.5).

Smyth and Wrigley (2013) recognise that white working-class children often live precarious lives. Indeed, the boys who took part in my research had unstructured, risky and unpredictable lives outside of school. Potentially, this is an amalgamation of collective and individual habitus, particular approaches to parenting, perceived prospects within employment and their lack of success within the traditional curriculum at school. Furthermore, if education is presented as an opportunity for working-class boys to emancipate themselves from their circumstances and those of their parents, then it follows that white working-class habitus is seen as value-less or perhaps even a burden that needs to be cast aside, with the potential symbolic violence that this carries.

A particular limit of this study is the notion that education has short-term but also much longer-term effects that are difficult to quantify and cannot be predicted even if the school deems white working-class boys' achievement to be successful. A study of this kind could become too wide if focused on multiple institutions, therefore there is a rationale for focusing on one school. The study's contribution to knowledge is anticipated to be a demonstration of how theoretical perspectives can help understand the issues of white working-class boys' underachievement in this setting.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Warrant

This research is set within a critical interpretivist paradigm – drawing on the ideas of Bourdieu. Its methodology allowed for the examination of experiences, or accounts of experiences, through conducting a series of three interviews across the last three years of participants' schooling, as they undertook Step-Up. The aim was to allow the boys' voices to prominently feature, regarding their experiences and feelings about Step-Up, along with the effects they felt the intervention had on them.

Research questions 2, 3 and 4 sought to uncover social structures, habitus and symbolic violence in the field whilst seeking to capture the accounts of individuals in their own words. Here the wider socio-historical context became relevant. Students' thoughts and language were important dimensions of their habitus, although such data arguably went beyond the conscious manifestations of the present reality. Interpretivist research attempts to consider what is being "hidden, repressed or disavowed" (Ward and Zarate, 2011, p.86). One issue with this methodology is that it could result in epistemological conflation, where a misattribution, over-simplification or confusion is claimed, since it seeks to expose and illuminate simultaneously. I addressed this by careful coding of the interview responses under broad thematic headings which were reviewed at each interview stage, with the emphasis on the rich detail of each participants' viewpoint.

The chosen paradigm was useful as it suggested that any idea, truth or reality could not be considered without first exploring how individuals conceptualise, interpret and position themselves within their environment. In order to address these research questions a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate. This allowed an inductive approach where individuals accounted for and

made sense of their experiences. It was intended that the individual experience of each participant would be given due consideration (with broad themes being discussed as a way of identifying potential patterns).

The advantages of this approach included the opportunity to consider, reflexively, how individuals interpreted their experiences. However, I was aware that in the act of interrogating theory, there was a potential for deductive reasoning that may have influenced data collected. I believe this was due to the nature of the underachievement of the boys; to go beyond the intuitive that they were perhaps disengaged from school and felt alienated by their schooling would be a needless conclusion; there was a need to be much more open-minded. An inductive approach allowed concepts and theories to be explored in participants' responses whilst applying Bourdieu's ideas to the data to attempt to understand the boys' experiences of Step-Up. The proposed study was not seeking to mobilise Bourdieu's ideas in a deterministic way; it was necessary to see them in terms of propensities and tensions, in order to consider whether the concepts of habitus and symbolic violence in the field were relevant in exploring how the boys felt about Step-Up and its effects.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. This allowed for some comparative analysis between participant's responses but also further probing of "rich, original voices" (Newton, 2010, p.6). They also offered an opportunity to "examine how large-scale social transformations are experienced …[and] interpreted by …social actors" (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002, p.201). Semi-structured interviews could be seen as knowledge construction rather than illumination or excavation. This is possibly because sufficient objective knowledge is problematic and the focus must be on the subjective rich-picture of a participant's in-depth response to be allowed to develop. Or they could be viewed as simply an imparting of opinions, multiple assertions or distorted experiences. In this sense, the reflexive practice of asking, listening and interpreting was strewn with a danger of presuming that the boys felt a particular way because of my own preconceptions.

The concept of knowledge construction suggests that the "phenomenon under research does not have a static de-contextual and therefore uncoverable existence" (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002, p.227). Therefore, there was a danger that semi-structured interviews might capture little beyond the intuitively known. However, an advantage of this method was that participants could be re-interviewed to further explore responses. Whilst semi-structured interviews may be based on personalised accounts they are an important tool to capture participants' attitudes towards the field of schooling and their perceptions of Step-Up. As the research was small-scale, its findings were not generalisable, but the theoretical and practical ideas arising from it could potentially be transferable in some contexts and have at least some relevance beyond Hillside High. Whilst Step-Up was a particular intervention at a specific school and time, it could more broadly illuminate how interventions offered to other students are devised, implemented, administered and evaluated.

Method in the Madness: Finding a Way Forward for the Research

If research is a messy business (Heron and Reason, 2006), then the methods employed must attempt to bring as much clarification as possible for the issue, question or problem chosen. There must be an enactment, a form of agency, between theory and practice where the conceptual is operationalised as clearly as possible. However, in the collection of data and analysing the findings there was the danger of conflation. In this case, due to the research taking place in a school I was employed at in a senior capacity. In beginning interpretivist research, I attempted to uncover what was being "hidden, repressed or disavowed" (Ward and Zarate, 2011, p.86) and what "passionate attachments" I may have been assuaged to follow (Butler, 1997, p.32). After all, these boys were students at Hillside High and by joining Step-Up they were engaging in an intervention that they could not be removed from, were they to stay at the school and not be permanently excluded. The participants had specific traits in common in terms of their behaviours and attitudes to school and

also in their backgrounds. The boys were part of Step-Up, but they were also part of the Unit. Teachers saw the participants as a virtual sub-culture within the school, although the boys did not see themselves in this way.[31]

Having the full set of permissions from the participants and parents removed the ethical dilemma of entrapment in using recorded evidence of participants' responses to questions. In conceptualising the research design, I had to acknowledge there was an objectivity-bias inherent in the way I was trained as a teacher. I also had to carefully manage the tendencies of positivist thinking that I knew I had been exposed to throughout my teaching career. Such traditional ways of measuring school actions, manifested in Ofsted and school league tables, were entirely against the spirit of this research. I had to prioritise the narratives and experiences of the boys and try to suspend my personal thoughts and feelings about Step-Up. These initial thoughts clouded my research design decisions as I realised that I had begun my conceptualisation by considering how I could operationalise analysis of the results. It would have to be the other way around. The analysis of the data could not lead how the boys' experiences were captured. The spectre of 'answerism' was acknowledged (Avis et al., 1996, p.164-66).

As an insider-researcher, I had to consider how I navigated the dynamics of the perceived power relations within the school. My positionality within the school was fraught with tensions, due to the dual roles of being both a Deputy Headteacher and a researcher. However, this positionality was also helpful to the research in that I knew the boys' backgrounds and the reasons why their positions in school had become precarious, therefore I could ask more pertinent questions in the interviews that went beyond them replaying narratives about their schooling. The research was focused on

[31] In acknowledging sub-cultures, I refer to the differing habitus of those being educated and the white working-class boys in this study. Sub-cultural theory was not pursued, although it could have potential. It is proposed that such an approach might be a useful paradigmatic lens for further research regarding interventions implemented for white working-class boys.

their feelings and experience of Step-Up, so it was necessary to know that their feelings at the beginning of the intervention were typical for them and that the voracity of their responses felt genuine.

Being an insider-researcher meant that I had to carefully navigate the duality of being a senior leader in school and being a researcher who could ask the boys for their opinions whilst not attempting to intervene and take some immediate action about the issues that were raised. The concept of being an insider-researcher presumes that a researcher can become part of the group they wish to study and fit in with them so that the data collected is valid and has provenance; however, I had to be especially mindful that my position in school could have affected the provenance and validity of the data. In interviewing the participants it became clear that the multiple positionalities of being both a senior leader and a researcher meant that I understood why the boys were selected for Step-Up and I knew what detail of response was typical for each of them. This then allowed me to ask searching follow-up questions during the interviews that added richness to the data.

Another strength of this positionality was that in using Bourdieu's ideas, which see the social world as an accumulated history, allowed the opportunity to consider the layers of the multiplicity of the field of school within the perceptions of these boys and their own multiple positionalities. By engaging in qualitative interpretivist research that yielded rich data, I was able to take varying viewpoints into account. These boys had consciousness, they were intricate and complex, and in order to collect and interpret the data such close interactions with the participants was helpful. I acknowledge that it did mean proffering greater validity over reliability and representativeness; however, schools are communities and their success is largely dependent on relationships. It is important that these relationships are understood, tended to and mediated. The data clearly shows that the an individual's habitus is in flux and has fluidity, research such as this has clear implications

for how students and teachers interact, along with what schools do to support students and challenge underachievement.

Reproduction is arguably not an endlessly reaffirmed version of the status quo, it is more complex than that. Notably, many of the teachers I spoke to lacked awareness, at least in my conversations with them, of the boys' backgrounds and the challenges they faced in their daily lives. This research reveals the complexities and multiple positionalities that these white working-class boys inhabited; these complexities are arguably not properly understood or acknowledged by policy-makers nor by teachers.

Research Design

In designing the research, I considered how best to capture the boys' experiences and attempt to understand and uncover the underlying phenomena. Interviews appealed to me due to the reflexivity and refinement that was possible as the research was ongoing. When considering the boys' experiences, it was logical to afford them a 'voice', even if that voice would be semi-structured via the interview questions. I am conceiving 'voice' as the participants' organic feelings about being part of Step-Up. Before collecting any interview data it was necessary to consider how it would be analysed. I considered an inductive approach before deciding on a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. The purely inductive approach was rejected due to its structure: Observation – Patterns – Tentative Hypothesis/Broad Generalisations – Theory. This 'bottom-up' approach did not fit as it did not give prominence to the boy's experiences and feelings. As I went through several different conceptions of how this research could be done, I was concerned at various points that I had begun to adopt a positivist methodology, with the unintended consequence that I was trying to prove something. On reflection, I was too heavily influenced by my mind-set as a teacher and Deputy Headteacher.

The research design went through many iterations, before I settled on a critical interpretivist paradigm. In considering this research and the many different ways it could be done, I went through several stages of conceptualisation in an attempt to gather data which informed me about the question. This research was not an analysis of Step-Up *per se*, it was small-scale qualitative research focused on the boys' experiences of Step-Up and its effects. I was aware that throughout the implementation of Step-Up the ten participants were not given the opportunity to give their honest thoughts and feelings about what was happening. I decided that having a longitudinal series of interviews over the three years of Step-Up would be a way to capture their experiences over time.

I had to consider how the data was coded and decided on thematic strands. I considered a shift from thematic open-coding to closed-coding to produce an exhaustive list of over-arching themes; however, codes and sub-codes seemed a clumsy way to trial a small-scale primary research instrument. The deductive approach was perhaps a better fit to the research questions: Theory – Hypothesis – Observation – Confirmation/Rejection of Theory. However, once again I was in danger of adopting a mechanistic approach, more in keeping with the ways in which schools were being measured than giving a voice to the participants.

Qualitative research methods, such as observation and in-depth interviewing, offer a "direct encounter with 'the world'" but also "with the ways that people construct, interpret and give meaning to those experiences" (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002, p.199). Participant observation would be most likely effective when a project begins with "an interesting or strategically located research site", whilst in-depth interviewing would likely be most effective when presented with an "empirical or theoretical puzzle" (p.201). Informant interviews of those surrounding the boys were disregarded, despite the benefits of "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 2008, p.5). This unstructured approach would have produced copious data but would have been unmanageable in the time available. It was important when conceptualising the research to consider the "theoretical …questions about the

nature, causes and consequences" of the issue (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002, p.201). By this, I mean the research instruments had to be less structured to allow some possible manifestations of the phenomena, but then to also consider that the boys' understandings of what was happening to them could perhaps be highly personal and disparate from each other. I was also conscious of what might have been 'intuitively known' from my viewpoint as an experienced teacher; especially one who knew the boys and worked in the same school.

Three forms of analysis were considered: content analysis (themes), descriptive analysis (main things, ways of expression and actual words used in interviews) and relational analysis (identifying concepts, exploring relationships between concepts). The semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for the rich experience, accumulated history and developing habitus of the boys to potentially emerge. I decided to code the boys' responses into themes. At the time of doing the interviews, two specific thoughts concerned me. Firstly, if the data yielded an unwieldy range of disconnected ideas I would have to re-conduct the interviews having already elicited personal responses from the participants. If this were the case then the data would contain personal descriptions that deserved to be heard. I was once again in danger of wanting to prove something. I made the deliberate decision to keep all the interviews semi-structured, so that specific questions were asked, but the rich descriptions of the boys would be allowed to develop.

ETHICS

Whilst the students selected for Step-Up had received parental permission to join the programme, the truth is that the students and their parents had little choice about whether to be involved in Step-Up. The alternatives were either a drastically reduced part-time timetable or a permanent exclusion. This brought further ethical considerations as although their experience of Step-Up was important, it did not matter whether it was successful, enjoyable or preferred by the participants. Once they had embarked on Step-Up in Year-9 they had to continue with this pathway, as they would have missed a considerable amount of learning in the subjects they were removed from.

I had to carefully consider the ethics of how students deemed to be 'disadvantaged' (with precarious situations within school) were treated in this study. My own thoughts were mixed about Step-Up as to whether it was student-centric or system-centric, or neither. Saegert et al. (2001) suggest that stigmatisation of disadvantaged students leads to them being considered as "bundles of pathologies" who are there to be worked on, corrected and normalised (p.9). Seeing students in this way risked depersonalising them and perhaps made schooling an alienating experience where a "familiar cycle of failure" was enacted (Smyth, 2011, p.69). In essence this was a description of symbolic violence. However, it must be noted that without the participants' removal from some GCSE courses (one of the consequences of Step-Up), their place in school would have been even more precarious. The irony that they could be kept in school only by spending considerable time in the Unit engaged in Step-Up was not lost on me.

All the boys involved in this study exhibited varied forms of resistance, such as opposition to school systems and teachers' expectations. Home-school communication with participants' parents was inconsistent or non-existent. This presented a problem in gaining parental permission for the boys' participation in the study. I overcame this by contacting the parents first by letter, then following-up

with a phone call. I got eight of the ten permissions, but had to obtain the final two by taking the consent and permission forms to the boys' home addresses. I will admit that this felt decidedly awkward for all concerned, as it took more than a month to gain all permissions. However, the longitudinal nature of this research, where the boys could express their views freely, and assurances that the interview data would remain anonymised made all participants and their parents happy to proceed.

The research adhered to the BERA (2018) guidelines and those of the SEPD's Research Committee. The BERA Guidelines offered clarity about what was ethically acceptable and raised some important considerations about the research project's design, conceptualisation, operationalisation and the research instruments. By this I mean that the guidelines stipulated that methods employed in research must be "fit for purpose" and that researchers must "have knowledge of alternative approaches sufficient to assure" others that the "research needs are being properly addressed" (p.9). My reservations lay in the possible ramifications for the participants, as well as whether Step-Up was suitable for them or not (in raising their achievement in English and Maths and keeping them in mainstream schooling) it would have to proceed regardless.

As a senior leader at the school the ethics of conducting semi-structured interviews with students presented potential difficulties. I considered if they felt they could be open and transparent about their experiences of Step-Up. There was a further difficulty inasmuch as I had been involved in excluding three of the boys for fixed-term periods in Year-8. Within this research, the boys understood that they could say whatever they wanted in the interviews and, besides any safeguarding concerns, there would not be any action taken against them. The research was presented as an opportunity for them to speak freely about their experiences in a safe environment.

Anderson et al. (2007) suggest that an advantage of conducting research in one's own institution is a "deepened understanding", meaning that researchers are not beginning on the fringes of the issue, even if the issue's 'reality' may be disparate from the researcher's conception of it (p.126). As an insider-researcher I had greater access than an 'outsider' would. The fact that I would have to reflexively consider my own assumptions about Hillside High as an institution brought a tension to the data collection. Being the Deputy Headteacher at the time, I had a wealth of knowledge about the boys' backgrounds and the difficulties they had faced.

The boys' involvement in the research was not incentivised and there were multiple opt-out possibilities for all involved. They were able to refuse to be interviewed and to withdraw from the research either by parental request or by their own volition. All participants were fully informed of the nature and scope of the project from the beginning. The boys were assured about confidentiality and anonymity. After the interviews were transcribed they were anonymised and stored electronically on password-protected USB drives. The original recordings were all deleted and checks made to ensure they were unrecoverable on the device.

BERA (2018) guidelines state that when a researcher possesses a dual role (researcher and teacher for example) then "explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality" are possible (p.5). BERA guidelines state that the "best interests of the child must be the primary consideration" (p.6). The method of semi-structured interviews raised the possibility of confessional, expository or disclosing testimony. All participants had the right to refuse to answer any questions. I ensured that a colleague, trained in personal counselling, was available if needed. I was also potentially making people 'subjects', but also 'subjecting' them to something. As Williams (2002) states: it is possible to be "doing it and denying it" in research (p.126). I designed the interviews carefully and had them checked by another doctoral researcher to ensure they were free from unconscious bias. Drever (2005) highlights that interviews are based on structure and control, but semi-structured interviews,

whilst still being “a formal encounter” also allow the interviewee “a fair degree of freedom” (p.13). Of course, analytical coding of the data threatened to misrepresent the voices of the participants. I counteracted this by adopting both a content and relational analysis in coding and analysing the interview data. Epistemologically, qualitative methods are always contestable as individuals may interpret the world in different ways. However, since the aim of this research was to uncover the boys’ experiences of Step-Up, the research was “designed to encourage research participants …[to give] ...detail about the meanings …they have of the world and the extent to which these influence their behaviour” (Henn et al., 2006, p.177). The participants were the only people in school who could provide meaningful testimony about the effects of Step-Up, as it was their school experience for three years.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Research Participants’ Biographies

The ten participants were all on the verge of permanent exclusion, having been through a mixture of managed moves, fixed periods of time at another educational setting (temporary college vocational days) or temporary exclusions. The boys all came from single-parent homes and all were identified, via school records, as being in receipt of free school meals and pupil premium funding. As problematic as it was to label them working-class boys, they fitted the criteria stipulated in the ECR report (2014).

