School exclusions and masculine, working-class identities

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1. Introduction

In the policy pursuit of social justice through social inclusion, Scottish and UK governments have made specific connections between school exclusions and social exclusion. In November 1999, the Scottish Executive issued a new Report *'Social justice….a Scotland where everyone matters'*. The report provided a framework of targets and milestones to enable the monitoring of progress towards social inclusion. Targets were aimed at, for example, ending child poverty, increasing the educational attainments of school leavers and increasing the financial security of older people. Within that broad framework, figures produced annually since 2000 (Scottish Executive, 2000), enable the monitoring of school exclusions both temporary and permanent, and, initially, encouraged their reduction through a target-setting exercise. Those statistics are structured by a range of social factors: gender, poverty (as indicated by receipt of free school meals), looked after by local authority and special educational needs (denoted by the existence of an RoN). Statistics for 2001/02 published in February 2003 were subsequently revised to include the ethnic origin of pupils as a factor in the analysis of data. It is significant that the data are organized in ways that make specific links between exclusions and factors in broader social exclusion and thus demonstrate the over-representation of certain groups. Boys, for example, are approximately four times more likely than girls to be excluded. In the light of these highly gendered patterns in the area of exclusions and discipline referrals (Head et al, 2003), and the political pursuit of improvement through a social justice framework, it is interesting to note that SEED policy on discipline/behaviour, *Better Behaviour, Better Learning* (SEED, 2002) mentions neither gender, nor those other social factors interacting with pupils' experience of school.

This paper will consider data arising from an investigation into school exclusions which focused particularly on the experience of working-class boys. In addressing the reasons why rates of exclusion for this group are far higher than for other groups (Scottish Executive, 1999, 2001, 20002), policymakers, education professionals and researchers have located the 'problem' in a much wider pattern of boys' underachievement in schools related to 'laddish' attitudes and behaviours. This analysis has been criticized (Skelton, 2003; Frank at al, 2003;) for its narrow account of masculinities and for its failure to encompass other forms of identity, particularly social class identity, in the analysis. School approaches to gender based on this narrow analysis may endorse just those behaviours that lead to the exclusion of some pupils. Boys are seen in this study as actively engaged in the attempt to negotiate particular masculine identities, using, for example, public interactions with teachers to position themselves in opposition to the school and in alignment with other norms of masculinity. This paper considers the experience of boys who have been marginalized by the school in that they have been formally excluded for periods of between three days and four weeks.

In considering the experiences of three case study pupils, the first part of this paper will outline how they came to be excluded, the second part will illustrate and discuss how the behaviours which led to their exclusion were part of their attempt to negotiate working-class masculine identities. The third part of the paper will address the relationship between in-school behaviour and wider social identites. Particular attention will be paid to the notion of agency in relation to working-class boys and exclusions; the boys here are viewed as steering an uncomfortable course between their present and future identities in the wider community and their current identities as school pupils. Finally, the paper

will consider implications for schools in the continuing attempt to provide socially just outcomes for all pupils.

2. Schooling and working-class, masculine identities

In *Learning to Labour*, Willis (1977) showed how the boys in his study were actively constructing social class relations during the last two years of schooling and doing so in relation to their gender and social class identities. Their anti-school behaviour as they moved towards the end of schooling was interpreted as preparation for the 'resistance within accommodation' they would practice as workers within an industrial capitalist economy. Arnot (2003) notes criticisms of *Learning to Labour*, including the charge that it commits the reader to a 'highly romanticized, celebratory view of the working-class 'lads'. (Arnot, 2003: 101 alluding to Skeggs, 1992). In spite of such criticisms, the influence of Willis's work has been lasting. Arnot (2003:103), in reviewing the impact of Willis's study, notes that Willis had shown the ways in which different masculinities were created, regulated and reproduced within the school setting, an area explored by a number of researchers through the 1990s and into the present decade (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Connell, 1995; Francis, 2000; Skelton, 2001; Frosh et al, 2002; Renold, 2004). In *Shaun's story*, Reay (2002) showed how Shaun's white, working-class masculinity was shaped by two compelling and conflicting influences – his family and his peer group at school, a conflict requiring of Shaun heroic efforts to secure the continuing approval of both groups.

