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In the corner of working-class boys: Relational approaches and the re-orientating of habitus

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ABSTRACT

The academic disengagement of working-class boys features regularly in sociology of education research which frequently highlights how their classed and gendered identities often serve as a barrier to their academic success. The salience of this issue is elevated in the current climate of social change which has renewed debates around gender identities. Analysing case study data from a Northern Ireland-based study, we draw on Bourdieu's theoretical construct of habitus to examine how school-community youth work collaboration encompassing relational approaches can be leveraged to foster better learning experiences and outcomes for such boys; and how their habitus can be reorientated toward a pro-school agenda by resultant changes in the field within which their learning occurs.

1. Introduction

The long-standing and seemingly intractable problem of the academic disengagement of working-class boys features regularly in education research and in wider contemporary debates around gender, identity, and the experience of boyhood in the twenty-first century (Ingram, 2018; Stahl, 2015). Concomitantly, the new millennium has witnessed an intensification of effort on the part of schools to address this issue via the adoption of flexible curricula (Gill, 2020) and an emphasis of pastoral care (Morgan et al., 2015). Many working-class boys succeed and indeed thrive in formal school settings and have clearly benefitted from a renewed emphasis on more supportive teacher-pupil relationships (Hickey & Riddle, 2022; Stahl, 2022). However, for some working-class boys, the interplay between their emerging masculinities (Stahl & Dale, 2018), their, often, doxic dispositions towards education (McGregor, 2017), and the rigid structures of formal schooling (Harland & McCready, 2012) leads them to disengage.

Scholarship around working-class boys' masculinities and education, certainly in the later decades of the 20th century, commonly posited hegemonic modes of masculinity predicated on boys performatively exhibiting toughness, misogynistic views, and anti-school stances (Connell, 1993). Similarly, Nayak and Kehily (1996) argued that aspects of their working-class culture, particularly in a post-industrialization context, persuaded them to view education as a feminine activity. However, social changes since the new millennium around gender roles and the acceptance of same-sex relationships have encouraged examinations of more *inclusive* masculinities (Anderson & McCormack, 2018). These new examinations hold that while residual aspects of hegemonic masculinities persist around anti-school stances, and that performativity remains central to masculinities in school settings (ibid), boys may feel less

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compelled to exhibit hypermasculine behaviors to attain acceptance (Stahl & Dale, 2018), and that such performativity can be positively assuaged by reconfigured learning spaces (Borduas et al., 2023). Moreover, it is posited that *relational* attributes such as wit, humor, and friendliness are now more esteemed in terms of peer group positioning than orthodox expressions of masculinity such as strength, physicality, and aggression (Anderson & McCormack, 2018).

While much of the wider discourse around raising the aspiration of working-class boys is deficit-centric (Stahl, 2018), our research is concerned with an issue which has long vexed educators, how to simultaneously be respectful of traditional working-class aspirations while also encouraging these boys to engage in education. This concern is premised on acknowledging that educational disengagement amongst some working-class boys emanates from their sense of disconnection from school (Gill, 2020), sub-optimal relationships with teachers (Gergen, 2010), and their doxic dispositions which suppose academic success as impossible (Ingram, 2018). Amongst the methods schools adopt to address the disengagement of such boys is collaborating with youth work organizations to co-create new learning spaces which encompass pedagogies tailored to their diverse and complex needs (Davis, 2015). However, scholarship around these types of intervention remains very limited in this space. This paper addresses this gap by examining one such collaboration between a post-primary school¹ and a youth work-led boxing club in the outskirts of Belfast which targets year 11 boys (aged 15–16) disengaged from education, with behavioral issues, and/or deemed unlikely to achieve their qualifications.

Primary data from focus group discussions with current and previous cohorts are interrogated and indicate how relational approaches can be leveraged to create an improved sense of connection between these boys and their education, teachers, and learning spaces. To our knowledge, this paper outlines a novel examination of a collaborative formal/informal education intervention targeting disengaged boys via relational approaches and demonstrates the art of the possible when schools are prepared to utilize and learn from the relational dimension of youth work methodology. Moreover, the high metrics of success in terms of attitudinal change toward a pro-schooling disposition and positive academic outcomes engendered by this intervention and evidenced here are unpacked in ways that are currently prime-pumping future interventions around working-class boys and educational disengagement.