The notion that the white working class has somehow been ‘left behind’ raises the conundrum of whether they have been marginalised or whether they have marginalised themselves. Either way, a

racialised discourse has emerged which problematises a particular faction of the white working class as 'white trash', 'scum' and 'chavs'. This, in turn, creates a sense of 'otherness' those from other sections of society are encouraged to disparage. This further creates a contestable space where symbolic violence towards a specific section of the white working class may be seen as deserved.

White working class boys in particular are denigrated for their immaturity and laddishness. Nayak (2006) argues that such boys "exhibit 'spectacular masculinities' of white male excess …young men accrue a body capital that has a currency and a local exchange value within the circuits they inhabit" (p.813). This suggests that such accrued capital may create some prestige within less-legitimate contexts than school, but such prestige is confined to a limited social group, which in turn is debased and denigrated because of its 'excess'. Nayak acknowledges that such capital is then seen as vulgar by others. Skeggs and Loveday (2012) argue that those "positioned as already marginal to the dominant symbolic are presented as 'useless' subjects rather than 'subjects of value'" (p.474). Then, because of this, white working class boys may seek to generate alternative ways of making value, such as by criminal activity. Skeggs and Loveday also attest that the white working-class' experience of injustice generates affective responses expressed as 'ugly-feelings', which marginalise them further as they articulate an experience that appears different, bitter or ungrateful. Croizet et al. (2017) argue that society's institutions impose symbolic violence on the white working class and other lower socio-economic status students. This occurs by students having to judge, early-on in their school career, whether "they are smart, motivated, meritorious and deserving…or not" (p.105). Croizet et al. also argue that hidden advantages within the education system "fuel the symbolic disqualification" of lower socio-economic students and that "this symbolic violence undermines the self and amplifies social inequality" (p.106). Whether such symbolic violence is fuelled by the contestable spaces that white working-class boys inhabit or if those positionalities are an imposition in themselves is an important discussion.

Meanwhile, there has been a significant change in the makeup of the UK population; migrants from Europe and elsewhere have moved into what once were solely white working-class areas. Educational policy has focused on levelling-up the achievement of ethnic groups, perhaps most notably via the London Challenge, which included a highly-successful focus on Afro-Caribbean boys. Working class identity has undergone many shifts in urban areas with swathes of northern English cities seeing significant labour market restructuring, especially in terms of employment available to school leavers.

Hillside High had excellent progression rates for the majority of students at post-16; with most students accessing level-3 (A-Levels and equivalent) courses, some accessing level-2 (GCSE equivalent) courses and a small number accessing apprenticeships. Historically, the poorest performance in GCSE subjects included lower-ability pupils, who were demotivated, persistent absentees and those with multiple temporary exclusions. Whilst not all of the participants were lower-ability, they did exhibit other characteristics in this list.

Step-Up was essentially a composite of pastoral and academic interventions. The pastoral aim was to keep such boys in school, whereas the academic dimension was to ensure that these boys gained at least some qualifications, to provide at least some post-16 options. Some background information on the ten participants is presented below. In introducing a brief portrait of each participant, it should be noted that the boys have been numbered in terms of the precarious nature of their school place, in other words, the rank order for possible permanent exclusion (with 1 being the most precarious and 10 being the least). Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of students.

Participant:	P1
Pseudonym:	Zane
Background / Issues / Crises:	Above average academic ability but conduct in school severely declined during Y8. Cautioned by the police for moving drugs around the local area. Had a banning order excluding him from entering a number of streets near the town centre. Known cannabis user. Often picked up by the Police at night. Multiple cautions for drug possession. Had been subject to a family referral order via social services. In one-to-one conversations he participated maturely with staff. Has said that he wanted to succeed and "does not want to throw (his) life away". Often left lessons, had poor attendance and disrupted the learning of others. Zane had pulled a knife on a member of staff when he came on site during a fixed-term exclusion.
Position of School Place:	Most precarious of all participants. School finances were a factor in not permanently excluding Zane (in Y8) as the School would have incurred placement fees and a monetary penalty. Multiple incidents of drugs on-site. Many teachers refused to teach Zane and he had been timetabled with Heads of Department for subject lessons. In reality, he spent most of his lesson time either in the Unit or outside SLT offices.
Interventions Already Received:	Already had two failed managed moves to other providers. Had been on an Early College Transfer placement in Year-9, but it was withdrawn due to bringing cannabis on site. Early College Transfer places were refused by providers due to Zane being seen as a health and safety risk. Drug referral service and social service involvement with the family.

Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	Two attitudes characterised Zane's approach to school: a desire to get some qualifications and have a job that gave him money, or pursuing antagonistic behaviour towards other students and physically threatening adults in school.
Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Zane's attitude to Step-Up was initially positive. Specific reasons included: "teachers kick me out for no reason", "all day at school I have teachers angry at me", "being out of classes more will chill me out" and "(Unit Manager) has showed me some modules and it sounds alright".
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at B-C, later changed to grades 6-4.
Aspirations:	"I can't decide", "nothing interests me", "I don't care", "I want to work with cars", "dealing is easy money".

Participant:	P2
Pseudonym:	Ed
Background / Issues / Crises:	Known drug user. Quiet and socially-reserved. Only socialised with participant 1, no other friendships in school. Ed had sought conflict in many different ways with adults, including physical aggression towards a crossing-patrol worker. Lived with his father, who had several social services' warnings issued for neglecting Ed. Ed would not routinely disrupt lessons but usually wandered around school and did not arrive at classes.

Position of School Place:	Precarious. Had brought drugs into school twice, once in Y7 and once in Y8. Ed's poor attendance had meant that his school place became more secure over a period of time; as his behaviour record had fewer incidents recorded than if he had had full-attendance. Ed was not able to attend alternative provision due to other students being there, as there had been trouble within the local community and the mixture of students was deemed as 'toxic' by one of the providers.
Interventions Already Received:	Had a failed managed move and a separate three-month step-out from school. Sporadic attendance had led to crisis team and social service involvement. A family referral order had ceased due to a lack of engagement by Ed's mother. This led to the case being closed and the emphasis for action being put back onto the school.
Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	Found school demotivating. Was in the lowest-ability set for every subject and had weak literacy skills.
Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Said he wanted to try the programme as he did not like school and if he could have less lessons then he would prefer it. Felt that he would find it easier to come back to school after absence and slot in.
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at F-G, later changed to grades 1-U.
Aspirations:	Ed said that "drug-dealing was easy money" and to have a "chilled out life… doing what I want to do".

Participant:	P3
Pseudonym:	Harvey
Background / Issues / Crises:	Had been in several fights with other students and enjoyed the fact that other students were afraid of him. Had been involved in several incidents of anti-social behaviour in the local community, including setting fire to bins on a cul-de-sac which he had previously been banned from with an ASBO, along with Sam (P6). Had also been picked up by the police for wearing a mask in the local community. Harvey was the identical-twin brother of Will (P4).
Position of School Place:	Precarious. Had numerous fights including serious assaults on other boys. Was often singled out by other boys who wanted to prove they were tougher and also had older males in the community challenge him to fight.
Interventions Already Received:	Had already reached the maximum number of temporary exclusions, although most of Harvey's anti-social behaviour occurred outside school. Had reached the point where a managed move might have been considered, but other schools had reservations about offering him a place due to his violent conduct.
Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	A quiet student the majority of the time. He completed most of his work reluctantly but would often get into verbal conflict with teachers when they commented that the work was done to a poor standard. Led to him being removed from many situations and sanctions being applied away from the class teachers' own detentions to maintain calm. Led to a perceived lack of fairness from other students who felt he got away with things. Some teachers felt that Harvey was treated too favourably and that he was never sanctioned.
Summary of Attitude to	Said that he wanted to do the programme so that he could "get out of trouble from teachers having a dig". He also reported that his basic skills needed improving rather than being in some option subjects that "didn't matter".

Step-Up in Year-9:	
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at D-F, later changed to grades 3-1.
Aspirations:	“I want to do an apprenticeship”, “I want to do something with my hands”.

Participant:	P4
Pseudonym:	Will
Background / Issues / Crises:	Identical-twin brother of Harvey (P3). Had much weaker literacy skills than his brother and would often come into verbal conflict with teachers over his refusal to attempt tasks, even though the tasks were often differentiated appropriately for him. Had become involved in similar anti-social behaviours outside school, often being taken home by the police for causing disturbances in the local area at night. Had been issued with a community curfew order preventing him from being out after 10pm. Known cannabis user and had previously brought a significant amount into school.
Position of School Place:	Precarious due bringing cannabis into school. Had already been withdrawn from various subjects due to previous conflicts borne perhaps out of frustration or lack of motivation due to poor literacy. However, he did not have a statement and the SEN team had done several assessments of him. He had a reading age of over 9 years and therefore was not on the priority list for interventions beyond the reading recovery programme. Will refused to engage with this programme.
Interventions Already Received:	A vastly reduced timetable was implemented during Y8. At several points, this meant that Will was not in school for the full week. This had been agreed with his mother but caused further conflict at home when Harvey (P3) was expected

	to be in full-time but Will wasn't. Eventually, this was rescinded and he was expected to be in full-time again. Was diagnosed with a mild form of Tourette's Syndrome which manifested itself in being rude towards adults. Many of the staff saw this diagnosis as an excuse for his poor behaviour, despite him being medically diagnosed.
Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	Enjoyed the social aspect of school and in one-to-one conversations he was a sensitive boy at times. Had originally been in favour of having a reduced timetable but he was falling further behind which led to more conflict with staff. Found presenting work neatly and in detail difficult.
Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Was in favour of joining the programme. Had shown real enthusiasm when he first heard of the modules offered within the programme, but was disappointed when he was told which modules would actually be delivered.
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at F-G, later changed to grades 1-U.
Aspirations:	Wanted to study 'Computer Games Design' at a local college and aspired to design computer games. The Unit Manager tried to use this as a way to discuss how he might catch-up in Maths and Science and arranged for him to take GCSE Art. Will did not engage with these suggestions.

Participant:	P5
Pseudonym:	Ben
Background / Issues / Crises:	A clever, able student but a serial underachiever, in terms of academic work and targets. Known drug use and high absence rates had made his time in school more difficult as he would often be sent home for smelling of cannabis and he

	appeared to be in a perpetual state of catching-up. Consequently, when Ben attended classes he often could not access the learning as he was missing the formative steps. It had been common for Ben to be back in school when assessments were being completed and he would often quite rightly claim that he couldn't be expected to do an assessment when he had missed all the teaching. Often scored some marks because of his natural ability to express himself. Had received three separate cautions for cannabis possession and a further caution for dealing a small amount of cannabis.
Position of School Place:	Ben's position in school was precarious because, although he had never been found to have cannabis on him, he was sent home on many occasions exhibiting signs of drug use, such as being 'spaced-out' and with a strong smell of cannabis on his clothing and bag. Found with drug paraphernalia (a grinder and cigarette papers) on at least three occasions. Ben often presented a significant safeguarding risk to other students and would be searched daily.
Interventions Already Received:	Had failed a managed move due to non-attendance. His mother had been fined for his non-attendance. The drug-referral service had been involved with Ben for over a year, but after funding was cut they reduced their case-load and Ben was seen as a casual user at low-risk. Local police officers had been to school to do workshops with Ben and some other students on the danger of prolonged cannabis use.
Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	Presented an enigmatic attitude to school. When in school he was hampered by the amount of learning he had missed but he was usually willing to complete tasks. Rarely caused problems in lessons.

Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Saw the programme as a way to compensate for his poor attendance. There was potential for Ben to feel patronised by the nature of some of the Step-Up modules offered, but this was not the case.
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at A-C, later changed to grades 7-4.
Aspirations:	Expressed bewilderment about post-16 options. Had told a drug counsellor that he was always going to use cannabis so he did not want a job where an employer would have a problem with that.

Participant:	P6
Pseudonym:	Terence
Background / Issues / Crises:	Academically bright but disengaged from learning since Y5 of primary school. Would often come into conflict with staff who challenged a lack of effort and poor quality of work. Had sworn at staff and become personal when challenged. Led to disparity where some staff left him at the back of the room to do little work whilst others sat him at the front and constantly chivvied him along. Quiet in class and passive engagement at best. Often got into arguments with other students and largely remained passive, but was adept at fighting and physically tough. Had done mixed martial arts and boxing training; due to take part in cage fighting (with a head guard after his 14th birthday). Suspected cannabis user. Significantly below target in every subject and every assessment data point.
Position of School Place:	Severity of verbal abuse towards some staff rather than frequency was the issue. One incident of violent conduct towards another student. Had two fixed-term

	exclusions. Had become physically violent towards the Unit Manager on one occasion.
Interventions Already Received:	Had been mentored by a member of SLT and had a time-out card which some staff were worried he would overuse, but he never actually used it to remove himself from situations.
Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	Passive and apathetic. Saw himself as an unnecessary target of staff criticism, whilst staff largely thought that he drained time away from whole-class teaching. Terence felt that he was "being treated badly because I did alright in some tests when I was 11"; he felt that his place in school was made more difficult because of his high target grades.
Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Wanted to do the programme as a means of avoiding conflict with teachers. Terence felt that if he did fewer subjects then "teachers can chill out a bit and I won't get pissed off as much". Had also said that the "modules look easy and I can have more time in my head for the subjects I have to do".
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at A-C, later changed to grades 7-4.
Aspirations:	After many different conversations about his aspirations, Terence had settled on either the armed forces or an apprenticeship with Jaguar-Land Rover (where his brother worked). Following conversations about entry requirements for each pathway Terence decided on either the apprenticeship or a post-16 college qualification in Uniformed Public Services.

Participant:	P7
Pseudonym:	Coby

Background / Issues / Crises:	Came as a managed move student from another school whilst in Y7. Reasons given included his social group, anger problems, poor relationships with others and a one-off incident of graffiti tagging a school building with spray paint. Another bright and verbally-able student who had not been fulfilling the promise of his Y6 SATs scores. Teachers often described him as a "charmer" who lied to avoid difficult situations. Had gradually been moved down ability sets in many subjects. Attendance issues had become a significant problem (dropped below 60%). Coby had become increasingly disrespectful towards staff who challenged his poor behaviour or low-quality work. Gradually his attitude worsened to the point that he was frequently removed from lessons. Coby would often act in the moment and then remain angry about the way he was treated for days afterwards. Would often wander around school refusing to go to certain lessons.
Position of School Place:	Two temporary exclusions for verbal abuse towards staff. Was often removed from lessons for not backing down. Would often distract others from learning by asking inappropriate questions and making personal comments about staff. Mother had been into school on numerous occasions but was desperate about the situation at home and school. Coby would often cause trouble in the local area by anti-social behaviour.
Interventions Already Received:	Anger management programmes had taken place with outside agencies and in-school mentors. Many teachers dreaded having Coby in their class. As he had already come to school via a managed move that became a full-time school place any further exclusions would result in him being placed at a third school and then possibly at a Pupil Referral Unit.
Summary of Attitude to	Coby felt that staff intentionally made him angry by treating him differently: "teachers won't leave it" and "I get shit all the time for trying to have a laugh".

School in Year-9:	He saw his anger as an external problem: “teachers know not to get me angry … so when they do they know what they’re gonna get”.
Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Reluctant to take part in Step-Up as the Unit also housed students that Coby had had altercations with in the past. Some of these incidents included Coby exhibiting extreme violent behaviours.
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at B-C, later changed to grades 6-4.
Aspirations:	Aspirations for a football scholarship but had been dropped from a local team’s training squad due to his attitude. Expressed an interest in an apprenticeship but had not decided which.

Participant:	P8
Pseudonym:	Billy
Background / Issues / Crises:	Another able student, who had exhibited apathy towards learning at primary school. Often put minimal effort in but was bright enough to catch-up quickly. Gulf began to widen in Y7 and Y8 where a lack of effort meant that he could not complete assessments to an acceptable standard. This led to Billy moving down ability sets over time. This meant he was then placed in ability sets for his core subjects based on his attitude and behaviour. In many subjects, he had been put in the lowest ability set or a separate ‘sink group’ in non-core subjects. Unfortunately, this de-motivated made Billy further. He became disruptive in classes and would often spoil the learning of others because he claimed to be

	'bored'. Regularly removed from lessons. Billy's behaviour included singing loudly over instructions from his teachers in French, Technology and Science.
Position of School Place:	Precarious. Had been sent on a managed move to another school due to his persistent disruptive behaviour. This failed due to the number of removals and sanctions Billy accrued.
Interventions Already Received:	Failed a managed move due to persistent disruptive behaviour. Had three temporary exclusions for displaying a poor attitude to staff. Billy would do 'dares' that were often extreme, such as setting fire to bins and defecating on the playing fields.
Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	Could easily cope with the academic expectations of KS3 but his lack of effort undermined this and demotivated him further when he could not complete tasks in enough detail. Felt that school was against him and that he was being punished for being a bright student who did not want to work hard. In Billy's words: "teachers have a problem with me because I can do it …but they make me not want to".
Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Initially reluctant about the programme as he felt that he was being "put with the thickos" and that the school was limiting his longer-term opportunities. Billy warmed to the programme when he believed that it might expose to him to less conversations with staff about his underperformance and sub-standard work.
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at A-C, later changed to grades 7-4.
Aspirations:	Spoke of aspiring to be a sports' lawyer. He had been given opportunities as part of the BTEC Sport programme which he had enjoyed. A review of Billy's academic performance at a parents' evening led to him feeling that he could pass easily when he wants to. Billy perhaps over-estimated his own ability to

	perform academically without the foundations of each subject. Spoke with some knowledge about what a university course in Law would involve.