Starting with Willis's work, studies have shown how the behaviour of boys in school settings related to the stratifications of both schooling and capitalism, and to the manner in which working-class boys dealt with inevitable contradictions in their lives. Although influential in research, such understandings have been marginalized in policy. Challenging pupils have been viewed as having 'social, emotional and behavioural difficulties' and responses to their behaviour have, increasingly, been framed by support and welfare approaches. This paper argues that there are other ways of trying to understand the disproportionate exclusion of boys and that, whilst approaches based on support, rather than punishment, are to be welcomed, on their own they may have very limited impact. Mortimore (1999: 327), acknowledges the criticism that school effectiveness research has ignored the insights offered by Willis (1977):

> …..that 'working-class' students have often made a rational decision to reject 'compliance' for 'credentials'. This point is fair: most school effectiveness studies do start with the assumption that students want to succeed. If, for any reason, this is not the case, then many of the strategies of school improvement are likely to fail. The key point is…..that the system needs to permit as many as possible to succeed – albeit at different speeds, with different amounts of support and to different levels. (Mortimore, 1999: 327)

This paper considers the experience of boys who were not among those permitted to succeed. They were excluded because of behaviour that was very difficult and very challenging for their schools although, in all four secondary schools in this study, highly developed support support systems were in place. The discussion here probes the limits of the approaches adopted by schools. It argues that schools' power to shape the behaviour of all pupils is limited. Some pupils, no matter what schools do, seem to 'kick against' the prevailing school norms, sometimes with overt displays of particular and very challenging forms of masculinities. It is argued that such behaviour should be considered in relation to wider social inequality and to increased social stratification. Before pursuing this discussion, however, the next section will outline the research study.

3. Aims and context of the research

The data here was gathered from four secondary schools in one local authority (LA) in the West of Scotland. Three of the schools were located in areas where the economy had been dominated by heavy industry, notably the steel and mining industries. These industries had ceased to exist at the time of the study, and while the research was being conducted in schools, the largest remaining local employer, a multinational manufacturer, announced its closure. The fourth school was located in a

'new' town built in the 1950s/60s to accommodate young families moving out from the nearby city. Of the four schools, this school had the widest social spread in its pupil population. Within this context, the study addressed the following questions:

- What are the relative influences of school culture and wider cultural factors in shaping the gender and class identities of young people?
- What is the link between cultural identities and school exclusion?
- How far are schools sites for the pursuit of social justice?

4. Methods

The data was organized around case studies of twenty pupils, all of whom had been excluded during their time in secondary school. The sample was not constructed to represent a particular gender balance but, as it happened, there were seventeen boys and three girls, roughly the same gender balance indicated by national exclusion statistics (SEED, 2004). The pupils were drawn from S1 to S4, that is, from the age range of compulsory secondary schooling in Scotland. Nineteen of the pupils were white and Scottish, one boy was black and Scottish. Race was not an aspect of identity considered in this study in any depth; neither was religion, although one of the schools in the study was a Catholic denominational secondary school. The focus of the research was gender and class identities and, in particular, the experience of working-class boys who form the majority of the whole group of pupils excluded in Scottish schools. Across the group of twenty case studies a range of factors was seen to be contributing to pupils' exclusion. Among those factors was the practice of a number of boys of actively positioning themselves in ways that were very challenging to teachers and to the school organisation. Those pupils were seen to be actively negotiating hegemonic masculine identities through particular kinds of behaviour in and outwith the classroom. The focus here is on three of these pupils.

Data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with pupils, parents, teachers and other staff; from focus groups with pupils; from classroom observations; and from documentary material. In all, 105 interviews were conducted, ranging in length from 1.5 hours to just 10 minutes when some teachers gave a little time at the ends of lessons to comment on what had just passed, before the next class arrived. Pupils were observed in class on 26 occasions, though this was not possible for one of the S4 case study pupils whose attendance had been very poor. All interviews, apart from those with parents, were conducted in the schools and with a great deal help from staff members who coordinated the arrangements for the data gathering in each school.