Theoretically, our research is informed by Bourdieu's (1990) logic of practice and thus builds upon previous scholarship around working-class boys' engagement in education which have sought to capitalize on Bourdieu's theoretical contribution (e.g., Mills, 2008; Reay, 2002). Specifically, we focus on habitus and how the inherently reproductive traits of working-class boys' habitus can be assuaged, and their habitus can be reorientated towards a transformative trajectory of change by altering the conditions of the field within which their learning occurs. Premised by acknowledging that many such boys struggle to build and maintain relationships – especially in school settings (Reichert, 2015), we posit this transformation is contingent on engendering/improving the pedagogical relations and connections of their school lives. Following a review of relevant literature, sections on habitus as a theoretical frame, the study context, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusions are presented in turn.

2. Relevant literature

While the remit of this research encompasses a wide range of pertinent issues such as class, masculinities, and the purpose of education in contemporary society, we have chosen in this review to emphasize the relational dimension of youth work before narrowing the scope to focus on boys as relational learners.

2.1. The relational dimension of youth work

Professional youth work practice is characterized by the voluntary participation of young people in pedagogical processes of self-actualization underpinned by relationship-building and dialogue which supports their developmental transitions from childhood to adulthood (Davis, 2015). The nexus between relationships and dialogue is highlighted by Mezirow (2003) as a key enabler of transformative learning and underpins youth work's efforts to support the education of young people (Jeffs & Smith, 2010), particularly those (commonly, working-class boys) excluded, disengaged, or at risk of exiting school with few or no qualifications (Morgan et al., 2015). Indeed, an increasingly key element of youth work practice entails partnering with schools (McGregor, 2017), utilising informal approaches in community-based learning spaces (Davis, 2015), and soliciting the engagement of such boys through conversation and dialogue (Mezirow, 2003) engendered in the relationship the youth worker cultivates with the young person (Davis, 2015). This relationship is central to youth work practice, enabling young people to feel understood, and determining the level of learning they achieve (McGregor, 2017). Such scholarship frequently refers to the work of Rogers (1957) who held that learning was primarily facilitated via inter-personal relationships between educator and learner, and subsequently (Rogers, 1967) posited “genuineness”, “unconditional positive regard”, and “empathic understanding” as core conditions required to facilitate a learner's transformative change; and Noddings (2005, p. 1) who defined care as “the foundation for successful pedagogical activity” and later (2013) proposed “engrossment”, “motivational displacement”, and “reciprocity” as underpinning elements of ethical caring relationships. The often-complex relational aspect of boys' learning is the issue to which we now turn.

¹ In Northern Ireland, children begin school aged 4-5 and attend 7 years of (compulsory) Primary School education. At ages 11-12, children then progress to 4 years of (compulsory) Post-Primary School education, and those children with higher levels of attainment, i.e., General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) can opt to stay on for a further 2 years to undertake advanced qualifications (A-Levels).

2.2. Boys as relational learners

Over the past 40 years, scholarship has acknowledged that the disengagement of many working-class boys stems from the sense of disconnection they feel towards their school and teachers (Gill, 2020; Reichert, 2015; Gergen, 2010; Willis, 1977). Although the budding research around the relational aspect of boys learning is somewhat limited, the critical role of teacher-pupil relationships is recognized in terms of engaging working-class boys, supporting their emotional wellbeing, ensuring their identities and inclinations are accepted and comprehended (Reichert & Hawley, 2011; Stahl, 2022), and, consequently, preventing such disconnections from occurring or becoming entrenched (Gill, 2020). While Anderson et al. (2004, p. 46) posit that the inter-personal connections pupils have with teachers “are amongst the most salient and influential relationships” in their lives, Reichert and Nelson’s (2018) found that many schools are “steeped in cultural stereotypes of boys as arelational”. Similarly, Connell (2013, p. 105) argues that the neoliberal-inspired commodification agenda “severely reduces nurturing and educational relationships” because teachers’ “capacity for care is being suppressed”. Moreover, Raider-Roth et al. (2008, pp. 445–447) argue that teachers’ relationships with boys “are often fraught with tension” as teachers wrestle with the dualism of personally appreciating boys’ individuality while concomitantly mediating professional “forces of enculturation” to ensure they become “good boys”.