Participant:	P9
Pseudonym:	Sam
Background / Issues / Crises:	Sam came from a home with many problems. Had been moved to live with his grandmother so that his sister (in the year below) would not be involved in his poor behaviour. His behaviour was good in school for the most part, but when his behaviour was poor it was extremely so. Had received an ASBO when he was implicated in a break-in at a local resident's home. Police confiscated his school shoes as evidence, Sam then wore trainers to school and made it a flashpoint when staff asked him to borrow shoes from the school office. Sam was a 'follower' and was consequently viewed as vulnerable by both the school and social services. Attendance was often poor and his whereabouts often resulted in school staff looking for him in the local area. Average academic ability and he did not apply himself so he often failed tests and was sanctioned for a poor standard of work. Was suspected to be involved in dealing and moving drugs around the local area for older males but he had never presented behaviours suggesting drug use. Sanctioned for smoking on an almost daily basis which he thought was "stupid", a "waste of time" and "stopped him having one thing he enjoyed" in his school day.
Position of School Place:	Precarious due to the nature of behavioural incidents, not the quantity but the severity. Had entered the school grounds during a prize-giving evening and again during a school musical performance wearing a mask. Made threats to staff who

	were guarding the doors and threw eggs at the school windows; was identified by his trainers and gait.
Interventions Already Received:	Already had two temporary exclusions for poor behaviour. The fear was that Sam would do something which would make his place at school untenable and he would then be at further risk. A managed move was declined by his grandmother for this reason.
Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	Was quiet in class and seemed reserved. He had been involved with the Unit because his behaviour was deteriorating rapidly. Sam reported that he "hates school" but that he kept his "head down" to "not get aggro from teachers".
Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Initially happy to spend more time in the Unit where the manager was mentoring him. Poor attendance showed that he was often missing days where he had French and PE. Was enthusiastic about some of the modules offered in the programme.
Academic Profile:	Target Grades set at C-E, later changed to grades 4-2.
Aspirations:	Expressed an interest in the post-16 'Uniformed Public Services' course.

Participant:	P10
Pseudonym:	Lewis
Background / Issues / Crises:	Likely on the autistic spectrum but never diagnosed. Lewis was deeply unpopular with other students due possibly to two behaviours he regularly exhibited: a worrying lack of empathy for others and verbal abuse towards other students who often told him to stop interrupting/arguing with teachers. Brightest boy in the year group in Mathematics, with the highest KS2 entry score. Literacy skills

	and ability to write legibly or in detail was highly concerning. Outside Maths he presented as apathetic and disinterested. Was quickly moved out of the higher ability sets in most other subjects. Lewis' teachers felt that he only worked when closely supervised and that he took the focus away from the rest of the class as they tried to combat his apathy. Had been in trouble with the police for setting fire to bins in the park and had also been officially cautioned for setting off fireworks aimed at other people. Mother was supportive of school but had said on many occasions that she "didn't know what to do with him" and "can't explain why he is so cruel to his sister at home". Mother also informed school that he spent a significant amount of time sat in his bedroom alone playing console games. She was concerned about the level of violence in some of the games he was playing. Despite living across the road from the school, Lewis was often late to school.
Position of School Place:	Did not present major difficulties in his behaviour but he racked up more collective sanctions than any other student in the school as he was removed from lessons on a daily basis. Had already served two fixed-term exclusions for persistently failing to follow instructions, resulting in him swearing at staff.
Interventions Already Received:	Had been considered for a fresh start at another school but the number of sanctions on his behaviour record meant that three other schools refused to accept him. The idea of moving him was perhaps unsatisfactory as Lewis may have needed to be further integrated into school rather than potentially ostracised further from it. Had been involved in a Maths mentoring programme for younger students but he refused to engage with this in the medium-term as it meant being in school for registration, which he often wasn't.

Summary of Attitude to School in Year-9:	Felt that teachers “single me out” and “let others get away with stuff”. Had developed a reputation with teachers for being difficult and argumentative. Lewis rarely completed classwork and the standard of presentation and detail in his written work was often described by teachers as “appalling”. Resisted writing in every subject except Maths.
Summary of Attitude to Step-Up in Year-9:	Saw the programme as a relief from teachers “moaning all the time” at him. He did not display any particular enthusiasm for the modules offered but was happy that he would be able to spend more time in the Unit. Lewis had begun to see the Unit as a haven away from the expectations of the classroom.
Academic Profile:	Maths Target Grade set at A*, later changed to grade 8/9, other Target Grades set at A-C, later changed to grades 7-4.
Aspirations:	Had expressed an aspiration to be a vet. Lewis had an interest in problem-solving and said that he “loves animals”. Many teachers attempted to use this as a way to engage Lewis. Refused to go to Science lessons at one point as he said it “was boring and just learning facts”. Mother expressed a concern that he lacked empathy for anyone or anything away from himself. After failing every subject’s assessments - it was discussed delicately that a career with animals would be something the in-school career service could discuss with him, but his current grades and attitude would not see him achieve the grades needed for an application for veterinary science. He also expressed an interest in studying the post-16 course in ‘Computer Game Design’.

The ten participants all had four factors in common:

- they were at serious risk of permanent exclusion;
- they had failed managed moves to at least one other school;

- all were significantly underachieving;
- they often presented challenging behaviours that affected their own and others' learning.

All participants were from single-parent families and were in receipt of free school meals and pupil premium funding.

The data was collected via three rounds of semi-structured interviews with each boy across three academic years. There were ongoing professional conversations with staff too, but these were not structured interviews. The initial round of interviews was carried out in Year-9, after Step-Up had been running for a term. A second round of interviews was conducted at the mid-point of Year-10. I intended to conduct another round of interviews at the end of Year-10, but this proved difficult as a period of work experience was organised for Step-Up students. The next round of interviews was conducted in the December of Year-11. A final opportunity to gather data presented itself on GCSE results day, although only six participants came to collect their results.

The interview data was coded at each collection point and it was intended to keep the rough thematic groupings throughout the study. However, at times, the interview data did not slot easily into such themes. The themes were more disparate than I had imagined. Not wanting to impose a basic intuitive understanding of the issues raised I widened the thematic codes. Where appropriate direct quotations from interview responses are presented for analysis.

I acknowledge a specific difficulty in conducting small-scale qualitative research involving contestable ideas about class. One of the main issues being that asking students to articulate their biographies, experiences and feelings is challenging, in that they may express some semblance of an idea that the researcher sees as neatly fitting with the conceptual considerations of the topic. However, this may not be what the student means, thereby introducing a bias that may overplay or

disavow specific experiences for the researcher's purpose. As Farrugia (2012) identifies, students' conceptualisations about class may be:

> "structured in ways which do not map neatly onto traditionally understood class divisions, but are nevertheless implicated in the production of deeply entrenched structural inequalities" (p.686).

So, whilst students may not have the language to express their experiences in a way that interconnects with established academic ideas, those experiences, feelings and thoughts are nevertheless the basis of this research study. In addition, many students may not be thankful for the label of 'working class' (Willis, 1977, p.185). Also, discussing social class with pupils might have unintended consequences, such as "shame and the fear of shame" (Reay, 2005, p.923). Arguably, the attitudes of students today are somewhat different to those seen by Bourdieu in 1979, so it was decided to allow students to take the conversation in the way that they felt they wanted it to go. This study was, after all, intending to uncover participants' experiences of a specific intervention.

Data Analysis: Students' Experiences in Year-9

It is worth mentioning that the Unit where Step-Up was delivered was often rowdy and students would frequently make it difficult for the Manager to maintain control. Consequently, the decision was taken to split the Step-Up students into smaller cohorts early in Year-9. The Unit also had students on reduced timetables in the current Year-10 (four students) and Year-11 (six students), so it was often a difficult environment.

It was a concern that the Year-9 first-round interview data would only present what might have already been intuitively known; by this I mean that the boys might be pleased with a perceived

lessening of their workload and fewer examinations. This appeared to initially be the case, however the data was more complicated than expected. In the first round of interviews, participants were asked why they thought they had been chosen for Step-Up. The boys talked with some commonality about the type of student they felt they were labelled as, but their responses varied widely when they spoke about themselves as individuals. This made me reassess my thinking inasmuch as it seemed that the boys held two views of themselves: one as a member of a perceived group of students with some common defining characteristics; and their own personal evaluation that often expressed frustration, anger and bitterness towards school and a perceived lack of fairness in the way they were treated by individual teachers.

Typically, their perceptions of the group were framed in derogatory language that suggested an 'otherness' from the rest of the school:

- "you get called a lad which means you're a dickhead who doesn't do anything you're told" (Ed);
- "people think we're hard and that's something you can use to get what you want" (Coby);
- "We haven't done well at school so far, but most people are scared of us" (Terence);
- "teachers think we're dickheads, but they're dickheads" (Sam);
- "they've put us together to get us away from swots who kiss teachers' arses, they think they're better off with us in the unit" (Zane).

However, different thoughts and feelings emerged when the boys talked about themselves as individuals. Terence explained that he felt he had chosen "a way" to be in school so that "I don't lose cred [credibility] and people don't mess with me" but he felt that if he was achieving as highly as he did at primary school (he was one of the brightest boys in the year group) then "I would have to survive school by twatting [hitting] people who take the piss" and that he would "be excluded

anyway". He also expressed an inner-conflict that whilst he wanted to "survive school" he also wanted to "do well on the quiet".

Lewis felt that Step-Up would take him out of conflict with some teachers and he expressed anger about the classroom environment in every subject except Maths and ICT, where he excelled. He felt that "teachers like their own type of kids" and they "think I'm stupid 'cos I don't work quickly". He also felt that he had been chosen for Step-Up because "it's easier for teachers to not have me in there, so they don't have to keep moaning at me". Lewis appeared to believe that being on the programme was purely in the interests of the teachers and other students in mainstream classes. He suggested that Step-Up would "keep me out of the way" and although "it would be good to have less work to do" he would be happy to be "left alone". It appeared that whilst the boys felt some affinity with other students in the Unit, they also held views about themselves which they often concealed. The participants were perhaps engaging in a reflexivity where they rationalised their place in school in a way that worked for them, or at least it explained or excused the difficulties they faced. Although they were angry and bitter about the trouble they felt they were getting into, a deeper emotion of feeling personally misunderstood or slighted began to emerge. Bourdieu's (1997) ideas about reflexivity suggest that rationality of an individual's agency within a given field constitutes "actions guided by a 'feel for the game'" which has "all the appearances of the rational action" (p.49). The participants were perhaps broadly rationalising the present by disavowing aspects of it, which then became symbolically violent on a personal level. The boys could have been engaging in Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity, by interrogating their social position and the field to decide what they could acknowledge and disavow.

The boys were also asked about their views on social class and their perceptions of school. These responses were broadly similar and arguably exposed a certain form of working-class habitus. They can be summarised as follows:

- anger about a lack of money;
- feelings that other students looked down on Step-Up boys;
- a belief that teachers did not like them;
- derogatory statements about other students in the Unit and about Step-Up.

Some of these responses displayed an awareness of complex processes within the field of school and broader social structures. For example, the idea that other students outside Step-Up saw the boys as a homogeneous group with a similar habitus:

- "they think we're all knobheads" (Ed);
- "teachers and other kids don't want me around" (Billy);
- "I've had some real shit happen to me, nobody bothers to ask me why I'm bouncing [angry] all the time" (Harvey);
- "people think I'm into drugs and shanking [stabbing] 'cos of who I hang around with" (Zane).

It could be argued that there is an awareness here of a lack of individual agency within the structures of the field; there was also some anger about how the boys felt they had been labelled. It is important to note that the boys felt some homogeneity with those they considered 'mates' or in the same social group with.

The participants spoke positively about being selected for Step-Up which meant that they would effectively become predominantly based in the Unit; I acknowledge that a novelty factor of being involved in something new could have been at play here. However, their reasons for this positivity

appeared to differ widely. Some boys suggested that they felt being in the Unit would help them stay in school and be offered pastoral care that they felt was not otherwise available to them:

- "if … they [the Unit Manager and the Behaviour Support Worker] can pick me up when stuff gets too much then I'll calm down quicker" (Sam);
- "the staff here try to understand you a bit more" (Lewis);
- "when it all kicks off I can get some peace" (Terence).

Others felt that being part of Step-Up would result in them gaining some or better qualifications:

- "I need to pass some exams and it's gone shit being in all my lessons … if I have some less work to do then I can work more on my Maths and English" (Lewis);
- "I kicked off in French 'cos I didn't want to do it … fewer exams would help me" (Sam);
- "fewer lessons, fewer exams, sounds good" (Ben).

Half of the participants identified some kind of educational failure as the main reason they had been selected for Step-Up, ranging from blaming teachers or other students to deeply-personal statements about their perceived inadequacies within the expectations of the exam system and the school:

- "teachers like swots" (Ed);
- "I don't get most lessons … stuff isn't explained and I just switch off" (Will);
- "lessons are doing exam questions all the time" (Lewis);
- "I can't remember stuff like others can" (Coby);
- "If I act up I get kicked out … it's easier than doing work" (Will).

The dominant discourse of education emphasises that all students have opportunities available to them which they either take or they fail to take due to feckless, reckless and dismissive attitudes to school. This narrative proffers the idea that educational failure is a personal failure rather than acknowledging that the wider inequalities in society exist beyond the school gates and that these often adversely affect students like these boys. Bourdieu (1986) argues that working-class failure in schools, as measured by exam success, is largely due to the structure and functions of the education system, rather than working-class culture or individual failings. Bourdieu argues that cultural deprivation theory, where certain groups and individuals supposedly have inferior norms, values, skills and knowledge, is not an effective explanation for working-class educational failure.[32] For him, education subjects working-class children to a form of symbolic violence where prestige is conferred on other types of habitus. The participants' responses arguably elicited an experience of otherness, alienation and failure felt at a deeply-personal level.

I was aware at this point that my questioning had strayed in the interviews. In an attempt to capture the boys' perceptions of being selected for the programme I had not emphasised questions about what they felt about the Step-Up modules they would be studying. Instead the boys were seeing this as a form of education that was not about preparing them for life after school. Rather it was perceived as a way to sit less exams and to reduce conflict with others. I decided to emphasise this line of questioning about their perceptions of the actual modules in the programme in the next round of interviews. In this regard, some of these boys saw the Unit and Step-Up as a safety net from the main school.

If it were assumed that white working-class boys share a collective habitus, then it could be seen as being in conflict with the middle-class habitus required to succeed in the education system. It might

[32] Bourdieu argues that working class failure in schools is the fault of the education system, not working-class culture.

be assumed that the white working-class habitus defies authority, is unconcerned about underachievement, feels disassociated from opportunities for social mobility and lacks aspiration (See Spielman 2018; IPPR 2012). However, much of the data from the first round of interviews contradicts this. Many such discourses appear to see white working-class males as an anthropological tribe, native or primitive culture, with the implication that they need to be understood through the lens of their otherness or else converted to the majority's ways of thinking. They are possibly misread, misunderstood or they fail to comprehend the feel for the game that the majority are privy to.

As I analysed the data further, it was clear that there was some collective identity felt between the boys. Individuals often spoke about how they were similar to the rest of the Step-Up group, but this was also contradicted by the way they differentiated themselves within it. I wish to note an important finding here; that the collective habitus emerging appeared to be a collective isolation that was felt on an individual basis, but it was held in common by the majority of the participants. Paradoxically they were perhaps united in their individual isolation. The majority of the boys (seven out of ten) expressed feelings of isolation and alienation from the main school in this first round of interviews:

- "no one cares if I fail or not" (Zane);
- "I'm getting dragged into other's problems" (Terence);
- "I don't get on with anyone down here" (Sam).

The expected collective 'we' did not appear in Year-9 students' opinions about Step-Up as often as it might have been expected to; instead it was littered with a subjective first-person 'I'. I was struck by

the lack of connection between what the school believed it was doing to help students and the personal experiences of the participants.

The participants were mainly living an individual experience of Step-Up even though it was their perceived collective characteristics and circumstances that led to them being placed on the programme. Bourdieu (1986) argues that habitus is defined by its most crucial aspect – that it "naturalises itself and its cultural rules, agendas and values" (Webb et al., 2014, p.40). For my participants, the way they spoke about themselves as part of a wider group who were unwelcome in the mainstream was a natural extension of their precarious positions in school. However, their dispositions in the Year-9 interviews suggested that they felt their own positionalities were separate and were used to denigrate some of the other Step-Up students as being less worthy of help or support. The ten participants were certainly aware of similarities between themselves and others in the Step-Up group. All participants believed they were grouped together for specific reasons:

- "I'm with the tough lads" (Terence);
- "rest of the school will get more done if us lot are in here" (Ed);
- "I'm with others that people can't be arsed with" (Coby);
- "teachers think we're all gangsters" (Zane).

However, the majority (eight out of ten) also highlighted differences to disassociate themselves from the group:

- "I'm not a pothead like some of these but teachers will think I am" (Zane);
- "I don't wreck lessons like …(naming students that do) …I just like to have a laugh sometimes" (Billy);
- "I find school work really hard …I'm not a twat like (name of student)" (Harvey).

In some ways, these white working-class boys were experiencing some educational failure. However, the range of reasons that their school places were precarious were varied. Having said that, some teachers did view them as being collectively difficult to deal with, but the nature of each individual students' crisis in education was just that, individual and not collective. It was revealing that the majority of the students identified themselves in their 'otherness' from the majority of the other students on Step-Up and in the Unit. I asked Lewis about his feelings towards some of the other boys on Step-Up; his responses surprised me. He employed some invective language in his descriptions: "thickos", "stoners", "crims", "dealers" and "dolers". Lewis said that other Step-Up students "think I'm a swot", "think I'm soft" and "think I'm boring 'cos I don't talk".