5. Case studies of exclusion

A number of the boys in this study exercised considerable control over their personal lives, sometimes well beyond what would be accorded to other adolescents, and in marked contrast to the scope for control offered by their schools. For example, twelve-year old Andy lived with his brother and with his mother who had mental health problems and who had great difficulty in helping her sons to organise their lives. Andy came to secondary school with what the DHT called 'an absolutely horrific report' from his primary school indicating a range of concerns, including some raised by the local police:

> Caught with drugs. Kept in cell overnight because no responsible adult could be found to take them. They have den where they sleep overnight. (extract from police report to primary school)

Andy seemed to have exercised a great deal of control over his own lif. For example, Andy had refused a referral to the Educational Psychologist, even though his mother and the school advocated this course. Andy was hostile to professionals. He preferred not to have a social worker and was strongly opposed to other professionals entering his life. There was, though, great concern, about the experience of the Andy out of school. He and his brother were known to a range of community services, including police and social workers – *'They are so well-known to everyone these boys, to the police, to everyone.' (DHT)*. Worryingly, Andy's mother reported to the school that, at home, he has been violent towards her, swearing at her and kicking her. He, along with his brother, was reported to have put his mother out of the house on occasion. Andy himself had no real explanation to offer when asked why he gets into bother – 'I don't know. I haven't a clue.' He knows that he himself sometimes tries to annoy the teacher but he also feels that sometimes it is the teacher's fault.

Andy was recorded as excluded just once in S1 but, during interview, Andy himself said he had been excluded six times, all in S1. The DHT explained that the single exclusion given to Andy was in line with the local authority policy of not excluding pupils wherever possible. However, he also explained that Andy had been 'sent home' a number of times pending his mother coming to the school to discuss his behaviour. She would usually come on the following day. 'Sending home' would not count as a formal exclusion and so this practice would account for the disparity between Andy's account and the school's account on the one hand and the written record on the other hand.

The second case study is Ross who was thirteen and who lived with his mother and his older brother. Ross's attendance in S1 had been poor. His record showed 129 absences from a possible 369 openings at time of interview, giving an attendance rate of 65.04%. Ross had been excluded just once, for one day, during S1. This was surprising given accounts of his behaviour in school but his poor attendance might explain this to some extent. His father had access to the family home and Ross had a good deal of contact with him. Ross's father had wider family in the area and they were reported as being well-known locally. Ross's relationship to his father and his father's family were reported to have made Ross himself very streetwise. Ross was tall, of good physical stature and he carried himself well. His friends are older than him but it was reported by several staff that he did not seem out of place, physically or socially, in the company of sixteen- and seventeen-year old boys. This marked him out in a group of first-year boys:

> …he has got to be the big guy and you can see the fear factor with some of the other kids.
> (Home/School link worker)

Ross does not appear to have friends in his class in school. His male classmates seem to regard him with a mixture of admiration and deference. One teacher indicated that Ross was very protective of people in the class, offering to 'get' anyone who bullied his fellow classmates.

The third case study, Davy, was a third-year pupil at time of interview. He was keen to portray himself as a boy's boy, emphasising in interview that he has a lot of friends and a girlfriend. Davy had had two exclusions, both of them during the previous year when he had been in S2. Davy's exclusions had been for bringing a knife into school and for aggressive and threatening behaviour towards a girl. Both exclusion incidents had involved other boys and there seemed to have been some bravado on Davy's part on both occasions. The knife incident had come to light when a local woman had phoned the school to report that she had seen several of its pupils with a knife at the bus stop that morning. Davy emerged as the one who had brought the knife into school. The second exclusion arose when a girl saw Davy with her friend's stolen mobile phone. Davy had bought the phone not realising that it had been stolen. He subsequently threatened the girl in the corridor and was excluded for this bullying behaviour towards her.

The behaviour which led to the exclusion of all three boys here might be interpreted as part of their negotiation of identities which, though ongoing in school, related to the wider social and cultural context of their lives. The next section will look more closely at how such identities are negotiated through interactions with teachers and with peers in the school setting.