Underpinned by relational ontology and a constructivist understanding of knowledge as learner-created and schema-incorporated, relational pedagogy situates individuals as relational beings (Gill, 2020) and education as a relational process (Hickey & Riddle, 2022). Although defining relational pedagogy is complicated by the non-static nature of relationships and the dynamic and contextualized way relational pedagogies respond to the diverse and complex needs of individual learners (Papatheodorou, 2008), consensus exists around the “fostering [of] connections, authenticity and responsiveness” (Gravett et al., 2021, p. 5); the view that “informality can operate as a productive modality to activate inclusive... learning opportunities” (Hickey & Riddle, 2022, p. 797); and recognition of a learner’s agency to select and follow their own learning trajectories (Morgan et al., 2015).

The particular suitability of relational pedagogies for boys is highlighted by Raider-Roth et al. (2008, p. 448) who identify a critical nexus between boys’ “internal psychologies”, their construction of masculinities, their relationships with teachers, and their “scholastic functioning”. Similarly, Reichert (2015) argues that relational pedagogies are particularly beneficial for disengaged and/or low attaining boys; and Reichert and Hawley (2011, pp. 48–49) posit that boys enthusiastically embrace “the relational dimension of schooling” but are prone to disengage when they “struggle to locate this dimension”. The same authors outline the contours of a “boy-refined pedagogy” which includes boys perceiving teachers as “ready for a good laugh”, “reaching out” to help them, providing “extra attention” (2011, pp. 42–43), and being “fair”, “kind” and “a friend” (2010, p. 38). In a later study, Reichert and Nelson (2018, pp. 349–353) highlight the “enabling effect” of a boy sensing a connection with his teacher and realising that the teacher understands him “beyond his status as... a student”. However, they caution that “absent such connections, boys are quite willing to check out and thence to act out” (p. 351); and that it is “the teacher as the adult and the professional... not the boy” who burdens the “relational responsibilities” (p. 352).

3. Theoretical frame: habitus

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) logic of practice conceptualizes the social world as a series of ‘fields’ (social arenas) within which individuals, each with their own ‘habitus’ (their internalized dispositions), deploy the ‘capitals’ (the social, cultural, and symbolic assets) at their disposal to secure favourable positions. Although an individual’s habitus operates below the level of consciousness (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), the dispositions it engenders guide individuals to think and act in determinate ways (Wacquant, 2016). Habitus is a complex, seemingly paradoxical combination of past and present experiences (Mills, 2008), individual and collective dispositions (Reay, 2004), and reproductive and transformative potential (Stahl & Dale, 2018). Habitus is formed through processes of socialization and inculcation and is continuously informed by previous and current social interactions. Thus, habitus is concomitantly “structured by past social milieus”, and “structuring of present perceptions” (Wacquant, 2016, p. 67). Evidently, there is a reproductive aspect to habitus because, in addition to internalized dispositions, habitus is also influenced by an individual’s inclination to conform to dominant familial/neighborhood norms. Consequently, habitus typically reflects the dispositions of an individual’s class and community backgrounds (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The habitus of working-class boys and, more specifically, their dispositions towards scholastic endeavor therein, are shaped by familial/neighborhood histories of, often, dispiriting and unproductive school experiences and labor market engagements (Ingram, 2018; Mills, 2008). Such dispositions thus lend themselves to anti-school stances, fatalistic tendencies, and reproductive traits because although their habitus is influenced by new “virtualities, potentialities, eventualities” within the social fields of their lives (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 135), it is bounded and constrained “within the limits of its structures” (Stahl, 2018, p. 565). Therefore, in communities with low attainment and lowly-paid, precarious jobs, the options of local boys can become “circumscribed by an internalized framework” (Reay, 2004, p. 435) and some are likely to view education and labor market success as unreachable, and consequently consider academic application as a pointless endeavor (Mills, 2008). In such ways, their affected habitus dictates to them what is achievable and worth aspiring to (Ingram, 2018).