Contrastingly, Lewis felt that students in his main groups (which he had mainly been removed from) felt that he was "a gangster", "a trouble-causer", "wasted time" and was "lazy". He went on to say how he felt the majority of teachers saw him as a "waster", "loner", "argumentative" and "they think I don't care". I felt uncomfortable interviewing him as he was speaking with candid reflection. This perhaps came from knowing that I could not push a similar line of questioning with other participants as I was approximately halfway through the interviews at that point, but also because there was a proverbial 'can of worms' being opened that I was not in a position to rectify. Either way, this particular boy's experience of school was clearly alienating. Bourdieu (1986) sees schools as being agents of social reproduction, but more specifically he considers how an individual's habitus is shaped by how well they can or cannot understand how to negotiate these relations.

Perhaps Lewis had carved himself some semantic space or he had failed to negotiate the rules and not practised what Webb et al. (2014) refer to as "a more discreet and secretive way of distinguishing [themself] …from the play of the system" (p.125).

When the first modules were delivered, many of the boys initially felt that it was preferable to being in option subjects:

- “it’s less hassle and it’s done in modules so I don’t have to remember owt” (Will);
- “the work is easy and it’s not for exams” (Lewis);
- “it’s easy to do so I don’t get angry” (Sam).

The boys were initially positive about the reduction in the number of GCSE subjects they were required to study. They also appeared to value the support of the Unit if they were having a difficult day or conflict resolution was necessary. The data shows that they initially saw the removal from other options as helpful, as a way to gain higher grades in English and Maths and as a part-time version of school. However, many of the boys were later resentful about being treated as different to students in the mainstream. Many continued to perform significantly below their target grades in English and Maths. This was problematic as the opportunity to receive further support and time on Maths and English was one of the main benefits of Step-Up when it was implemented. In this sense, the boys were going to have limited future options. I felt sympathy for the boys, but it had been made clear by the Headteacher from the outset that the boys could only stay in school if they joined Step-Up.

I expected a narrative strand of ‘a lack of understanding about our lives’ to present itself in the initial interviews and it did, of a fashion. In conversation with teachers, I was struck by their collective labelling of the participants, suggesting that these boys shared a disposition that was anti-school as a form of vindictive resistance. They said that these boys:

- ‘destroy lessons’;
- ‘others cannot learn with them there’;

- ‘they are not bothered about consequences’;
- ‘they resist learning and do not see any value in hard work’.

I initially interpreted this as a conflict between the dispositions of teachers, under pressure to secure results, to maintain classroom discipline and an understanding that successful learning is modelled on their own behaviours and dispositions. However, over time, the above statements were shown to be patently untrue for these ten boys across the data collected. The ten participants in the study were not all students with very low target grades; consequently they were causing what was seen as a catastrophic effect on the school’s progress results. I expected to find that the boys’ views, collective or individual, would range around a perceived unfairness in the way teachers treated different students, especially those that did not fit in with the school’s expectations. The initial interviews did not yield this. When asked about their perceptions of learning, academic subjects, teachers, progress and their futures, responses ranged around a perception that they could learn effectively when they chose to; that there was plenty of time left to get their heads down; and that Step-Up was there so the school did not get into trouble for excluding them. Importantly, there was an amalgamation of collective habitus and individual dispositions. All of these could be termed as forms of resistance, but it would have been incorrect to suggest that the boys were all educationally failing, by choice or not, for the same reasons.

Teachers told me that if some of these boys ‘worked harder’, ‘pulled their socks up’, or ‘actually knew how hard it was to work for a living’ then they would see how important school was. The discourse that working-class students should aspire to middle-class ideals, that better suit the field of education, is symbolically violent in many ways. The boys expressed that they were often told to ‘work hard now’ so that a ‘better future’ could be had through a ‘well-paid job with prospects’. As I conducted the interviews, it became apparent that the boys were initially reticent to speak negatively about teachers, perhaps because my role as Deputy Headteacher made them feel that

they should not. In this sense, a study within my own school was a hindrance; however, I now view it as a strength as I knew the background of the boys much better than if I was an outsider conducting research.

Whilst Step-Up could have been seen as a way to reduce conflict between the boys and school, by reducing their workload, removing them from option subjects they might find difficult and removing them from broken relationships with their peers and staff, in the initial interviews the majority of the boys saw it as helping them to do better in English and Maths, and as their chance to finish school without being permanently excluded.

It was important to note that in my conversations with teachers, the language used to describe the boys was symbolically violent and displayed a frustration that these boys were being given preferential treatment despite their poor behaviour records. One of the themes in the data which I felt most uncomfortable with, was 'laddishness'. The boys did not see this as a barrier to learning, although many teachers did so. The social reality of laddishness, its conceptual basis, existence and influences are complex, but many teachers summed it up by phrases such as:

- "they think it's funny";
- "face-saving";
- "immaturity";
- "work avoidance because learning is seen as geeky";
- "a lack of resilience if something is a bit tricky to do";
- "rowdy behaviour";
- "cheek";
- "yobbish and loutish";
- "a pre-occupation with the gutter".

The idea of 'laddishness' is perhaps a lazy attempt to problematise boys' behaviour as a self-inflicted issue. There is no doubt that some of the previous behaviours of my participants, that saw them receive many exclusions prior to the beginning of Step-Up, could be seen as extreme forms of masculinity. However, in the Year-9 interviews these boys differentiated between each other more than they identified with each other.

One particular participant - Coby, illustrated his difficulty in mediating different positionalities within school. He expressed a delight in getting out of doing hard work but also a sense of isolation from students in the mainstream in how they viewed him. Coby said he had:

- "knackered some lessons so I could get out of doing any work";
- "pissed the teacher off because she spoke to me like shit";
- "saw my arse with the swots in my class".

However, Coby also indicated that being on Step-Up made him look "like a dummy" and that he "couldn't do it" when he knew that he could if he wanted to. Lewis, a frequent occupier of top sets when younger, went further and expressed that he:

> "would have to spend time with the dummies now. I like the less subjects and the work will be less but I will have to see some proper knobs every day and it will make me try even less" (Lewis).

When I asked Lewis if he had considered this lower down the school he said "no, I couldn't be bothered on a certain day and then I got used to it". Lewis' work-ethic had become normalised by teachers accepting lower-expectations but also by Lewis consistent opposition towards staff. In

seeking to uncover if a particular habitus had been formed at home or within his peer group (which was doubtful considering his attestations) I asked where this attitude had come from. His response was that when he first took the Step-Up letter home his mother was angry with the school but mostly with him.

Another participant – Sam, also encountered tension at home when Step-Up began. He said that his mother:

> "went mental, she was proper embarrassed about me being with some real idiots, smelling of skunk or getting a caution from the feds 'cos of who I was hanging out with" (Sam).

I questioned Sam on his use of terms such as "idiots", "feds" and "skunk" and asked if these were new feelings he had or if they belonged to his peer group. Sam claimed that such language came from "gangster rap" and he "had to fit in with …[his] image". He said that:

> "I've been different to the rest for ages, top set kids work hard. I've been clever enough to just try a bit and get it done alright. But GCSE work was started in Year-8 and the tough lads are thick and hang around each other, the swots all behave like robots" (Sam).

Sam also said that "the lads are scared of me, most of the girls think I'm selfish but a few of the girls found it funny". It could be argued that some agency was being grasped at, or enacted, as Sam was potentially judging his own place in the hierarchy of the field. Importantly, Sam viewed the material factors of his place in the hierarchy (the amount of work he had missed, comments on friendship groups), but his responses were also heavily symbolic. He saw being a "swot" as undesirable.

However, Sam also recognised some similarities between the specific dispositions of these students and their teachers and defined himself in opposition to this as a way to exercise a degree of agency. His understanding that others were scared of him suggested that he held some symbolic power within the larger school group, disavowing the opinion of the majority of the girls.

Sam also said that he felt better positioned to make a success out of Step-Up than some of the other students who he felt clever than:

"I can get these things [modules] done quickly …some of the others can't even read the stuff. I'm top-set Step-Up, me …I'm only on it because I didn't put any effort in lower down. I could have got a lot more out of learning …but as long as I get a few subjects then it don't matter". (Sam)

Sam potentially displayed an emerging egalitarian habitus in that he had begun to consider what are the best and worst-case scenarios within the limits of being on Step-Up. It could also be argued that what he had experienced as symbolic violence to his own tastes and dispositions was now becoming material. Sam appeared to acknowledge that his own tastes and dispositions differed from other students, both in the mainstream and in Step-Up. I began to wonder if Sam was saving face. Either way, he was in the minority in weighing-up the options that Step-Up gave him.

The majority of the boys felt that Step-Up provided them with a sanctuary from being in trouble in mainstream lessons and relief from the additional workload involved in the rigours of further GCSE subjects. Some teachers presumed that the participants were all experiencing the same feelings about their educational failure so far. The participants felt that they were viewed as a collective by some teachers and the students in the mainstream, but within Step-Up the boys were mediating their positionality within the group. All the boys still welcomed their involvement Step-Up, although

the reasons ranged from being glad that they had less exams for some, to a genuine desire to improve their achievement in English and Maths.

Data Analysis: Students' Experiences in Year-10

By Year-10, the Unit had been extended to include four portacabin classrooms adjacent to it. This was in response to the difficulties of housing students with a range of issues in the Unit (such as mental health challenges and extreme violent/aggressive behaviours), on top of having the Step-Up modules delivered in the same building.

The interviews in the February of Year-10 were conducted shortly after an assessment week in core and option subjects. The majority (six out of ten participants) of the boys still felt that the reduction in subjects and related pressure was welcome. However, the Behaviour Support Worker had recently resigned and cuts to the school budget meant he was not replaced. This led to the decision to take timetabled teachers away from extra support sessions scheduled separately from normal lesson times. The atmosphere in the Unit changed over the period of one month; there were now more behaviour referrals coming through on a daily basis and fewer staff to deal with them. It was noticed, by both myself and the Unit Manager, that a collective mind-set had begun to take root in the Unit, which included the Step-Up students. With seven of the boys, there appeared to be some emerging prestige attached to being removed from timetabled lessons. Also, some collective poor behaviour was increasingly occurring in Step-Up with some participants taking advantage of the way Step-Up was being delivered with students working on modules in different rooms, often only loosely supervised due to staff shortages.

I must admit to personal frustration here, but the financial circumstances of the school meant I could do little to change the situation. It was decided to begin discussion about post-16 options in an

attempt to focus the boys on their next steps. Several providers and employers were invited in talk to the boys. Options discussed ranged from level-3 courses (A-Levels or BTEC equivalents), level-2 courses (GCSE vocational courses) and apprenticeships. These would be contingent on the boys achieving some success in the GCSE examinations.

Another potential option for students who were close to permanent exclusion was early college transfer (ECT), which would see them complete examinations with the school but teaching would be conducted in a FE college environment or other setting. This could include Maths and English teaching and a work placement for three days per week. The cost for a student to access this option was around £10,000 per year – so this was never realistic due to the school's dire financial situation. However, three of the boys (Lewis, Terence and Ed) requested such a pathway after a local college visitor to the Unit had mentioned it as a potential option. This had some immediate consequences within the Unit. After it became clear that ECT would not be possible, the three boys became negative about Step-Up:

- "the module I'm doing now is about managing money …I want to be doing building …or doing some work that pays" (Terence);
- "the modules are crap …I could be earning or getting Maths" (Lewis);
- "why am I learning about controlling my temper …it's better than being in History but it's bollocks" (Ed).

The other participants did not express such views. At the beginning of Year-10, most of the boys were attending core subject lessons in mainstream classrooms but having the rest of their lessons (sometimes social times too as a punishment for poor behaviour) in the Unit. However, some students' attitudes towards being in mainstream lessons deteriorated during the year. The Unit Manager reported that:

> "I'm having to pick up a lot of the boys on the programme on a daily basis from Maths and English. I think it's a mixture of feeling behind, preferring the Unit where the sanctions are not enforced as quickly and opting out or tapping out on a particular day when they just don't fancy it" (Unit Manager).

Arguably, the boys were experiencing two types of schooling and as they were less exposed to mainstream classroom expectations and routines they became less able to meet them. By withdrawing them from full participation in the 'mainstream' school certain boys began to resent having to bridge these two experiences. The more personalised approach to learning employed in the Unit was perhaps the correct approach for the participants; however, it arguably had the consequence of providing a sanctuary away from the pressures, expectations and demands of GCSEs. This might have been viewed as a good thing for some of the boys, but it was also problematic inasmuch as some of the boys saw the Unit Manager collecting them from class as a safety net to be used if they encountered problems in class or if they were having a bad day:

- "Mr F [Unit Manager] comes to get you if you kick off" (Sam);
- "when I get angry then I get told to go … at least I can get calm in the unit" (Billy);
- "I'm refusing to go to Maths and English, it's the only time I get done" (Coby).

The altercations that occurred in lessons often arose where some of the boys felt that they were being spoken to disrespectfully by teachers. The Unit Manager removing them placated this situation but it did little to build relationships and often made it more difficult to persuade some of the boys to return to that classroom the next day. Whilst their removal from a lesson was an immediate way to stop a situation escalating, such actions potentially inflicted symbolic violence on individual boys. Another part of the problem was that if one of the boys had been isolated for a day

within school, he might then go to a lesson where he would not be able to join in or succeed. This situation presented two difficulties for the boys. Firstly, they had missed content, knowledge and skills. Secondly, they did not regularly practise classroom expectations or build relationships with staff or other students. The support of the Unit and the different ways of working there, meant that the boys were symbolically disadvantaged when attending mainstream lessons.
As Coby put it:

> "If I didn't do the work 'cos I wasn't in last lesson and teachers act like you did do it and you should know it. That's when I get pissed [angry, upset]." (Coby)

However, the instances of students being picked-up in such circumstances became less frequent after the Behaviour Support Worker resigned. Consequently, some of the boys were involved in conflict much more regularly, often leaving teachers in situations where one of the boys was not collected or simply sat outside the classroom causing further disturbance.

The original idea that the reduced number of examinable subjects would result in more focused time on Maths and English was not the reality for many participants at this point. The extra time that was scheduled for Maths and English would sometimes be a spare English teacher talking through some tasks, online revision or the boys working unsupervised in a room together. The boys were constantly reminded of the need for them to pass English and Maths. During Year-10, the majority of the boys were beginning to consider what their post-16 options might be. Four of the boys showed a specific interest in an apprenticeship, but they were disappointed and despondent when they learned that the apprenticeships offered locally had increasingly high entry requirements. For example, plumbing and building apprenticeships were requiring grade Bs and Cs at GCSE.

Where local low or semi-skilled working-class jobs might once have featured there was now a prevalence of post-16 courses, such as BTEC awards, which sounded vaguely vocational, such as 'computer games design', 'uniformed public services' and 'sports coaching'. All the Step-Up students were given a chance to speak to post-16 providers and potential employers during the school day. It was revealing to observe the participants avoid detailed conversations with the college representatives and to spend the majority of the afternoon talking to friends rather than seeing this as an opportunity to gain contacts or gather more information.

Bourdieu (1986) sees habitus as physical embodiments of cultural capital, the deeply engrained habits, skills and dispositions that an individual possesses due to their life experiences; yet here was the school seemingly providing an opportunity and, as some of the Unit staff saw it, these boys were seemingly refusing to help themselves. However, such a conclusion misunderstands the concept of cultural capital. To presume that the boys understood the value of various forms of capital and how they could be exchanged within and outside the field of school is problematic. Webb et al. (2014) also identify that working-class children and their parents are made to engage in master discourses which "communicate with …school on its terms rather than their own" (p.120). If the boys in Step-Up were aware of their restricted options, either due to their family's cultural trajectory or an unconscious acceptance of the pathways open to them, then they were unlikely to step outside of this just because the Unit Manager was willing them to do so.

Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital did help to illuminate and understand what was happening to the boys at this point. The Unit Manager even set up practise conversations so the boys could make a positive first impression with visitors to school. This made little difference as the boys were both free and constrained by school life (free to pick and choose but constrained by the structures of school) but were further alienated by more adult discussions about their futures. The boys' did not

express an attitude of 'when I leave school and start work then I'll be fine', it was instead replaced with a kind of paralysis.

Bourdieu (1990b) is critical of prior notions about the opposition between an individual and society. He is also critical of post-modern and existentialist emphases on individual subjective outlooks that can never be 'pinned down'. Bourdieu calls this the "absurd opposition" between individual and society (p.65). He believes that both perspectives are necessary but leave too much unknown, too much to chance and disavow how the individual is organised by their habitus. Bourdieu states that "all my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?" (p.65). In this sense, the social world becomes objectified in that we are likely to act in a way dependent on others' responses but the range of possibilities and probabilities that make an individual more likely to choose certain actions rather than others is organised by an individual's habitus.

These predispositions, tendencies, propensities and inclinations do not then have to derive from fact or actual experience. The ambiguity for Bourdieu then comes from the 'rules of the game' often being unwritten but still generally understood along with society being organised in a particular way that informs the individual of their own perceived position and their range of options. Such rules are a paradox for Bourdieu, but one which cannot be resolved as society is both objectively and subjectively factual.

The career's fair could be seen as an interactive failure between the boys' expectations and culture and those of the school, colleges and employers. It appeared that this was one of the ways that the participants had some awareness of the collective orchestration of school life, employment, prospects and choices but without knowledge of how to navigate it. This was potentially recognising that there are 'rules to the game' but with little understanding of the nuances, leading to a chaotic

and clumsy approach in navigating what is perhaps understood by students from middle-class backgrounds; partly due to a lack of familiarity, experience or it being alien to the individual's or collective habitus.