6. Negotiating hegemonic masculinities with teachers and fellow pupils: moving towards exclusion?

Most of the pupils in this study had been excluded, and sometimes repeatedly so, for their very challenging attitudes towards teachers. Again and again, pupils in this study, especially boys, accounted for some of their exclusions by saying that they were responding to being shouted at or being treated with disrespect by their teachers. For example:

> The teachers do not treat you right. In Primary 7 the teachers treated you with respect. Here they don't; they treat you like you were dirt, nearly every single teacher (S1 pupil)

An S3 pupil who had been frequently excluded explained why he sometimes lost all control:

> I can't stand teachers in my face shouting at me….At C___ Primary. The teachers were always shouting at me so I always shouted back, swearing and all different things. So I always got suspended. (S3 pupil)

In general, pupils' angry reactions to being shouted at were seen as indicative of a loss of control but there were also indications that some boys were able to use their angry reactions to reach an accommodation with teachers. One teacher, a young woman, commented on how she had learned to deal with Andy, the first case study pupil:-

> My experience of Andy was very simple. If you were too antagonistic with him he would react in a similarly antagonistic way and that happened once – the first time I met him….He was showing off to other people and we hit a brick wall quite quickly. He reacted and he was quite aggressive. His body language was quite aggressive. I quickly learned from that if you are full on, he will just shout back at you. He will actually use expressions like 'Don't speak to me like that' or ' Don't shout at me' (Female English teacher).

The teacher went on to say that she now treated Andy differently from other pupils in the class, in that she would not now speak sharply to him. She recognized that there were inequities here but she felt that other pupils in the class expected Andy to be treated differently and did not, therefore, object. This teacher's changed behaviour could be seen as an example of how teachers, as well as pupils, learn in classrooms. They develop their professional practice to accommodate the diverse range of pupils in each class. However, it is also possible to interpret this teacher's experience as learned deference to a boy who is consciously seeking to be dominant in the classroom, even when the teacher is present. This latter interpretation of Andy's behaviour is worrying if it is viewed as an attempt to replicate his relationship with his mother.

Ross, the second case study pupil, uses classroom events and interactions as a means of constructing in a continuing way his identity. This was observed during one lesson in particular when Ross demonstrated his ability to orchestrate the lesson. Ross sat at the front of the class, in clear view of everyone and close to the teacher. He used his position to establish himself as the leader of disruptive behaviour. It was clear that others in the class looked to Ross for their lead. He was literally laid back during the lesson, leaning back with his feet on a chair and his hands clasped behind his head. He asked a girl at the other side of the room for a drink from her bottle of Irn Bru. This was thrown from one pupil to another until it reached Ross. He drank and then threw it back across the room. The teacher did not challenge Ross in a direct way. Instead, he went twice to have a quiet word with him. This tactic had no effect. Ross continued to run the lesson for his own and others' enjoyment, making noises and asking superfluous questions. In fact, the teacher seemed to try to establish an accommodation with Ross. For example, he had refused permission for one of the class to go to the toilet. However, when Ross asked he was granted permission immediately.

Ross did not appear to have friends in his class in school. His male classmates seemed to regard him with a mixture of admiration and deference. One of his teachers commented:

> Pupils want to be his friend because I think it is the power he has outwith the school, or the perceived power he has outwith school. (Teacher)

The teacher indicated that Ross was very protective of people in the class, offering to 'get' anyone who bullied his fellow classmates. Ross is powerful enough to be able to offer patronage to other boys. This is not heroic altruism, although Ross constructs it as such, but is a means for Ross to demonstrate and to advance further his control and his status.

For the third case study pupil, Davy, the class did provide him with his peer group which strongly influenced his behaviour. In one lesson observed, Personal & Social Education, the impact of Davy's social group on his behaviour was very apparent. Davy sat with a group of 10 boys whose dress was a kind of uniform within the school uniform and distinguished them from others in the class. This group operated quite consciously as a group, teasing each other and encouraging each other to annoy others in the class, especially girls. Davy was in the thick of the group and was very involved in attempting to attract the attention of a girl sitting in front of him. The boys participated in the lesson but, to a much greater extent, they were engaging with their own friendship group. Once the teacher put on a video, the boys moved to sit on the desks, still keeping close to each other. They maintained their conversation, which was about drugs and the video itself, throughout the film. The rest of the class – all of the girls and a few boys – were quiet and attentive throughout. This episode was a very vivid illustration of how his friendship group impacted on Davy. He was very much part of a group of mates who were prepared to participate in the lesson but very largely on their terms.