However, because habitus is a “dynamic... set of schemata subject to permanent revision” (Wacquant, 2016, p. 64), the same processes of inculcation and structuring which engender reproductive traits can also create transformative ones. In other words, the non-static, fluid nature of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) means that dispositions can be “eroded... by exposure to novel external forces” (Wacquant, 2016, p. 66). Reay (2002) and Ingram (2009), for example, highlight the habitus of working-class boys becoming destabilized and riven with conflict when it is confronted by field conditions in an education context discordant to its inclinations. In such encounters, an inner dialectical conflict typically ensues as they become more cognizant of the seemingly incompatible dualism

between their classed and learner identities (Stahl, 2015). In this conflicted state, scholarship (e.g., Ingram, 2018; Mills, 2008) contends that such boys are compelled to either accept the doxic social conditioning of their class and forsake academic pursuit (reproductive), or instead refashion their habitus to better suit the conditions of the field they find themselves in (transformative). Building on this scholarship, we posit here that addressing the disengagement of working-class boys requires bringing their habitus into flux; and that a positive reorientation of their habitus can only be achieved relationally.

Of course, the field of education is *structured by* and *structuring of* all inhabiting habitus, including the institutional habitus of schools, for they too are shaped by their history and social encounters (Wacquant, 2016), and have considerable influence over the setting of conditions in this particular field (Ingram, 2018). Challenging the narrative that educational disengagement is a consequence of cultural deficiencies in the habitus of working-class boys, Ferrare and Apple (2015, p. 46) propose that diagnostic attention be instead directed towards deficiencies in field conditions, such as “school-level structures and practices”.

4. The study

4.1. Research context

Taking Boys Seriously (Harland & McCready, 2012) was a 5-year longitudinal study of boys’ educational underachievement which annually tracked 378 adolescent boys aged 11–16 across nine post-primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI). Amongst their key findings were that: the school environment left many boys bored and frustrated; relationships with teachers were the primary factor in boys’ attitudes towards learning; and that youth work methodologies and relational approaches could play a vital role in supporting educationally disengaged boys. The second iteration, TBS2: the next steps (2018–2023), focuses on boys from socio-economically deprived communities (Quintile 1) and distils key learning from case studies of school-community collaborations which have improved disengaged boys’ educational aspirations and attainment.

4.2. The intervention: “in your corner”

This article draws on data from one such case study collaboration, “In Your Corner” (IYC) - a partnership intervention between Milltown High and Milltown Boxing Club (pseudonyms) which targets year 11 boys (aged 15–16) disengaged from education, with behavior issues, and/or deemed likely to exit school with few or no qualifications. IYC has been run annually since 2016, and the data we examine here is from focus groups with boys from the fourth (2019–2020) and previous cohorts. The school and the boxing club are adjacent to each other in a disadvantaged estate close to Belfast and within a school-catchment area which, according to the NI Statistical Research Agency, features in the lowest quintile of multiple deprivation indices.

Milltown High has directed considerable energy towards supporting the small, yet persistent number of pupils unable to fully engage in formal educational settings. A key aspect of this endeavor is IYC - a year-long program encompassing a bespoke timetable, academic and vocational pathways. IYC recruits approximately 10–12 pupils annually in a joint process with Milltown High and assigns each new participant a key (youth) worker and link teachers from Milltown High to create an individualized learning plan. IYC participants attend the boxing club 3 or 4 days per week (determined by this plan) where they receive small group learning and one-to-one tuition and mentoring from the link teachers and key (youth) workers around English and maths; and are also required to attend 1 or 2 days per week in school accompanied by their key (youth) worker where, supported by their link teacher, they undertake other curriculum-based subjects. Thus, the link teachers and key (youth) workers provide a consistent and constant presence in the boys learning environments both in school and in the IYC.

5. Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative and participatory² methodology, with data gathered from baseline (October 2019) and mid-point (March 2020) focus groups with boys from the 2019–2020 IYC program, and a third focus group with boys from previous IYC cohorts (2017–2018 and 2018–2019). A key aspect of the methodology entailed the engendering of a ‘praxis loop’ where the findings from the IYC program case study around relational pedagogies and their impact in terms of engaging with disengaged boys were contemporaneously fed back to the school to inform IYC’s evolution as well as whole-school strategies and (school-based) initiatives to increase engagement and improve teacher-pupil relationships.