During the Year-10 interviews it was apparent that the participants' feelings towards Step-Up were more disparate than collective. Some of them discussed their futures whilst others spoke only about the immediate present. The responses of those who spoke about their futures could be coded under the following headings:

- concerns about college courses: "I don't know what to pick …I don't want something boring or too hard" (Lewis);
- not knowing what employment they could do or be offered: "there aren't any jobs that pay enough" (Zane);
- concerns about how far behind in their learning they felt: "I don't know enough to do any mocks …I'm way behind in Maths and English" (Terence).

The responses of those who only spoke about the present could be coded as:

- not wanting to extend their learning: "I don't want to do sums that I don't need for a job" (Ed);
- not wanting to be embarrassed: "you get asked loads of questions …you get hassle when you don't know …I don't want to be asked" (Harvey);
- feeling angry that the work was so difficult: "every day is hard and I can't remember stuff …it's boring …it's not fair that I have to do all the core exams …I can't pass anyway" (Sam);

- feeling that their day-to-day school experience was negative: “same shit every day …I get done all the time …I’m a Unit kid so I get spoke to like shit …never get told well done” (Coby).

Arguably, these students were aware of deficits here. Either:

- their own perceived learning deficits in how they do or do not meet the requirements of the exam system to be deemed successful,

  or

- they perceive a deficit in the system that they feel does not cater for them.

At this point in the Year-10 interviews, the former was more evident in the data, although this began to shift towards the latter as they came to the end of Year-11. One of the main benefits of being involved in Step-Up for many of these boys was that it took them away from daily conflict with some teachers who had whole mainstream classes to provide for. Coby, in particular, began to talk about being disrespected by the language that was used about him and Step-Up across the rest of the school. Coby said:

> “Kids take the piss ‘cos of Step-Up. They think I’m trouble …I don’t have the same mates anymore ‘cos I don’t see them …Teachers talk to me different now …first sign of me saying ‘no’ and it’s a ‘call-out’ for removal …it’s like the sirens go off and the police are called …it’s over the top …I get told to talk with respect but never get any [respect] back.” (Coby)

Coby clearly felt a sense of injustice and had some awareness of possible symbolic violence being exerted against himself and the other students in Step-Up. The imposition of specific norms on a

group possessing less power is the very definition of symbolic violence. Coby not being in mainstream lessons had been accepted as the norm by some teachers, some mainstream students and Coby himself when he was lower down the school. Coby said he did not want to conform to the expectations of mainstream school but he also felt that school was a battleground for him, which left him feeling angry and disrespected. If symbolic violence does play a "fundamental role in the reproduction and naturalising of the social hierarchy" then it perhaps follows that this naturalising was occurring in Coby's disposition towards school (Webb et al., 2014, p.118). Coby felt that school was a battleground because 'school was school' and 'Coby was Coby'.

Within the Year-10 data, the boys' responses could be split into two discernible strands: their preference for concrete or abstract thought. This phenomenon has been mooted in many different ways over time. Bernstein (1961) argues that education has consistently failed to acknowledge students' backgrounds, including their social class, so consequently a one-dimensional curriculum fails them. He sees the success in education as requiring 'abstract and analytical' thought that goes beyond the 'descriptive and concrete', with those from the working class unpractised and unfamiliar with what the education system purports to offer them. In Bourdieusian terms, this could be seen as inability to navigate the field of school skilfully due to a lack of the specific capitals which educational advantage requires.

Abstract thought could be of benefit to a student if they are able to see each school day as a formative step which may lead to higher achievement and further educational opportunities as a preparation for aspirational employment. Arguably though, this puts the onus on the individual rather than the deeply-entrenched inequalities which exist in societal structures. Contemporary discourse instead focuses on characterising white working-class boys in terms of deficit. Blandford (2018) argues that white working-class children are not born to fail, but educators must "help them identify opportunities" (p.1). Skeggs (1997) sees white working-class students being involved in the

war of class formation, which operates between the abstract structures and concrete specifics of everyday life. In a Bourdieusian sense, this could be interpreted as the interaction between the field of school and the habitus of working-class students.[33]

All the boys described themselves in terms of 'otherness', although not always in terms of deficit. Four of the boys' responses could be coded as 'deliberate opposition':

- "I ignore them and do my own thing …not bothered about getting done" (Lewis);
- "… fucked off getting told what to do …other kids make it harder 'cos they suck up to teachers" (Zane);
- "I just say no …anything I'm told to do" (Sam);
- "get talked to like a little kid so give some of it back" (Will).

These comments all seem to place individuals in opposition to others students, staff and Step-Up, rather than wider school systems, the exam system or societal structures more broadly. Zane summed this up with an almost glib observation: "why do learning when I could be earning?" Zane's positionality here was that he had outgrown school and was now resenting elements of it. Zane's desire to engage in the master discourses of employment belied his behaviour and attitude when career conversations took place. Zane claimed that Step-Up was wasting his time that could be better spent earning money. Further opposition to Step-Up came out in comments such as:

- "these modules are for divvies" (Sam);
- "I have a reduced timetable …I'm doing worse now than I was doing before" (Lewis);
- "I'm not really in school now …just sat in the Unit …it's easier …it's alright" (Ed).

[33] Skeggs (1997) takes this further as a discussion of how identity politics arise and the struggles that occur when marginalised individuals seek to be empowered.

It seemed that some of the boys were in opposition to what was happening to them in school for two possible reasons. Firstly, there was a collective habitus of resistance developing in the Unit amongst some of the boys, or it was possibly an emotional reaction to feeling that their deficits, academic or behavioural, had excluded them from mainstream classes. The comments these boys made were often paradoxical, such as feeling angry that they were likely to fail in the final exams alongside seeking a reduced timetable so they could arrive later and leave early on specific days.

Three other boys' responses could be grouped as 'feeling excluded':

- "I'm worse at English and Maths now …lessons in the Unit have to get stopped when there's a kick-off" (Ed);
- "I want to go back to my normal classes …for lessons I'm doing some exams on" (Coby);
- "the Step-Up stuff is pointless …I'm stuck doing it now" (Zane).

These boys perceived some deeply-personal costs with being involved in Step-Up. Coby simply said: "I don't see friends now …I stay quiet in the Unit".

The other two boys responded with 'conscious refusal':

- "it's [Step-Up] shit …lessons are shit …I kick-off and get sent home" (Ed);
- "I'm in charge – if I get it here late …go home early …don't want to be here" (Zane).

Arguably, there is a sense here that these boys do not feel equipped, capable or invested enough to master the 'game' of school rationally, by either not being endowed with the necessary information or as a deliberate act of resistance that disavows any lasting consequences. This raised a further

question: 'would these boys genuinely be happy with less?' However, I had to acknowledge that if I asked this I would perhaps be promoting the doxic values of an education system which purports to pit meritocracy against the fecklessness of those who refuse the opportunities it offers.

During the Year-10 interviews, the boys were again asked about their perceptions of Step-Up. Their responses could be divided by the simple dichotomy of *what it gave them* and *what it didn't give them*. There was evidence here that the boys were experiencing Step-Up in an individualised way; the sense of collective belonging was largely absent in the data. In this sense, I could not see an emerging collective habitus, although there were patterns around the forms of resistance which some of the boys exhibited towards some staff and the wider school via their attitudes to learning. Participants suggested that Step-Up had the following positive implications:

- More time to study English and Maths – "I can just get on the Maths computer programme" (Coby); "I can do some classwork I didn't finish slower" (Lewis);
- Respite from conflict in mainstream lessons – "Mr F [Unit Manager] picks you up and brings you down to the Unit …Gets me out of swearing at teachers …Doing the Units calms me down" (Zane); "Being a Step-kid [Step-Up student] means I have a way to get out when it's kicking off" (Terence);
- Specific learning that they felt they could be successful in – "The Units are simple ...I always get told well done" (Sam;) "I'm proud of my Step-Up folder …it's neat and up-to-date" (Harvey).

It is worth noting that the positive comments about Step-Up arguably show that the boys felt success in completing tasks, keeping organised folders and taking some pride in their work. These are all micro-manifestations of what was encouraged and conferred with prestige in mainstream lessons.

The participants suggested that Step-Up had the following negative consequences:

- A feeling that mainstream lessons alienated them – "I don't go to every Maths and English class …it goes on to fast and I get lost …makes me not want to bother" (Ben); "Teachers treat me different now …they think that I can't be arsed …there's no patience" (Billy);
- There was no time for meaningful vocational education allied to their own interests – "I want to learn about motor mechanics ...the school should pay for that instead of doing shit in folders all week" (Terence); "worksheets on how to wash myself when I want to do work experience is bollocks" (Sam);
- An atmosphere was building in the Unit which was unpleasant – "I don't want to go to the Unit on some days …it's always shouting and time-out stuff" (Lewis); "I like winding the others up …it's the only place I can fuck about" (Ed).

The Year-9 interviews showed that the boys viewed Step-Up and their removal from GCSE subjects was seen as broadly positive; with the boys generally determined to make use of the 'opportunity'. In the Year-10 interviews, some of the boys began to directly challenge and reject authority. This could be seen as a component within the habitus, as it is produced through social positioning and experience. There were clear acknowledgements of concepts such as power, respect and priorities. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest that working-class students navigate the field of school, even if in a limited way, to adjust their positionality within shifting "virtualities, potentialities, eventualities" (p.135). In doing so, the data shows that the boys were navigating the field of school more widely and Step-Up specifically to see where they fit in. Stahl (2015b) calls this the 'egalitarian habitus' defined as "the internal process of reconciling dispositions, which …[allow students] …to constitute themselves as 'having value' in the hegemonic neoliberal discourses of 'best' and 'worst' where they are often devalued" (paragraph 5). In the Year-10 interviews, power was notable by the boys' concept of respect, which they appeared to value highly. Only Ed and Zane appeared to enjoy

having power over others in the Unit; for other participants it was disagreeable to use power in this way. Either way, the data shows that there was an emerging dissatisfaction towards Step-Up in general.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is once again relevant here. There appeared to be an emerging opinion that Step-Up was not fulfilling the boys' needs, either by a perceived lack of opportunity or by bringing opportunities to reproduce the poor behaviour that led to some participants having a precarious position in school in the first place. All the boys began to further differentiate themselves from students in the mainstream. It is notable the language regarding other students and teachers was generalised and used to suggest that the participants were different, but also that they were not given a fair chance by others in school. This could be seen as drawing on an egalitarian habitus in order to 'save face'. Reay's (2005) attestation that white working-class boys often engage in a "staunch denial of class thinking and feeling, especially one's own" is relevant here (p.923). Arguably, the data showed an awareness of hierarchy and a resentment towards students and teachers who were valued more in the school. The egalitarian habitus could then be seen as manifesting itself in an unwillingness to articulate a belief in class, instead it was presented as an individual's own positionality within a hierarchy.

There appeared to be a decreasing agency in the responses of many of the boys. They now described themselves in terms of *deficit*:

> "other kids are getting on …I'm in the Unit …it's a laugh sometimes …I hate swots cos they think they are better than me" (Terence).

Terence saw a disparity between those who were successfully engaging in learning and what he was capable of, or at least what he was allowed to be capable of. I asked Zane about how he felt that

other students in the mainstream were 'getting on' and whether he would prefer to be there. He replied that he was falling further behind and that Step-Up as a title was "taking the piss …my grades have gone down". He was becoming very resentful about completing modules which he felt were for "thickos". Zane also acknowledged that his previous conduct and attitude had given the school few options for his education: "school has tried stuff …but now it's all been blaming me". Arguably, Zane perceived symbolic violence as he reflexively considered and evaluated his limitations within the field of school.

Zane potentially had an awareness of the interaction between his habitus and the field. He did refer to a wider identity when he spoke of "lads like me and my crew" [crew: mates/group, with connotations of gangland culture].[34] Zane was increasingly aware of an idea of belonging and identity through the positionality of his peer group versus, what he perceived to be, the dispositions and habits of other students in school. I would emphasise that the gang-referenced language used by Zane is not necessarily a manifestation of social class, as I have heard similar language used as part of youth sub-cultures by both ethnic minorities, black students and white students, including middle-class boys influenced by specific music culture. For Zane, there was clearly a sense of opposition between his own disposition and that of the school. Bourdieu himself refers to habitus and institutions as "two modes of objectification of past history" (1990. p.57). It could be that staff in school had seen boys like Zane before and therefore a narrative around what would benefit him or whether such actions were worthwhile were prevalent. Perhaps Zane's interview responses acknowledged not just his own positionality but also how he felt the opportunities afforded to him were narrowing.

[34] See Simmons, Connelly and Thompson (2020) for a discussion about white males adoption of street language and gangster culture, and how this is symptomatic of a rejection of mainstream education and employment. They argue that this does not mean that the values, attitudes and aspirations of such males can be simply categorised as low or self-defeating.

Generally, the Step-Up cohort and the Unit continued to be seen as very different to the main school. The Unit Manager reported that the work ethic of most of the participants, and the wider Unit group, had deteriorated. During this time, many of the participants' core subjects were taught by teachers (with timetable gaps) brought into the Unit. This damaged relationships in some cases, but was treated as a fresh start by others. James and Biesta (2007) draw on Bourdieu's work to argue that learning has a cultural context in which social practices are mediated and therefore students' actions and dispositions are inextricably part of a learning culture (p.23). The compensatory form of education that the boys were receiving was arguably contributing to a specific learning culture in the Unit and therefore informing the egalitarian habitus of each boy, where they were navigating and mediating the range of opportunities and perceived limitations open to them.

Throughout Year-10 the Unit undoubtedly became a more challenging place to be and to learn in. The Unit Manager often had to intervene in Step-Up sessions and even remove students. He suggested that one of the main issues was that the modules being covered were simplistic and predominantly worksheet based, whilst the higher-level modules were too difficult for most of the cohort. It was revealing that, during these interviews, all the boys seemed to have some awareness of the compensatory aspect of Step-Up. Comments included:

- "put me with the divvies so if I piss about it doesn't matter" (Sam);
- "do less exams …fail less *(laughs sarcastically)"* (Coby);
- "they can't exclude us so we're doing worksheets on easy stuff" (Ben).

What united their responses was that they all appeared to distance themselves from what they felt they did not possess: middle-class dispositions, motivation to achieve more highly, and productive relationships with teachers.

Eight of the boys felt that their focus had shifted more to life outside school, not necessarily to what their future options may be but rather that their positionality and individual habitus was now taking priority or importance over their engagement in school. These boys felt that their individual consciousness was emerging with clear ideas about the person they were; this often put them in conflict with the expectations of some school staff: that they are children who need directing morally and academically. Many of the boys belonged to older friendship groups outside of school, engaging in anti-social behaviour, where their status had a high currency. The boys appeared to view their social groups and friendships as being the opposite to school; they were not seen as failures in their social groups and the rules of their social lives were unambiguous.

Bourdieu (1987) explores the ambiguities within social life which can be applied to the field of school: "you can …[talk of a rule] on the condition that you distinguish clearly between rule and regularity. The social game is regulated. It's the locus of certain regularities" (p.81-2). In this sense, social life becomes a kind of pattern encoded in how we act. Furthermore, what are understood as rules may be nothing more than accepted regularities. Habitus then may illuminate the underlying structures of social life which become engrained. In the Year-10 interviews, the ambiguities of what lay ahead for these boys caused four of them increasing agitation. There had been a shift in these four boys' attitudes, in that they now seemed highly agitated about what options might be available to them at post-16 and a sense of dread about assessments and examinations. Their sense of objective possibilities had either narrowed based on their understanding of the qualifications they needed to access particular post-16 pathways or the strategies available to them to navigate the field and perceive a likelihood of success had been deemed sub-consciously erroneous.

Bourdieu's (1988) attestation that social actors, develop different strategies for organising future options, actions or routines is relevant here. For some participants, their options were narrowed by the number of subjects they were now studying, by their academic underperformance or by their

behaviour records. The boys spoke of potential pathways in a much more restricted way. They were now almost proud of being unaware of the pathways open to them and showed a disregard for conversations about careers. Bourdieu (1998) suggests that this is a type of agency to disavow the potential options with an act of resistance that protects the self from symbolic violence. The boys were displaying agency via resistance to the narrative of school success or were refusing to play the game as a form of self-preservation.

During this period of the research, teachers attending the Unit to teach core subjects reported a significant decline in students' attitudes to learning and general behaviour. All the boys expressed a need to be seen in a particular way within school:

- "I'm a Unit kid" (Ed);
- "They expect me to be hard …having a laugh by pissing them off" (Billy);
- "I have to join in and be bad so I'm the same as others in the Unit" (Ben).

I asked the boys about their awareness of class and class consciousness. I had to redraft and rework these questions a number of times. I also had them reviewed by other doctoral students as I was aware that I could be falling into some kind of subjective determinism. The questions were redrafted and trialled on another student in the Unit to see if they would yield valid data. The majority of the boys (all except Lewis, Zane and Ed) rejected the term 'working class', preferring instead the idea of "tough" (Coby) and "gangster" (Sam) as labels of prestige, whilst some spoke about themselves highly personally: "thick" (Harvey), "not good at school" (Billy) or "stupid" (Will). Arguably, all these students were perceiving their positionality as 'part involvement' in a 'game' which they felt unable to win. But, whilst they felt that the habitus of students who were being successful in education was different to theirs: "swots", "posh twats" and "show offs", they did not identify with notions of what they considered to be working-class students. All the boys employed derogatory language to refer to

others in school who they felt superior to in some way. Common responses included calling other students “chavs”, “skanks”, “spazs” (contraction of spastic), “potheads”, “binners”, “wasters” or “pussies”. These words were unpleasant but could also be seen as a way to disavow what they were individually not, whilst refusing to define what they individually were.