However, coming through from interviews and classroom observation was sense of Davy being at a crossroads in his life. He had been and continued to be one of the lads, behaving in and out of the classroom in ways that got him into trouble along with his mates. However, his academic aspirations were taking him away from those mates. Classes were usually set on ability in S3 and, for a number of subjects, Davy was finding himself in different sections from his friends. One of his teachers reported that he:

> …..showed ability early on but he did not play to his strength. He tried not to show that he was clever because it was not cool within that class. (English teacher)

Going into S3, Davy was placed in a top Credit class and his teacher thought that he might resent being separated from his friends. However, on asking Davy about this, she discovered that he was pleased to be in this class. He had been doing very well, bringing homework to her privately to check it with her.

The next section will consider how the masculinities negotiated by boys, sometimes resulting in their exclusion, were bound up with their views of their futures.

Present abilities: future lives
Within the whole case study sample there were pupils whose behaviour difficulties were bound up with general learning difficulties. Others, such as the three boys discussed here, were very able academically. Their teachers from primary school onwards had noted high levels of general ability and, sometimes, particular ability in traditional 'male' subjects such as mathematics and physics. For example, Ross, the second case study here, was noted by all teachers interviewed as a very able boy. His abilities were demonstrated not just in traditional measures of attainment but in his social interactions. He did well in primary school and, on transfer to secondary, he was working at Level E in maths, that is, well beyond the normal range of attainment for children of his age. Ross knew that he was very able. It was a point of pride with him:

> I was one of the brightest in my class at primary school. I still am really in most of my classes. I can do the work; but I just don't do it most of the time. (Ross)

In spite of very poor attendance and exclusion, he was still in the top maths section in secondary school, although there was a sense of his life taking on a very different orientation:

> He is a very bright boy but he is out till 1.00 or 2.00am and he cannot get up in the morning for school. He has a difficult home life but there is a lot of pressure as well with peers. (Home/School link worker)

Within the wider case study sample, too, there were other boys recognized as very bright. One S3 pupil had been excluded six times in that school session alone and had missed 37 days out of a possible 190 school days but he was expected to do very well in Standard Grade maths and physics, in spite of missing much of the course. It was recognised by staff that, in different circumstances, he would be going to university.

It was interesting to note that for a bright working-class boy like Davy, the third case study, university was not on the horizon at all. It may have been that, for Davy, one way of squaring his academic aspirations with the values of his friendship group was to present 'S' Grades and Highers as a passport to a better job, a means of achieving a higher standard of living in the future. University could also be said to provide these benefits but within the boys' social sphere, there was no evidence of that. Perhaps working-class boys grow up more quickly than their middle-class counterparts. At just fourteen, Davy saw himself in a settled relationship with a girl and as having to make plans about how he will earn a living. In that case, university would not only be a socially unknown experience with outcomes that were of unproven value but also as requiring a timescale quite out of keeping with how working-class boys saw their lives progressing. Also motivating against the boys' participation in Higher Education was their sense of being 'anchored' to their own social, cultural and geographical base and of their need to construct a future for themselves within that sphere.

The boys interviewed generally aspired to have a trade – car mechanic was mentioned by three of the boys as what they hoped for in the future; Andy, the first case study here, said he wanted to be a

plumber and that he was prepared to 'stay on' to help achieve this. Where they cited a preference, none of the seventeen boys indicated that they would like anything other than to learn a trade. From S3 onwards, many of the boys interviewed were working part-time and a number of them had steady girlfriends. These factors were conveyed in interviews as points of pride and as indicative of the maturity of the boys concerned. They saw school as instrumental in helping them to get the kinds of jobs they hoped for but they had very vague notions of what was needed by way of qualifications. Several cited contacts amongst friends and family as the means by which they would get a job. School, then, served very unclear purposes for the boys in the study, exerting over them an arbitrary authority but offering limited help in their preparations for the future.