5.1. Data collection and analysis

A total of $n = 11$ boys took part in the focus groups ($n = 5$ from the ‘live’ 2019–2020 cohort, age range 15–16; $n = 3$ from 2018 to 2019, aged 17–18; and $n = 3$ from 2017 to 2018, aged 18–19) who were identified and selected via the IYC program. Ethical approval was secured through Ulster University’s Research Governance Committee, and informed consent was obtained from all boys and their parents/guardians. Assurances were given around anonymity and confidentiality, the boys were made aware their participation was entirely voluntary, the focus groups were conducted with the sight of an adult youth worker, and pseudonyms are used in this

² Milltown High and Milltown Boxing Club are both active members of the *Taking Boys Seriously* steering group and helped shape the aims and objectives of this case study.

article to protect the identities of participants, the school, and the boxing club. The focus groups were semi-structured in nature and were framed around three key areas: boys' pre-intervention perceptions of school, education, and relationships with teachers; their experience within the IYC program; and the impact of the IYC program in terms of informing their attitudes to learning and their transitions into adulthood. Each focus group lasted between 60 and 90 min and were held in Milltown Boxing Club (the IYC venue) between May 2019 and March 2020.

All qualitative data was recorded, transcribed, and coded using thematic analysis to identify patterns, derive themes, and create a narrative (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Sections of coding were cross-checked by another researcher who also participated in some focus groups and were thus able to validate these data and their interpretation. These data were subsequently analysed manually and by using NVivo data handling and research software. Through these iterative processes of coding and thematic analysis (ibid), three key themes around 'disengagement and unproductive relationships', 'positive relationships and connections', and 'transformative change' were identified and are examined below.

6. Findings

The above key themes are presented in turn below. To further protect the identity of the young male respondents, pseudonym first names are used. Additionally, 'CP' is used to denote a current participant (i.e., from the 2019–2020 cohort); and 'FP' refers to former participants (i.e., from the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 cohorts).

6.1. Disengagement and unproductive relationships

The focus groups evidenced that, following streaming processes, boys were aware, and felt stigmatized that they were "in the bottom set" and "treated differently to those in the top classes". Consequently, some felt "stupid", "unmotivated to learn", unable to meet the standard of work expected, nor receive any "praise" for their efforts.

You keep getting it wrong, then you go, forget it, why bother trying [Tom, CP].

Just sitting there all tired and can't be arsed [Paul, CP].

Complete waste of time; the day just drags on [David, FP].

It's the ones in the top classes who are doing well that gets all the praise, but we are the ones who is struggling, teachers should be praising us [Mark, CP].

Many also acknowledged their low academic expectations, and that the specter of "failing school" and "leaving with nothing" made them "lose interest" and instead "mess about". While conceding their own "bad behavior", they felt, once labelled, they were "treated like a bad person". Another common theme was the structured setting of school which left them feeling "bossed about", confined, and "bored".

You're told what to do most of the time, treated like a child, it just makes you want to mess about more [John, CP].

When somebody says, "you have to do that", you're not gonna wanna do it because you feel like you're being forced [William, FP].

In school you have to stay in the one class, you're not allowed to leave. It's just like you're trapped [Daniel, FP].

You just feel squeezed in, with your school bag stuck to the back of you [John, CP].

The boys in the project reported that their relationship with schoolteachers was primarily negative. They conceded their part in this deleterious dynamic and admitted it impacted their motivation, self-confidence, and attendance. Two commonly cited traits of teachers they "struggled with" were teachers who did not exhibit "care" towards them, and those the boys felt they "couldn't have a laugh with".

It just seemed like the teachers didn't really care what we were doing [Michael, FP].

Some you can have a laugh with, but there's some teachers who just can't take a joke [James, CP].

The boys' frustration at being unable to form relationships with their teachers was also apparent when the boys were later asked about transitioning to adulthood and what they think it means to be a man:

Well, we are adults now, so, not being treated as a child [John, CP].

Not being bossed about... standing up for yourself... people not speaking down to you [Paul, CP].

Getting respected by other adults... and not being a loser [Tom, CP].

The sense of disconnection these boys feel towards their teachers, schools, and curriculum speaks to Gergen's (2010) point about a learning world disassociated from the boys' lived experiences; and Reichert and Hawley's (2011, p. 46–48) argument about boys perceiving teachers exhibiting "emotional detachment or disinterest" being more likely to disengage, and the ensuing "tragic spiral" when in response to a "scarcity of attuned teaching and mentoring", boys tend to resist and misbehave which in turn elicits further "disconnected treatment". These responses also indicate that, notwithstanding residual elements of hegemonic masculinities which dissuade their engagement in school, important aspects of these boys' emerging masculinities include the deployment of relational attributes such as wit and humor (Anderson & McCormack, 2018), the forming of relationships which recognize them as adults, feeling respected for who they are, and resistance to being told what to do, which they equated with being treated as a child. More broadly, these data evidence the boys' yearning to be understood, to have their 'effort' in school more fully acknowledged and praised, and perhaps more than anything, their frustration at their inability to have an honest, open, and power-symmetrical relationship with their educators.