Whilst these boys knew that they were considered to be economically disadvantaged, half of them expressed resentment towards the idea of class. For them, their educational failure was a deeply personal event. The other half of the boys seemed to enjoy their ‘bad rep’ (reputation, a term used by many of the boys) and perceived group identity around school, attaching little significance to their educational failure, possibly for reasons of self-preservation. To be critically aware of one’s own prestige in a given situation, to acknowledge one’s limitations in it and to simultaneously attempt to maintain a personal key disposition in a given field is problematic for an individual student, especially when it is played out in the context of social class, societal structures and disadvantage. Bourdieu (2000) terms such a phenomenon as a habitus clivé, where an enduring discrepancy between different habitus, felt by Bourdieu himself, creates a sense of self “torn by contradiction and internal division” (p.16). In other words, it is an attempt to accept doxic discourses whilst simultaneously trying to maintain a personal key disposition. For my participants this could be seen as the destabilising wrench of navigating the ambivalence, insecurity, uncertainty and disengagement they have felt within schooling against their emerging sense of who they are, where they belong and where they come from. The boys seemed to struggle with the contradictions of schooling, that particular students were good at certain subjects and behaved in a way which was commensurate with the values of school when they could just be an extension of these particular students’ habits, dispositions and interests outside school too. The data collected during the Year-10 interviews chimed with this idea of the boys being pulled by the forces of different fields simultaneously.

A common critique of white working-class boys is that they lack aspiration; essentially another way to label such boys as responsible for their own educational failure. This is a simple statement to make but a much more complex idea than it appears. An individual's aspirations are arguably based on the "dispositional structures of habitus and embody the possibilities within limits of given social-structure positions" (Stahl, 2015a, p.70). By operating within specific constraints, whether factual or erroneously perceived, an individual has to select from a limited range of possibilities. Reay et al. (2005) unpick the nexus between objective structures and the external forces and structures of schooling:

> "Working class acquiescence, a propensity to accept exclusion or exclude oneself rather than attempt to achieve what is already denied, arises because the dispositions, which make up habitus, are the products of opportunities and constraints framing the individual's earlier life experiences" (p.24).

Such analyses emphasise that processes of exclusion or denial of opportunities originate in many ways before students sit external examinations. In this sense, working-class boys embody everyday social practices as acceptable normal and natural phenomena, ironically reinforcing existing disadvantage by their own choices.

The participants certainly expressed conflicted and conflicting views of social class; what Stahl calls "misrecognition and ignorance but also acute awareness" (2015a, p.88). This seeming paradox is arguably the arena in which my participants felt both empowered by exhibiting resistant behaviours, but also a pervading sense of 'otherness'. Zane surprised me by expressing this paradox in his own meta-language:

> "Some of these teachers have fucked it with me 'cos of all the past stuff where they've never given me a chance. I used to be bothered …but I'm so used to being seen as the bad lad …I've given up giving a shit. If they don't like my attitude then it's tough shit …it's their tough shit." (Zane)

Zane's statement seemed to paradoxically reinforce the disadvantage he felt within school. A refusal to play the game, navigate the field, or engage in the school's hierarchy of power meant that he had some agency to resist. Zane arguably displays evidence of a reflexive habitus where he has evaluated the context of his schooling and considered what it possible alongside what he is able to do and how he was being judged. His statement had a profound effect on my own thinking about Step-Up; it had me question whose loss it really was? Zane possibly felt that the field of education did not recognise his own agency or value his own habitus, and his lack of conformity to the habitus of more successful students had singled him out as being a "loner" and "shite at school work". It is could be argued that he felt his own resistance had ultimately given way to a fatalistic despondency.

It is documented that boys tend to over-estimate their own ability.[35] Data from the Year-10 interviews suggested that eight of the ten participants tended to downplay their own academic ability. The two that did not do this were lower ability (Ed and Harvey). They essentially identified themselves by what they were not, but offered little informed thought about how they actually felt about themselves as learners. There was however one topic which elicited many strong views from the participants – this was when they responded to questions about how teachers saw them and estimated their abilities. Zane's words also suggested he positioned himself in opposition to what

[35] See Ivcevic and Kaufman (2013) for a discussion about the self-estimations of students' abilities in American schools. Whilst this study focuses on ethnic minorities and black African children, it also highlights that white middle-class students correctly estimate or even under-estimate their abilities, whilst white working-class boys over-estimate their abilities to either save face or as a disengagement from the education process. Also see Attwood et al. (2013) for a discussion of how boys tend to over-predict their grades, ability and progress. However, this study found that socio-economic factors were not a factor in this, although it was only done over a small sample of 109 students.

school was doing because it conferred prestige on the dispositions, habits and tastes that he did not possess.

In the Year-9 interviews, many participants felt some sense of belonging to the 'Unit' and were mainly enjoying the novelty of Step-Up. However, in the Year-10 interviews it was clear that a more individual consciousness was emerging. Whilst there were some uniting factors between the boys, in that they were all involved in Step-Up and they were all in precarious educational situations; the sense of loss, difference and an attempt to navigate or orientate the fields of school and their own social lives were now a much more deeply-felt personal struggle. It was noticeable that the boys' view of their own positionality contained some contradictions which they had either learned to live with, disavowed or had not considered. During Year-10, it was clear that upcoming mock examinations were causing them further turbulence. Most of the boys refused to engage in judgments about their academic achievement (by criteria and personal teacher judgement), whilst they also welcomed praise and comments that they had improved. Arguably, they disavowed aspects of schooling whilst, perhaps, secretly wanting to measure up to them.

The Year-10 interviews showed an emerging egalitarian habitus that led to some of the participants re-evaluating the power dynamics and their own place in the hierarchy of the field. Stahl (2015a) argues that egalitarianism becomes a "reflexive process" (p.73). Bourdieu sees reflexivity occurring where is a lack fit between the habitus and the structuring conditions of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.130). Stahl (2015a) takes this idea and applies it to his own study of white working-class boys in finding that, where there is a disjuncture in the habitus, middle-class students are:

> able to form a profitable dialectical relationship with their fields, while their white working-class counterparts are not as proficient, as reflexivity cannot be exercised in the same way (p.74).

In my data, this presented itself as the boys feeling some disjunctures between what they felt were their authentic selves and how they might navigate the field of school and its multiple subjectivities. In order to reconcile these tensions, many of participants constructed narratives to ameliorate against the "injuries of class" (Bottero, 2009, p.8). , Lewis said:

> "School [has] never understood me. I'm seen as a problem. I have problems … I know I won't do that well in my exam subjects, but that's because of the school I'm at and 'cos I have problems that they don't help. For an easier life, I'll get some exams and do something where I get left alone". (Lewis)

Lewis was reconciling his aspirations to something that he felt he could deliver; perhaps as a form of agency. Arguably, he exhibits reflexivity here, in acknowledging the complexities and multiple subjectivities of his situation.

This was also evident when Terence said:

> "One day school wants one thing, then for shits and giggles [for a laugh] they change to something else. To stop getting pissed off …I'm taking the CBA [can't be arsed] approach. If I stay the same then school can change but it won't work. I'm chill [relaxed]. I'll probably fail my exams, but I will try to be calm. When I have tried it didn't go any better. I'm ok with cruising to the end of school. It's all good. A lot of Step-Up lads are chill Sir". (Terence)

Terence appears to be navigating the field of school via a series of compromises. Bourdieu's notion of doxa is helpful here, where particular facets are taken for granted as common beliefs giving rise to common actions.[36] It is interesting that Terence allied himself with other Step-Up boys in deliberately, and with conscious agency, judging what the possibilities were and taking up a positionality that he could commit to, or at least saying it was – perhaps as a form of resistance. The collective habitus that was evident in the Year-9 interviews had developed into egalitarianism, where the boys had begun to judge the likelihood of their own personal success within the constraints of Step-up and the wider school.

Data Analysis: Students' Experiences in Year-11

The boys were interviewed again around the December mock examinations. During this time, they were also applying for post-16 education, vocational placements or employment. The boys were sitting significantly fewer exams than the majority of students, but participants reported feeling 'embarrassed' or 'caught out' (my label) by not being able to answer the variety, breadth and depth of questions they were asked either in lessons or by the core subject assessments they were doing in the Unit. An interaction between the subjective and objective elements of habitus is relevant here. Fewer subjects, fewer exams, less classroom teaching and a particular mind-set in the Unit seemed to be engrained to the extent where the boys now believed they were capable of less academically. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) call this "subjective expectations of objective probabilities" (p.82). The issue being that what is viewed as objective is actually subjective, but unconsciously so that it appears as ostensibly true. Bourdieu also suggests that the field is made up of the range of "objective possibilities" in that we enter it with the knowledge we have about ourselves (p.82). The

[36] See Lyke (2017) for an analysis of Bourdieu's concept, where it is argued that Bourdieu's doxa is an analytical tool capable of advancing insights into individual and organisational behaviour as it presents the social world as 'self-evident' and knowable only by what is thinkable and sayable, which renders it as natural (p.163-173). In addition, Davey's (2012) work on Bourdieu offers a reading of Bourdieu's doxa to illuminate classed practices in educational decision-making (p.507-525).

boys, in different ways, gave responses that indicated that Step-Up had disempowered them. They also suggested that it had made them feel less able to deal with the exams they did have and the strategies they were adopting to survive within the field were becoming less about a likelihood of success and more about self-preservation from perceived failure.

As the time for the Year-11 participant interviews approached I admit to feelings of ambivalence about Step-Up for three reasons:

- Firstly, the participants seemed to have presented different responses to the programme in Year-10; some had felt removed from the rest of the school, whilst others saw the Step-Up modules as better and easier than academic subject work, some students began to display feelings of discontent and resentment as they considered a narrower set of choices at post-16.
- Secondly, in seeking to reduce inequity for a select number of boys on the brink of permanent exclusion, the school had seemingly done little to stop other students and staff seeing the boys as 'Unit kids' isolated within the system until they reached school leaving-age.
- Finally, the school had reduced opportunities for these boys to work on their Maths and English, as they would be often be taught as a group without seeing or hearing higher-level responses from other students. Some of the boys were back in some core subject lessons, although inconsistently, so they often felt behind, lost in the middle of a skill or topic.

Around this time, Terence, Ed and Sam ceased completing the Step-Up modules as their behaviour was deemed disruptive to the smooth running of the Unit. These three boys, amongst others not involved in this study, expressed a desire to do work experience as they already had a clear idea of what post-16 opportunities they wanted to pursue. Sam had been placed at a motor mechanic workshop for 2 weeks, but unfortunately stopped attending after this period. When asked about this

he said: “I only get to do the crap jobs, like making tea, sweeping up or passing stuff”. This boy clearly found the hierarchy of this workplace as stifling as school. This particular workplace, with its regulations, safety checks and qualifications felt like an autocracy. The subject’s perceived agency of the situation was erroneous; he had expected that the workplace would see him treated as a trustworthy adult.

Ed had been placed at a hair salon; he appeared to be impermeable to peer pressure or potential negativity from the other boys in the Unit. But he stopped attending his work placement after a few weeks citing similar reasons to Sam for not wanting to continue the placement. The most interesting placement, in terms of outcome, was undertaken by Terence. His placement was at an electrical engineering firm owned by a friend of his uncle. This proved successful for a number of months inasmuch as Terence attended school for one day a week with a renewed maturity towards finishing his exams. When asked about the nature of his tasks at this placement he reported that they included “loading the van”, “fetching tools”, “measuring up” and “odd jobs”. He often appeared at the Unit during his one day a week at school in his work trousers as he would picked up and would work into the early evening. Unfortunately, the placement ended when the company found itself in financial trouble and an apprentice and two electricians were laid off, as was Terence. On his return to full-time school he reacted angrily to being directed to do things and felt he was now too old for school.

Terence’s attestation: “at work I was treated like a grown-up …but now I’m back here [at school] it’s like being back in nursery” was troubling but also disavowed the guidance given to him by the Unit Manager about how he spoke and presented himself to people. When talking to Terence, I felt a palpable sense of his frustration and anger that he had either adopted an identity, a sense of belonging, masculinity and prestige which contrasted with his perceptions of school. Instead of being

somewhere where he felt he could succeed he was now back in the Unit and in his bottom-set Maths and English lessons.

Reay (2017) discusses the experience of working-class students who inhabit bottom-sets in schools as “places of routine everyday humiliations and slights” (p.77). Terence had left a place where he deemed himself as successful to re-join a school system where he felt devalued and denigrated. Whether he saw the school system and Step-Up as “class cultural oppression” or more of a personal hostility to his own sense of identity and belonging, Terence communicated feelings of deep resentment and abjection (Reay, 2017, p.77).

The Year-11 interviews yielded several unexpected, problematic considerations. As mentioned, the atmosphere in the Unit changed during Year-10 and a collective mind-set of negative behaviours and attitudes had begun to become engrained. This manifested itself as individual boys being much more likely to disrupt each other’s’ learning and being argumentative with the Unit Manager and other staff delivering Step-Up.

In a different context, Bourdieu (1994) critiqued the French *grand écoles* as:

> enclosures separated from the world, quasi-monastic spaces where they live a life apart, a retreat, withdrawn from the world and entirely taken up with preparing for the most ‘senior positions’ (p.96).

However, the reverse could be seen in the Unit. Rather than holding students in a bubble or in stasis from the world so that they can adopt the habitus of privilege, prestige and potential superiority, the Unit could be said to have held students in an ‘enclosure’ (the Unit) from the main school. This, perhaps accidentally, held them up for ridicule and judgment from peers. Step-Up, it seemed, was

now also making students resent their dwindling post-16 options. This manifested itself as resistance to attending intervention sessions, resentment towards completing Step-Up modules and an individual crisis about getting a job or a college course. Lewis said:

> "I'm getting told off all the time. I didn't go to intervention. I've been took [taken] out of loads of school classes, now they want me to go to more 'cos I'm failing. I don't see why I should go to extra when I've mucked about so much". (Lewis)

I possessed a growing belief that how a student is seen and judged by others profoundly affects their experience of education and ultimately their success within that system. This belief was inculcated during teacher training and twenty years' teaching experience; however, it was framed within the context of encouraging students to be aspirational, to take small steps towards a larger goal and to be resilient even when something appeared difficult. My thinking profoundly shifted during this study, and it has continued to do so. I would now attest that encouraging students to approach the exam system with their best effort and to accept the consequences might well mimic the meritocratic neoliberal market forces of the outside world, but education should be much broader than this. At times, the boys' journey across Year-9 to Year-11 was difficult to observe; however, it was their reality, not mine. My thinking as a researcher changed from seeking to uncover the stories of the participants to perhaps feeling some resentment towards the system that these boys felt so unsuccessful in.

Billy articulated a complex reading of the situation, but with the language of a Year-11 boy:

> "I know that work is nowt like school. Why has school spent so long telling us that school is like work, or that school is easier than work? I don't think I would say what my Grandad said, that school days are the best ones of your life. Doing some boring

> subjects and going to the Unit to look at budgeting and saving money and do spreadsheets is not what school is for. And it's not what work is about". (Billy)

Besides resentment, Billy's response suggests that school seeks to present itself as a microcosm of the way the world works. Belief in the meritocracy of the examination system and the value of hard work within the school was contestable for these boys. Billy seemed to suggest that traducing all knowledge or every form of work as divisible into success at school meant that the field of school purported to represent a microcosm of the outside world. Billy presented a sense of disillusionment because school had not prepared him for the outside world, whilst also reinforcing the narrative that he was unsuccessful academically. I suspected Billy would see this as a 'double-whammy'.

Coby saw Step-Up as a false sense of success. He was bright personally and academically, had completed a BTEC award in Sport during Year-9, which was notionally equivalent to four GCSE grade Cs. He had applied for the Advanced BTEC award in Uniformed Public Services at College but was told that the BTEC Sport qualification would only count as one GCSE pass rather than four. He stated:

> "College won't count my Sport stuff to get in. I have to get my four GCSE subjects now. But I dropped some that I could have passed. I'd have more chance of getting in then. The modules [Step-Up] I've been doing are easy. I keep being told I have done well in them. Everyday you're told you're doing ok. Then a college tells you you're not". (Coby)

Coby identified that different levels of prestige were being conferred within the school, depending on a student's stage, age and ability. A school then is seeking to encourage a sense of achievement and success within a suitable set of courses, in the same way that some students are removed from GCSE English and complete Entry-Level English conferring prestige on that qualification for the

student, where it might actually bring stigma. Perhaps Coby identified the school's conferred prestige on BTEC Sport and the Step-Up modules as therapeutic and erroneous.

The tension between the field of school and the multifarious fields of employment that constitute the outside world is identified here. Schools must confer prestige on the exam system for political reasons and also as a public-service within a community. Whilst education is increasingly marketed as an opportunity for social mobility, as a chance to escape the reproduction of social class inequalities through the meritocracy of schooling, the reality for these participants was quite different. The emergence of an egalitarian habitus in the Year-10 interviews had been replaced by a reflexive habitus where individuals had weighed up the possibilities, until a habitus clivé emerged where the field was negotiated with multiple subjectivities. This brought a pervading sense of isolation, loss and personal suffering.

The Year-11 interviews were revealing inasmuch as an intuitive expectation I possessed from the beginning of the study was absent from the data. When I coded interview responses into themes I was surprised to see the emergence of a particular code that I labelled as 'isolation/disempowerment'. Upon reviewing the data, it became apparent that it required disaggregating into several further codes. Whilst it might be assumed that a student who was close to a permanent exclusion, had been disruptive, and had been removed from many academic subjects would express feelings of disappointment and isolation within their school experience – I was surprised to find that the reasons for this were deeply personal and individual.

There was not, however, an emergence of a 'white working-class lad' habitus. This could be characterised by opposition to authority, a crisis of identity due to a refashioning of the world of work and a lack of male role models. Instead, each individual boy felt marginalised, lost or disempowered in different ways. I had expected a collective habitus, like the anti-establishment and

anti-authority views that emerged during the Year-10 interviews. Instead, I found there was little to consider as collective in the boys' experiences. Each boy had different ideas and dispositions towards school and how they were facing post-16 choices or employment. It is therefore perhaps erroneous to see working-class boys like the participants in this study as a group with a collective consciousness, identity or a sense of belonging.