Social justice and school exclusions
What can schools do by way of pursuing social justice for those working –class boys on the margins of schooling because of their exclusion? Skelton (2001) criticises the widespread trend in schools and education authorities towards producing support materials designed to make classrooms more ' boy friendly' by endorsing one kind of masculinity – that which is aggressive, active and dominant. Thus the behaviours nurtured by the school through certain gender strategies may be exactly the same as the behaviours that lead to the exclusion of some pupils. Archer and Yamashita (2003) argue for the need to recognise in policy and practice intersecting identities or 'culturally entangled masculinities'. By this account, gender interacts with other aspects of social identity, for example, class, culture, ethnicity and sexuality, to create multiple forms of identity and ensuring that within the whole group of boys, for example, there are very different relationships to schools and schooling, depending on a range of other social factors. School approaches therefore would recognise a range of masculine identities and would offer boys opportunities to examine and consciously review the processes by which they negotiate their identities.

Nayak (2003), writing about how boys in the North-east of England construct their identities in an industrial context much-changed since their fathers' and grandfathers' days, argues that the gender identities of young people 'cannot be adequately comprehended within the microcosm of the school institution alone' (Nayak, 2003: 148). Connell (1989: 292) similarly argues the need for research on identities and identity construction to see the school as located in a larger process. The two main sites for the construction of working-class, masculine identities have shifted dramatically. Such change and its impact on individuals, families and communities is neglected by school improvement projects that attribute only one form of identity to working-class boys (and girls) – that of school pupils. More flexible responses to provision for different social groups can be seen in the establishment of 'alternative curricula' usually with a highly vocational orientation. Whilst such approaches recognize and attempt to overcome the alienation of adolescent working-class boys from schooling, they are unlikely to promote social justice. Their impact will be to establish a hierarchy of opportunities and to limit the range open to some pupils. Cultural recognition of some groups within the school system may be pursued in too simplistic a way, resulting in the longer run in more rigid social stratification and increased inequality.

Conclusion
Schools have been criticised for under-reporting exclusions (Munn et al, 2000) and there was further evidence here that this is, indeed, the case. However, schools were very open about their use of the 'sending home' mechanism. This suggests that they saw this tack as a means of managing responsibly fraught situations, of defusing conflict and preventing exclusion. Schools see the monitoring of numbers of exclusions as framed by the school improvement discourse (rather than a social justice discourse) and, as with the monitoring of attainment through Scottish Qualifications Agency data, there is scepticism that this exercise (even without the target-setting dimension) can assist the capacity of schools to provide well for young people. In fact, in their openness about sending pupils home, schools seemed to see themselves as setting their care/welfare responsibilities against their accountability function in terms of reporting exclusions.

Many of the boys in this study had been excluded at some point for disobedience and aggressive and/or abusive behaviour. Their experience reflects the pattern across Scotland. National statistics

(Scottish Executive, 2003) show that the single most important reason for exclusion was general or persistent disobedience (23.7%), followed by verbal abuse of members of staff (16.6%), physical abuse of fellow pupils (13.2%), and then by aggressive or threatening behaviour (9.7%). The second and fourth categories here indicate that about a quarter of exclusions (26.3%) are the result of verbal abuse of teachers and aggressive and threatening behaviour. General or persistent disobedience, the largest single reason for exclusions in Scotland, does not suggest the same full-on emotional exchange between the pupil and the teacher. Sometimes, in trying to reduce exclusions, this category of exclusion has targeted by schools as representing the 'softer' end of a continuum of reasons why young people are excluded and therefore the area where the greatest improvement could be achieved. However, exclusions in this category can represent the outcome of a conscious and sustained challenge to the teacher's authority and evidence from some case studies demonstrated this. Andy and other boys in the whole case study sample were angry and sometimes, very aggressive, losing control of themselves when confronted with what they interpreted as aggressive or coercive behaviour from their teachers. Other boys in this study demonstrated no loss of control; on the contrary, they demonstrated very high levels of control over themselves, other pupils in the class, even over the teacher on occasion. The referrals they received according to their behaviour records were for reasons of general and persistent disobedience. This cause of exclusion, therefore, may be harder to tackle than is generally supposed, for it is sometimes a reflection of a deliberately oppositional attitude to school adopted by boys as part of a process of negotiating their gender and class identities.

In all four secondary schools in this study, extended, responsive and sometimes highly individualized support systems were in place. The development of such support systems is a major advance in schooling and in its capacity to be inclusive of a wider range of pupils. However, it is limited. Some in-school behaviour is the result of wider social factors and will be best addressed through policy which reduces social stratification and inequality.

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