Furthermore, their continued experiences of failure (e.g., being in the bottom set, struggling academically, receiving no praise for their efforts) reinforces in these boys that they are like a "fish out of water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127), engaged in a competitive game they are unlikely to win, leading them to "internalize a culture of resistance to schooling as a means of maintaining their identity" (Ingram, 2009, p. 422; see also Reay, 2002). Moreover, like the boys in Mac an Ghail's (1994) study, these boys perceive the authority of schools as infantilising, the work they are expected to engage in as both meaningless and beyond their capacity, and to maintain status in the group context, adopt "laddish" strategies where peer status is derived from being "funny" and visibly challenging this authority. The discordance between their acquired schemata and the field they find themselves in causes their habitus to become destabilized as they try and fail to reconcile the conditions of the school field with their habitus (Ingram, 2018).

In other words, the formal educational field these boys are expected to engage in arguably makes them feel devalued, armed with the wrong types of 'capital', powerless in their learning, and out of their depth (Reay, 2004). Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, their dispositions and acquired schemata thus delegitimized, their habitus as a strategy-generating construct (Bourdieu, 1990) persuades them to "deploy strategies of subversion" because they occupy "subordinate locations" in the field (Wacquant, 1998, p. 222); or to simply disengage from this field altogether because profitable engagement is assumed impossible (Wacquant, 2016). Such decisions have patent reproductive consequences however they are not solely guided by the habitus of these boys but rather "the product of the relation" between their habitus and the "specific social context" of the field they are engaged in (Thompson, 1991, cited in Mills, 2008, p. 87). More broadly, the data in this section tellingly encourages a shift from viewing such boys as the problem towards looking at what creating a relational habitus affords to bridging that disconnect by highlighting the (context-specific) materiality of education, its entanglement in relations of power, and the relational attributes of their emerging masculinities, including, the level of importance these boys attach to relationships with their educators.

6.2. Positive relationships and connections

In contrast, and outside of formal schooling, the boys reported relationships with IYC staff characterized by persistent care, positive communication, fun and banter, individual attention, and belief in their potential; and cited youth workers who "sort out [their] problems", "really take an interest" in their lives; and how being praised and "treated like a friend" motivated them.

What the staff are like? More a friend than a boss [Paul, CP].

We can have a laugh, but the work gets done because you want to do it for them [James, CP].

If somebody gets praised, it makes you to do it more, makes you have more self-confidence [Tom, CP].

They (IYC staff) actually believed in you [Daniel, FP].

The care exhibited by IYC staff featured regularly in the focus groups and clearly aligns with Noddings' (2013) typology of caring relationships in terms of IYC staff's levels of interest in the boys' lives (engrossment), the actions they take of their behalf (motivational displacement), and the boys' positive response to such care (reciprocity). Similarly evident are two of Rogers' (1957) core conditions in terms of the transparency of the relationship (genuineness), and the boys being and, crucially, feeling listened to and cared for (empathic understanding). Tellingly, the boys frequently contrasted the relational dynamics in IYC with those at school which they perceived as "bossy" and "unfriendly", particularly in terms of communicating instructions and dealing with issues such as being late. This contrast highlights the hierarchical /neoliberal aspects of school (Connell, 2013) that structure student-teacher relationships in unproductive fashions. These responses also confirm Reichert's (2015, p. 43) argument that the adverse impacts of negative teacher-pupil relationships "can be corrected" and "disconfirmed" via new positive teacher-pupil connections "with corresponding improvements in school engagement", and Morgan et al.'s (2015, p. 1040) observation that "developing authentic relationships" with disengaged learners is central to "restoring their capacity for connection and learning".

Because they're not telling you what to do. They're just trying to encourage you to do it. They're not shouting and bossing you about. They're just trying to help you [John, CP].