Each boy spoke in varying terms about Step-Up and how it affected them personally. Whilst coding their responses allowed me to deal with significant amounts of data, it would sometimes reduce the rich subjective narrative to commonalities and broad similarities which did not do justice to the participants' voices and the amount of time spent collecting the data. However, attempts to code the Year-11 interviews were often difficult. The semi-structured interviews and the need to deal with the amount of data sometimes led to compromises that taught me I had collected too much data and ran the risk of cherry-picking patterns and trends that may emanate from an unconscious bias. That being said, I had coded the previous responses so chose to do the same.

The Year-11 interview data suggested that the boys were starting to feel even more isolated from mainstream school. Whilst Step-Up was designed to keep these boys in mainstream education, they were increasingly feeling that they were attending a 'school within a school'. In this sense, Step-up itself could be seen as an act of symbolic violence. Step-Up was presented as a bespoke individualised package, whereas it was actually a selection of modules that the school was able to deliver. Additionally, Step-up could also be seen as reinforcing the meritocratic view of education, within which those who work hard within specific parameters are rewarded within the examination system. This was further complicated when what was considered as prestigious knowledge and skills were culturally-based. In this way, cultural capital became reduced to the dominant and preferred cultural capital, which disavowed and diminished other forms of knowing, knowledge and experiences.

Willis (1977) draws on Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) arguing that when working-class boys refuse to compete in the presented meritocracy of school it is a "radical act" and that such "counter-school culture" is a refusal to "collude in its own educational suppression" (p.128). Willis partly critiques Bourdieu and Passeron's approach to cultural capital as disavowing that some students do indeed 'get through' and gain qualifications designed or intended to privilege a different class of student; in this sense, such mobility could be hopeful to the individual, but to the wider class "mobility means nothing at all" (Willis, 1977, p.128). However, Willis also acknowledges that the "working-class student must overcome his inbuilt disadvantage of possessing the wrong class culture and the wrong educational decoders to start with" (Willis, 1977, p.128). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is one of the ways that class society is legitimised and reproduced and that by conferring prestige on institutionalised knowledge and qualifications enacts a form of "social exclusion" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970, p.13). In this sense, it could be argued that the boys experienced exclusion in educational terms, but they had also faced social exclusion from other aspects of school.

The boys felt that that school was not a place where they naturally fitted in. I was interested to know, now that the boys were a little older, if they had a sense of their own perceived social class and how it affected their schooling. I was surprised by the responses, which could be coded into three broad themes, with some students expressing opinions that often bridged two of them:

- 'lads like me don't do well at school …no one in my family did well at school' (Zane);
- 'teachers have a problem with me' (Sam);
- 'I'm not bothered about doing well' (Lewis).

The first of these themes could be seen as containing a sense of the symbolic violence enacted against the working class by the school system. Within this idea an individual examines the range of

possibilities available to them, but these are only seen in terms of what is not limited, available, weighted against other's success at school and then mediated by the individual. Responses ranged from:

- "no one in my family finished school" (Ed);
- "none of my mates get high grades" (Coby);
- "I'm not a swot so I don't practise French and Maths … like rich kids" (Terence).

Such responses appeared to acknowledge a collective mind-set which formed part of the narrative of some of these boys' lives. However, it also acknowledged an individual habitus in conflict with the idea of schooling as a tool of social mobility or as an opportunity which one either takes or does not.

The second theme contained responses such as:

- "teachers go for me all the time …make you feel like it's better if you don't come in" (Will);
- "get spoke to like shit so I give shit back and they don't like it" (Billy);
- "I'm a tough kid from a tough area …I'm nothing like the teachers …they don't know me" (Sam).

Students giving such responses appear to be in opposition to the habitus that is rewarded and conferred with prestige by the school. But the responses also contain an awareness of the field's norms and practices. It is perhaps a partial disavowal of the rules of the game but it is also cognisant of the ambiguities and contradictions within it. Some of these responses displayed an understanding that teachers favoured students who were more like themselves, made their jobs easier or exhibited a habitus which was commensurate with educational advantage and success. The participants

displayed some awareness that their own personal or collective habitus was rendered impotent within the field of school. Zane commented that “what I know …what I do …it don’t matter here”.

The third theme had responses ranging from:

- “fuck doing school work, I need to earn money …not do exams” (Zane);
- “school work is boring …it’s done for kids who have nice lives” (Harvey);
- “I will do shite in the exams and I don’t care …I did try once …still did crap” (Lewis).

These responses displayed an understanding that the school system legitimised itself by conferring specific prestige associated with ‘doing well’ onto a habitus consisting of particular behaviours, tastes and dispositions. They show that this was recognised by their opposition to it; participants had some knowledge and awareness of what it was because it was not the way that they were. A counter-culture where it is acceptable not to try, not care or avoid outward emotions was arguably an act of agency within the field. This could be a collusion into educational disadvantage, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) may view it, where the positionality of an individual is seen as being an act of ‘self-harm’ and the consequences for poor choices can be symbolically laid at the door of an individual, social group or a social class.

During these interviews, seven boys expressed anger that they had spent so much time in the Unit. The initial principle of improving their basic skills and more time to secure their English and Maths GCSEs had not actually happened. The boys were also angry that the Step-Up module certification would not be recognised as legitimate by the colleges, apprenticeship providers or employers they had spoken to. Billy commented: “now I’ve been doing Step-Up, it means that I can’t go to college and do what I want to do. No one is going to help me”. Whilst some boys were worried about their next steps, others were more concerned by their positionality outside of school.

As mentioned previously, the social groups of these boys had changed as they got older. Initially, they socialised mainly with peers their own age, sometimes from other schools as well as their own. Zane and Ed had always been part of a group of older teenagers who were often arrested and questioned by the police. Several ASBOs had been served on these two boys and their social group. In Year-11 I received a report that Zane would not come into school because he had refused to be searched by the Unit Manager who believed him to have cannabis resin in his bag. A search had taken place and a wrap of cannabis had been confiscated. I spoke to him at length and he became angry and then visually upset. I present his words here to illustrate his contradictory feelings towards the crisis he felt he was in:

> "I had to sell it so it could be swapped for money. I owe this lad it, I was looking after it. Gonna get fucking shanked now. Don't wanna see him tonight. He's gonna fuck me over now. You fuckers are gonna get me stabbed. Giz it [cannabis] back and then I won't get battered. Cover for me and I won't get shanked." (Zane).

Effectively, Zane was asking school to break the law out of a sense of fear but also to maintain his position and prestige within his social group. Zane clearly understood the discourse of this social group and it had become more important to him than anything that school could offer. He had abandoned a sense of respectable behaviour within school to protect the currency of respect he embodied in his social group. The other boys largely kept the same social groups, but these connections weakened over time as many of their peers were making plans to do Level-3 courses at sixth-form colleges, but also due to the boys' absence from mainstream lessons and social spaces in the school.

One may have expected a camaraderie within the Unit during Year-11 as the boys had been together for two to three years. However, this was not the case. Whilst many of the boys felt similar things throughout Step-Up, they appeared to feel them in an individual and alienated way. There was little recognition that other students in the Unit could empathise with their situation. During the Year-11 interviews many of the boys identified that Step-Up was not chosen for them for any particular benefit, but rather it was added as an intervention after the students had already been selected for withdrawal from many mainstream lessons; in a sense as *a priori* knowledge about who these students might be and how they might respond.

In an article form *The Guardian* (21st November 2017), Reay stated that "working-class children get less of everything in education – including respect". This was visible in the data, as many boys cited grievances about how they had been treated in school. Reay comments that relative educational failure is often relabelled as a 'personal lack' as a person's inherent value can never be decoupled from their class in our current education system (Reay, 2017, p.76). Many of the boys identified control as a key aspect of school that caused frustration, in phrases such as:

- "I'm seen as a pain in the arse!" (Coby);
- "I don't have a fucking carpet in my bedroom but school thinks homework is something I have to do!" (Ed);
- "no one in my family finished school. My Mum says the teachers are wankers!" (Zane)

were prevalent. Seeing past the anger contained within these responses, it is evident that these boys now felt that their position in school was personal and individual. I noted the increased prevalence of the first-person pronoun 'I' in their responses. The resistance and hostility they were feeling could potentially be dismissed as vitriol, however Coby exhibited a sense of his own personal history. Whilst Ed considered the absurdity, at least for him, of his living arrangements and the difference

between his own priorities and those of the school. Zane appeared to align himself with a specific family history that suggests adhering to a cultural trajectory is in this sense belonging to a group where educational failure is common enough that it can be rejected as normal and expected.

Symbolic violence is more potent when individuals accept that a failure to succeed is essentially an individual failure, rather than deriving from wider societal structures. Ball et al. (2002) argue that young people in such a system "see themselves as individuals in a meritocratic society, not as classed or gendered members of an unequal society" (p.4). The data collected for this study had the potential to uncover the process by which students mediate this or at least aware of it. Stahl (2015a) attests that a student's habitus:

> strengthens people's perceptions that things are as they are because of the natural order, rather than through cultural domination" and that the habitus "mediates what is possible from a limited range of possibilities (p.69-70).

To see educational opportunities as meritocratic also proffers social mobility as a desired goal. Perhaps this also contains elements of symbolic violence by disavowing working-class students' backgrounds and habitus as something that must be left behind.

Reay (2013) states that social mobility is a "wrenching process" in that it is a metaphorical ripping away of a habitus, a class consciousness and a collective and individual identity (p.667). In this sense, social mobility highlights the deficit of where the student is coming from and proffers a different social class as a destination to be arrived at; in all senses, it is seen as a moving away from working-class culture.

At its best, schooling should provide a tailored experience with targeted support to ensure fair and reasonable outcomes for as many students as possible. On the other hand, T.S. Eliot's (1948) attestation, is that "the function of schooling is to preserve the class and select the elite" (p.13). Bourdieu and Champagne (1999) state that the:

> school system increasingly seems like a mirage, the source of an immense, collective disappointment, a promised land which, like the horizon, recedes as one moves towards it (p.423).

The participants in this study certainly felt a collective disappointment, specifically towards Step-Up but also about what had happened to them by being removed from lessons and perceiving their post-16 options as limited. Many of the boys questioned what the point of Step-Up had been, with some speaking disparagingly about their whole schooling. Billy identified Step-Up as a way to "keep the bad lads from pissing about" whilst Will felt that it was a way to "stop the school getting done …[over its] crap exam results". Sam commented that he felt badly let down by everything the school had done in terms of intervention, class setting and decisions taken:

> "It's always me that gets ordered about …moved classes …detentions …laughed at 'cos of reading help …taken out of class …moved about …feel totally pissed off …won't get left alone". (Sam)

Seemingly, each of these actions had been deemed necessary, but when expressed by an individual boy it took on a paradoxical meaning. He felt that multiple interventions had reinforced the idea that he was deficient in many ways against the acceptable standard the school expected.

Now GCSE examinations were getting close the boys were having to decide their post-16 options. Coby gave a fascinating reading of where his priorities laid now, which touched upon the differences between concrete and abstract thought discussed in the Year-10 analysis section:

> "I've not thought about after Year-11 …now I have to think about it ...I don't have a clue …I want to leave off making a decision". (Coby)

Of course, this is not a new argument, Humphries (1981) traced working class experiences of education between 1889 and 1939 and found that students could be separated into those who were capable of abstract thought and those who could not progress beyond concrete thought. Arguably, the longitudinal nature of a student's school career requires many types of abstract thought; firstly, the theoretical, synthesising and application of knowledge to questions and problems, but also with a student looking beyond what they can do today and taking formative steps to perform in a future examination. Perhaps this proffers the idea that working-class students are deficient, resistant and are either incapable or choose not to co-operate in the mind-sets and habitus rewarded within education. As recently as 2014 the Head of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission suggested that working-class children must be taught to think and act like their middle-class counterparts (Brant, 2014). It was suggested that it is not just about mind-set but also about students changing how they conduct personal relationships, dress, appearance and dietary choices. These participants were certainly capable of distancing themselves from the neoliberal ideology of aspiration and middle-class ideals, even if it was possibly done to save face. Paradoxically, by doing so, they were possibly maintaining the established social order. Zane offered his thoughts on the demands of school work:

> "It's boring 'cos it makes out that you have to be posh and clever, but only sounded clever. Put some of the top-set kids where I live and see the shit I see and they'd care

> more about their rep (reputation). You have to look hard and have the latest stuff, but be hard enough that you don't get shanked (stabbed) for it. I have to have a rep and get it from doing some stuff." (Zane)

Zane could have been expressing a desire to only think in a concrete manner but perhaps a greater degree of abstract thought is present here. His habitus is arguably inclusive of what he perceives to be the collective habitus of his peer group outside school. However, he has clearly considered how his position in the group may have changed if he presented differently or if he failed to conform to the prestige conferred by this specific field. Zane perceived a hierarchy with an established order where he felt invested in a way he simply was not at school. Zane also confirmed that post-16 education would lead to "more boring studying" rather than "doing something I am good at with people I like, people who are like me". There is little doubt that Zane felt excluded from the field of education, but he had arguably opted out of the types of abstract thought that imagine a future more prosperous or with greater opportunities than the present. He expressed his immediate future as "some course at college that's easy and chilled" with "some dealing on the side for a bit of spends (spending money)". Zane began to blame school for his educational failure: "school isn't helping, it's just teachers being bossy and having power". Whilst Zane felt that Step-Up had "kept me in school" by taking him out of "kick-offs with bossy teachers", he also acknowledged that he had got into bad learning habits when teachers came down to the Unit to teach him and he thought the Step-Up modules were "easy" and "pointless". When asked about his own feelings about his social class he stated: "it don't matter, money don't mean you're clever. Class is not important. Get money different now". Zane appeared resentful of class distinctions, however, Zane could arguably be mediating how relevant the idea of class was to his current circumstances.

It is revealing that the majority of the participants moved, throughout the study, from some considered and thoughtful awareness of how they felt about school (some wanting more from it

than others), but all at least recognised the 'opportunity' of sorts that education might provide a better future. However, there was a noticeable change for many around Year-10 (especially after work experience placements) and nearer the end of Year-11. The boys' discourse then became one of frustration, anger and blame towards Step-Up in particular.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that social processes replicate social norms by proffering the idea "that all the groups concerned run in the same direction, toward the same objectives, the same properties" (p.163). By rejecting dominant neoliberal ideologies of climbing the class ladder and aspiring to transform their 'lot' in life, working-class boys are maintaining some kind of social order, even if they are not acting uniformly. Bourdieu terms this moving away as a subtle collection of behaviours that may appear innocuous enough in themselves: "gaps, differences, *differentials*, ranks, precedences, priorities, exclusions, distinctions [and] *ordinal properties*" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.163). The participants either felt embarrassed and angry about the post-16 possibilities that were open to them or they disavowed the neo-liberal and meritocratic discourse of education in favour of a positionality that offered more certain and was deemed to be achievable. Similar to Stahl's (2015a) study, some of the boys in my research saw "education as a risk rather than a certainty", whilst their teachers saw "education as the certainty and low-skilled employment as the risk" (p.167).

A specific coded strand of 'shame' within the data emphasised that whilst a working-class collective habitus was perhaps partially evident in Year-9, it had been replaced by a deeply personal and isolating habitus by Year-11. The experience of consistently failing was felt individually. It was fascinating that the boys felt shame about a variety of different elements of their schooling. There was initially an embarrassment for some about being selected for Step-Up with concerns about what individual teachers thought about them. Others felt embarrassed at being singled-out as a 'bad lad', whilst others felt shame when their low-level literacy skills were evident in written work. However, in these Year-11 interviews the boys felt embarrassment in different ways. Some felt angry at the

school's actions, whilst others felt embarrassment over only sitting a handful of subjects. Arguably, they were not feeling this way as a means of protecting or maintaining working-class identity, rather it was more about protecting and maintaining their individual dignity or their prestige in the eyes of others. It was possibly unsurprising that a white working-class boy would disavow aspects of the field where he feels deficient or would attempt varied acts of resistance. Such a disposition within the context of symbolic violence was perhaps an act of self-preservation.

Another way anger was evident in the data was in 'racist attitudes towards ethnic minorities'. This was a new development in the Year-11 interviews. I was aware that in collecting previous interview data I had asked the boys about class consciousness but the concept of 'whiteness' had never been prominent in their responses. However, in the Year-11 interviews that changed. Four of the boys (Zane, Ed, Billy and Terence) made unpleasant comments about students from ethnic minorities with tropes such as "they get everything for nothing" (Coby) and "they are taking jobs off us" (Terence). Such attitudes perhaps had their roots in the boys' homes and had possibly been exacerbated by media portrayals regarding immigrants and Brexit. These boys did not recognise poor immigrant families or ethnic minority families who lived in similar circumstances as being like them. Zane commented: "we've been here all the time …they've only been here five minutes". Such attitudes arguably suggest that a shared white working-class history was still prevalent, at least in terms of racialised discourse, but it did little to alleviate the situation the boys found themselves in.

The Year-11 interviews presented evidence of a habitus clivé, where the boys acknowledged that education offered some upward social mobility to some students, but with a belief that it did not include them, allowing them to maintain their key dispositions within their existing habitus. The wrenching process of social mobility requires a student to accept the associated risks and uncertainties whilst navigating the fields of education, employment and advantage that have not traditionally included students from their backgrounds. The participants constructed subjective

narratives around the possibilities that were open to them. In doing so they either blamed Step-Up, wider school practices or themselves. It cannot be a surprise that my participants distanced themselves from what they felt they did not possess or deserve.