The boys were asked to draw pictures representing their experiences of IYC and school. This visual research method encourages creators to reflect on, apprehend, and reveal their perceived position in the social world (Literat, 2013). Shown below are the drawings created by 'Paul' (please see Figs. 1 and 2 below) who chose to highlight contrasting starts to the day in school compared to the boxing club by focussing on the issue of turning up late.

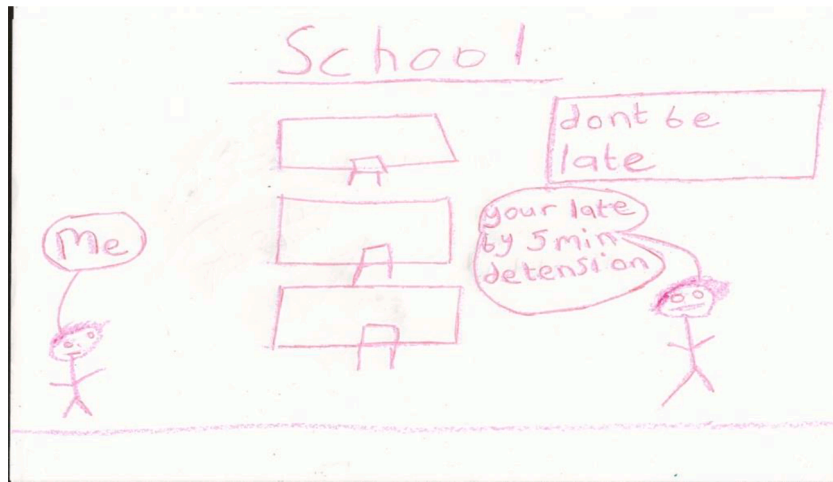


Fig. 1. Paul late for school.

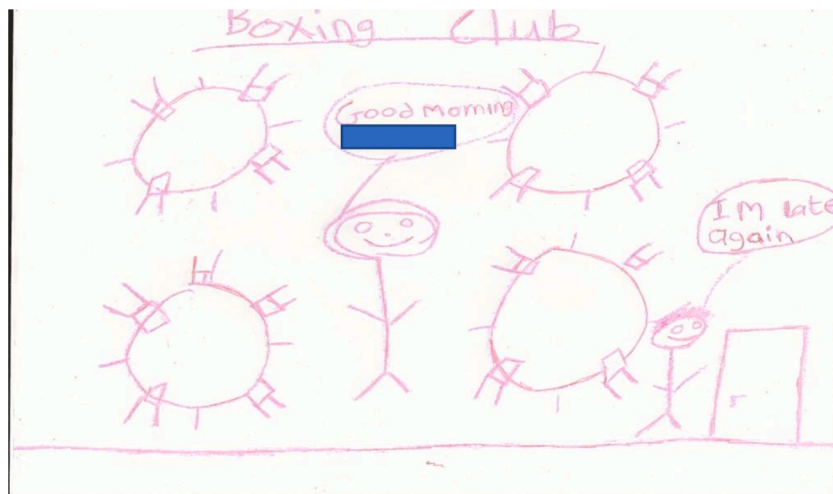


Fig. 2. Paul late for IYC.

Say if I came in late in the morning because there was something happening and just having a rough morning, in the school you'd get probably a detention at lunch. In here you'd make a wee cup of coffee and all. So, you're walking in, you might be late, and instead of shouting, they're saying, "good morning, nice to see you" [Paul, CP].

Paul's drawings and testimony highlight a cornerstone of youth work practice and the third of Rogers' (1957) core conditions of transformative relationships, unconditional positive regard, where the boys as learners are explicitly accepted and valued in all circumstances; and affirm Reichert and Nelson's (2018, p. 349) view that building relationships with "difficult" boys is contingent on "accommodating a measure of opposition", and responding to "oppositional behavior... with restraint and civility".