A Student's Thoughts After Collecting His GCSE Results

I do not present a narrative for every participant following their exam results, but focus on one boy – Terence. All the participants under-achieved in English and Maths compared to their target grades. All students, besides Terence, Zane and Ed, managed to gain a place on level 2 (GCSE equivalent) courses at either college or as part of a work-release scheme. Zane and Ed were classified as NEETs. Sadly, both boys had also been involved in the youth justice system for drug use and dealing. Terence's narrative is presented here:

When Terence collected his exam results he had gained enough qualifications to access an electrical apprenticeship, and fortunately his uncle had provided an employment placement and the college place had been offered, but Terence had turned it down hoping to study a BTEC in computer game design. He did not attain enough qualifications, including English or Maths at grade C, to study the BTEC course. On the examination results day he said he had a casual job fitting towbars to cars and caravans which would give him some money in his pocket. I asked him if he would mind giving a few minutes of his time to talk about how he felt about Step-Up. I'm grateful that he agreed as he was visibly agitated about the BTEC course being removed as an option.

Terence made some surprising observations which, although couched in teenage language, showed a degree of understanding I did not expect. He claimed that Step-Up had "made it too easy if I was having a bad day to just go the Step-Up block and get out of doing work". He also expressed some

understanding of habitus when he told me that “putting a load of rough kids together just made them all get tougher to deal with. I bet all the teachers and other kids loved it”, referring to lessons they were removed from. Terence told me that he felt like the school did the easy thing because he “was making things difficult”. This attestation that the intervention ostracised him further from the idea of school made me consider Bourdieu’s ideas in a new context.

I was facing a young adult who was dealing with the aftermath of a school-wide decision to act seemingly in the interests students. The boy looked devastated and said: “school has been no help ...what was the point of doing all the exams?” He had a paid job to go to which he seemed to attach some pride, although this was within the context of missing out on other options. Willis (1977) suggests that:

> even a meaningless job could be made a ‘success’ if it were carried out with pride and honesty …it is possible to ‘succeed’ in a job conventionally registered as being of low status if it demands, utilises, or allows the expression of capacities other than the conventional ones (p.129).

Terence had mediated the possibilities and arrived at a compromise where could be personally angry at the school and its actions, but also satisfied with the outcome that he was shortly to begin paid work. In some ways this was an amalgamation of an egalitarian habitus and a habitus clivé.

One of the major selling points of Step-Up was that it would give students longer to spend on the compulsory core subjects and allow for some mastery of them. Terence reported that he did not do any more work on English or Maths than before and that the Step-Up cohort would complete modules of work that he claimed were “easy ...daft ...a waste of time”. He said that the cohort would often spend time playing board games or having to wait outside the Unit due to a major incident

being resolved inside. Extra English and Maths work was set for these students and they were timetabled with subject specialists, but often in large and disparate ability groups, but they were not timetabled with subject specialists at other times. Terence claimed that he "spent a lot of time on the GCSE Bitesize website and then I didn't know what to do so I just gave up". This was not the vision when Step-Up was first introduced, but due to unforeseen consequences (the resignation of the Behaviour Support Worker and a severe reduction to the school budget) it became a behaviour Unit by proxy.

Terence displayed an egalitarian habitus within Year-10 before displaying clues of a habitus clivé in that he had negotiated several positionalities between what was possible for him and what he felt motivated to do. Terence had been capable of using his education for social mobility, he was a bright student. It was possible that Terence's cultural identity as a working-class lad did not allow him to consider certain possible horizons or expectations of himself. Terence's behaviour on results day was deeply symbolic, as he initially presented as casual and cavalier, but after a short interview there were clearly deeply-felt symbolic impositions that made him angry about what the school had done.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I chose a critical interpretivist approach as Step-Up was created for a particular cohort of students but a narrative had built within the school that had echoes of positivism. For example, the idea that a series of actions, such as increasing the amount of time these students studied English and Maths and reducing the number of GCSE subjects they were doing would mean that the boys would perform better in the ones they took. This seemed wholly unsatisfactory to me. I was interested in the consciousness, perception and reactions of the individuals concerned. By attempting to gain an insight into the boys' lives, I hoped that this study would allow professionals in the school to gain an understanding of the boys' feelings of Step-Up. It was a conscious choice to sacrifice reliability and

representativeness for a greater validity and depth of data. Arguably, this was appropriate in seeking to give a marginalised group a voice. It also allowed for thick descriptions and vivid data to be collected. An important aspect of this study was the individual 'subjective reality' of each participant.

For the ten boys their 'subjective reality' felt 'objective' to them as they knew little else. Living in the margins of being removed from lessons, often getting in trouble in the local community and facing the risks of limited choices at post-16 or low-paid employment. The recognition of the individual subjective component within the field of school is often denounced within the dominant discourse of education, in favour of generalisations about cohorts, positivist quantification and the expected continual improvement in performance of every school year on year.

Initially, the boys' general view was that school was difficult, the expectations were too high, the discourse of learning and academic study was dull and favoured students who were more like the teachers than these boys felt they were. I began the research wondering what it was that stopped these boys from buying into what school was offering them. Their views changed considerably over time from a sense of relief that the prospect of permanent exclusion had been removed, and the desire to spend more time on English and Maths qualifications. This was replaced in Year-10 by a decline in learning routines and in Year-11 by a pervading sense of individual loss, isolation and anger about reduced post-16 options. The boys saw that what they were achieving, or not achieving, offered them materially less beyond school; they also became more aware of the symbolism of Step-Up. Ben said:

> "I've tried working hard and it don't make any difference …I keep being told I'm bright …I'm gonna end up on some crap course at a crap college now …I told Mr F [Unit Manager] that Step-Down [Step-Up] has stopped me getting permed [permanently

> excluded] but I wanna join the Army when I'm eighteen …still need English and Maths for that …I don't think I'm going to get them now." (Ben)

Ben's sarcasm regarding Step-Up is rooted in a feeling that it did not deliver what it promised. He possibly exhibits an understanding of symbolic violence. Ben felt that the opportunities available to him outside of school had been negatively affected by the school's actions; that is the field of school had sought, perhaps unconsciously, to replicate the cultural and social domination of the wider field of employment and social hierarchy.

The boys' attitudes had shifted considerably by the end of the research and became much more divergent. School was seen as a 'job without rewards' to three boys, one which might just as easily be traded for the world of work. Billy said:

> "All I ever get is a telling off and told I'm doing something wrong. In school, at the weekends. School makes out that it will help you but I can't wait to leave. School should make you feel good. …I don't feel good about leaving 'cos I won't have any choices". (Billy)

Billy perhaps misrecognises the school's power and authority, presuming that the school had more agency that it actually had, perhaps this was unsurprising as he was 15-years-old. Schools must enact the curriculum of examination boards and prepare students for assessment within these parameters, whilst also constantly considering what the school's projected performance will be each year. I will leave the discussion of what examinations test in terms of cultural capital alone here as it would divert from the study, but this would be an interesting research project in itself.[37]

[37] See Ainley (2016) *Betraying a Generation: How Education is Failing Young People.* Ainley argues that public examinations are increasingly a test of cultural capital rather than a mark of ability.

The CBI (2019) suggests that schools have to do much more to prepare young people for the world of work, especially in terms of soft skills and interpersonal communication. This is arguably a reference to cultural capital as much as anything. It could be argued that schools pretend to not enforce the inequalities of the outside world whilst simultaneously doing so. Step-Up was first mooted as being personally profitable for those involved, but it was seemingly only the case for the other students in classes from which these boys had been removed. There were also existing contradictions for the Step-Up boys. Ben felt that the intervention had ruined his chances of a suitable post-16 option (a level-3 course in uniformed public services, followed by joining the Army), but accepted that he would not have worked hard had he been kept in his option subjects.

It was never intended that this study would have implications for policy or wider school practices, as it was a specific study of a particular group of students in a certain context. However, the political and educational discourse around white working class and boys' achievement has only increased during the period of this study. When white working-class boys' educational achievement is discussed in a wider context it is often about how they perform compared to all students (actually a nomenclature for non-disadvantaged students) rather than being compared to other disadvantaged or racialised groups.[38]

The participants in this study underwent significant shifts and changes in their habitus. In Year-9 a collective mind-set was evident in that all the students had some homogeneity in that their backgrounds, whilst not identical, did place them in a group where their school places were precarious. The shift from a full timetable of GCSE subjects to Step-Up was initially welcomed. However, the boys were seen as a collective by some staff and students whilst the boys actually

[38] It is important to note that such discourse is actually about a certain section of the white working class: those in deprived circumstances (however so measured). Importantly, there are significant numbers of children from white working-class families who are not in difficult socio-economic circumstances.

defined themselves in opposition to the other boys in Step-Up, exhibiting some feelings of isolation. This gave way to even more disparate mind-sets in the Year-10 interviews, where some boys were evaluating where Step-Up and their wider school experience was leading them; others engaged in a more collective mindset of belonging to the Unit, as an opposition to the mainstream of school. The Year-10 interviews saw an emergence of an egalitarian habitus where many of the boys began to adopt dispositions of self-preservation. Within this period the boys defined themselves by what they were not, with an emerging individual consciousness evident in which the majority of the boys down=played their own ability and possibly reinforced their own disadvantage.

As the material effects of being involved in Step-Up became clear, the boys became aware of the symbolic cost of Step-Up and their reduced Post-16 options. The Year-11 data suggested that participants were adopting a habitus clivé, partly out of necessity to negotiate the many positionalities that their involvement in Step-Up left them with as they neared the end of their compulsory schooling, but also as a reaction to their changing circumstances. The habitus clivé is necessary when the "conditions of existence change so dramatically for an individual that they feel their dispositions are losing coherency and they experience a sense of self torn by dislocation and internal division" (Friedman, 2015, p.1). This was felt as a deeply personal and isolating experience for the participants; ironically, this was something that they had in common with many of the other Step-Up boys.

Whilst the Step-Up boys were generally held in low regard in the mainstream of school, the majority of them enjoyed high status in less-legitimate settings when out in large groups at night or socialising with others who were equally marginalised. These boys conferred prestige on the limited

range of opportunities that were on offer to them, whilst disavowing those they felt were denied them or unachievable.

As data collection came to an end, I reflected on the minimal opportunities that boys such as Terence had for student voice. Admittedly, Step-Up was the only alternative for the participants to avoid a permanent exclusion at the time, but I was struck by how much the boys had to say, and the honesty in which they said it. Stahl (2015a) suggests that the material and symbolic collision that occurs in school for such boys is misunderstood by teachers and policy-makers. Such white working-class boys experience:

> an ongoing reflexive process of internalisation of possibilities, shaped by the conditions of both material poverty and a poverty of opportunity. Their limited means, juxtaposed against a rhetoric of aspirations that were competitive, economic and status-based, created a dynamic that directly influenced how their gendered, classed and ethnic masculinities came into being (pp.133-4).

Stahl suggests that the nexus between material (economic) and symbolic factors means that mobility, aspiration and engagement are encased in risks and uncertainties. If one thing characterises the data, it is that the boys' uncertainties were a constant spectre that haunted their shifting and changing positionalities within the field of school, and their opportunities beyond school.

Bourdieu (1993) describes habitus as "a power of adaptation" which "constantly performs an adaptation to the outside world which only occasionally takes the form of radical conversion" (p.88).

It appears that white working-class boys in particular are required to be 'converted' by the education process; however, this research shows that these particular boys struggled to negotiate the field of school to the extent that critical thinking was largely left to them individually. The boys in this research became reflexive in their thoughts about school, but not because they were aware of all possibilities, rather they were reflexive in decreasing circles about what was personally possible, negotiable and likely. The boys were also increasingly aware of the symbolic as well as the material (economic) limits of their opportunities were seen to be dwindling. Grasping the logic of the social world and the field of school is perhaps in antithesis to white working-class habitus.

The symbolic and material limits of their opportunities were lucidly discussed by Lewis during the Year-11 interviews:

> "I know I won't do well, but I have to do it all anyway ...the exams …it's like finishing last in a race but you have to do the final lap for no reason … just you can say you did the final lap". (Lewis)

Lewis arguably identified a pervading sense of deep personal dissatisfaction and individual crisis. The participants in this study were sometimes lost, sometimes defiant and sometimes rude, but they were always honest about their experiences of Step-Up, school and their lives.

It would be fair to say that the boys who took part in my research contributed to their own marginalisation, at least to some extent – although the reasons for this are complex and somewhat paradoxical. Simmons et al. (2020) argue that white working-class males may choose this path in order to be 'somebody' in their own world rather than be a 'nobody' in the mainstream of school or

college. There was clearly some kudos for these boys in being acknowledged as powerful within their own social circles. Perhaps this is not as contradictory as it first appears, as the boys learnt to navigate the various fields of their lives. Arguably, the Step-Up students exercised some agency in rejecting mainstream education and employment, even though this may have been exacerbated by feeling that these fields had rejected them. Step-Up did remove some students' options earlier than might otherwise have been the case and so Step-Up, it could be argued, helped reinforce inequality.

Bourdieu's work offers a framework in which some of the processes that affect the lives of white working-class boys can be understood. His ideas help illuminate their possible alienation within the field of school. The Step-Up boys became marginalised early in their secondary school career due to their behaviour, multiple managed moves and threats to permanently exclude them. They began Step-Up as an alternative to the perceived continuation of failure, in its many forms. On many occasions, the boys identified that the language used about them and towards them in mainstream school was symbolically violent, reinforcing their sense of 'otherness' and a disconnection between the forms of capital they prized, vis-à-vis those prized by school.

Bourdieu's ideas also expose contradictions in the data collected. The boys' experience of Step-Up, was initially positive, before it shifted to feelings of dissatisfaction about being singled out as different or unworthy. This developed into the boys navigating the increasingly limited possibilities open to them and accepting their educational inequity, before a habitus clivé developed which led the boys to negotiate the fields of school, college and employment with multiple subjectivities, experiencing personal suffering and a pervading sense of loss. However, there is a contradiction here. Arguably, Step-Up had not left the boys worse-off than if they had been permanently excluded.

The concept of habitus is useful to a point here, in that it possibly offers some understanding of how individuals navigate different fields. However, it does not follow in this data that an identifiable specific working-class habitus contributed to the boys' educational failure. Admittedly though, the reasons that these boys had precarious positions in school could be partially attributed to their dispositions towards education, which could be claimed as aspects of a white working-class habitus. The data suggests that the boys were collectively disadvantaged, but this was felt individually rather than collectively. The interview data presented a much richer picture of the boys' developing feelings towards Step-Up, the wider school and their post-16 options than positionalities and dispositions.

In terms of the types of interventions that white working-class boys are disproportionately involved in, there are some clear findings. School interventions, such as Step-Up, must be done well, which means allocating considerable funds to such programmes. Such commitments are often unpalatable to school leaders when other performance indicators may be more urgent priorities. This, in turn, is linked to staffing. My experience in schools has led me to believe that relationships are central to all forms of teaching and learning and it would have required talented, committed teachers to enable the Step-Up boys make make rapid and sustained progress in English and Maths, and engage them in learning more broadly. But, in reality, such lessons were often delivered by staff who were not teaching GCSE classes or by those who simply had empty slots of their timetables; this made the staffing of these sessions in Step-Up an after-thought.

Step-Up's intended impact was also compromised when a Behaviour Support Worker left the school and was not replaced. The Unit Manager was hard-working, but not a qualified teacher or educator.

One of the original justifications for Step-Up was to avoid the fines associated with permanent exclusions and the expensive fees associated with placing students in alternative provisions. The introduction of Step-Up arguably helped convince students, parents and staff that at least some action was being taken to address the perceived needs of the boys. However, the long-lasting impact of Step-Up was possibly predictable (in that the extra time created for English and Maths did not improve the boys' achievement in these subjects), but it was also tragically and individually felt by each of the ten participants.

It is worth considering the implications of this research for professional practice. The participants' removal from many mainstream lessons arguably ameliorated the problems that these boys were causing in these sessions for other students and teachers. However, such actions do not address the problems faced by white working-class boys, rather they run the risk of seeing white working-class boys as 'a problem to be solved'. The data shows that the boys came to realise that other constructive possibilities for intervention would have had a more meaningful and positive impact on their learning, achievement and the opportunities they felt were open to them. These possibilities included bespoke subject intervention programmes with specialist skilled teachers, a mixture of vocational college provision and functional skills teaching as well as anger management input and mental health counselling.

The longitudinal aspect of the research meant that I got to know the participants well over a period of three years. At the beginning of the research, when Step-Up was being introduced, I knew that the boys' precarious positions in school were deemed to be their own fault. I did not subscribe to this view, but admit to being frustrated when having to remove some of them from lessons for behaviours which seemed targeted, disruptive, deliberate and often selfish. However, as I

interviewed the boys in Year-9 I felt that they had gained a sense of collective belonging and identity from being on Step-Up and having the Unit as a base. The initial novelty of doing something different was welcomed by these boys too. By the Year-10 interviews, they were choosing a comfortable positionality within a narrow, almost self-enforced, set of options. I felt that this compromise then developed into individually experienced crises in Year-11. It would therefore be fair to say that this research has made me significantly more critical and questioning about the supposed underachievement of white working-class boys, along with some of the assumptions and practices which underpin interventions which aim to engage or re-engage them in learning. The objective relations and complex structures of education possibly require intervention programmes designed to raise the achievement of white working-class boys to be far more bespoke and personalised than they have been. Also, as the ESCR (2021) report suggests, there needs to be a significant investment in quality vocational education. Hillside High's Step-Up failed these boys because it:

- was under-resourced,
- amalgamated an intervention programme with a behaviour support service
- it was not responsive to the students' feelings or academic performance.

In my experience, successful interventions should be time-limited, highly targeted and have clear specific measurable outcomes. The boys in this research read the world of school that surrounded them, developed strategies of varying success, whilst navigating and mediating the possibilities they felt were open to them. However, they did so through constant compromise which perhaps enacted symbolic violence on their emerging sense of identity.

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