A sense of 'fitting-in' is a crucial aspect of a habitus at ease with itself (Bourdieu, 1990), and the feeling of connectedness engendered by their relationships with the IYC staff, and how boys feel unconditionally accepted have brought the boys' pro-learning dispositions to the fore and altered their perceptions of the logics of the field as a space worth investing in (Ingram, 2018). In such ways, Reichert and Nelson (2018, pp. 349) argue that these relationships and this unqualified acceptance engender "life-altering lessons" which are absorbed by boys and subsequently "influences their orientation to the world", persuades them that "there is help, that they can expect their needs to be met, that they are care for", and facilitates growth in their "self-concepts" as "they come to see possibilities they could not imagine previously". These attitudinal shifts mirror the reorientation of the boys' habitus, which as Stahl (2015) attests encompass a series of transposable dispositions which evolve in response to the dynamic nature of the social arena of their school lives. In other words, congruence between the boys' dispositions and the new field conditions created by IYC has re-fashioned their destabilized habitus into a "cohesive" one "whose successive layers reinforce one another and work in unison" (Wacquant, 2016, p. 69).

Another important dimension of these boys' relationships with the IYC staff is the enabled dialogue which Hickey and Riddle (2022, p. 791) posit "situates a sense of the activation of the relationship", creates an "interface" where learning can occur, and dismantles "traditional classroom power structures". Moreover, aligned to Mezirow's (2003) argument that relational dialogue is transformational and enables learners to re-evaluate previous assumptions and create new meanings, and Hickey and Riddle's (2022, p. 794) point about "moments of mutuality" which engender "conditions conducive to dialogue and enquiry", the boys also reported the personal connections with IYC staff made them feel more connected to the learning; that working in small groups and one-to-one support enabled them to "talk things through", "have a chat" about what they "need to do" and "how to do it"; and that this dialogue prepared them for exams and helped them realize they each had their own unique abilities.

They prepare you for it, and help you get in the right mind [Michael, FP].

In school everyone is examined on the same thing whereas you can't judge a monkey by its ability to swim, everyone has strengths [David, FP].

The boys also felt more connected to the learning environment which they described as "friendly" and "relaxed", and posited "best parts" such as having more "freedom" and being able to "take breaks", go out for a walk, make themselves a coffee, or make use of the gym facilities whenever they wanted, being able to "have a laugh" and to have fun associated with learning; and a flexible curriculum encompassing "interesting subjects".

If you need to go for a walk, you can, they're not forcing you to stay [Paul, CP].

It's not like, "sit there, do this", it's interesting [Mathew, FP].

The sense of connection these boys feel towards the IYC staff, and indeed their classmates, speaks to Reichert and Hawley's (2011) claim that boys who feel connected to their learning spaces and cared for report higher levels of emotional wellbeing and are more likely to engage in learning; Reichert and Nelson's (2018) point about boys' sense of belonging engendered via their relationship with their educators being fundamental to their sense of connectedness; and Gill's (2020) argument that relational approaches can redirect the "emphasis on student deficiency" towards a focus on "potentialities, possibilities and opportunities... thus fostering hope and engagement" (pp. 396–397). Moreover, the boys' enthusiastic engagement within the IYC program aligns with Stahl and Dale's (2013) argument that many working-class boys enjoy learning but dislike school.

Whilst it is inarguable that other groups of schoolchildren also want to have good relationships with teachers, to be praised, and have their efforts acknowledged, studies have shown that working-class boys, to a greater extent than girls, establish self-esteem through social interaction to a greater degree than academic performance (Reichert, 2015). Furthermore, these boys are uniquely burdened by the interplay of their histories of academic failure, their doxic working-class habitus (Ingram, 2018), and residual elements of hegemonic masculinities which, certainly prior to the IYC program, contributed to their anti-school stances (Nayak & Kehily, 1996).

Other reported positive features of the IYC learning environment included the lay-out of the room with "round tables", "bright colours" which created a "positive atmosphere", the encouragement they received from IYC staff, and the cooperative peer support and banter they enjoyed from their co-participants.

It's just more positive around here [William, FP].

I love it here [Mark, CP].

Whenever you're happy, you want to learn. This place puts you in a good mood or something [Michael, FP].

We just start taking the piss out of each other for a laugh... just pushing each other and being there for each other makes you feel more confident [James, CP].

6.3. Transformative change

The positive relationships and connections engendered in the IYC program have transmuted the boys' learning landscape by creating pedagogical relationships and an educational environment that are better suited to their inclinations and identities. The boys' adoption of pro-learning behaviors and attitudes evidence that they have embraced informal approaches over rigid structure, cooperation over competition, attachment to education, educators and learning spaces over detachment, and an environment where they feel comfortable employing their natural learning strategies of conversation, humor, and cooperation (see also Stahl & Dale, 2013). In other words, the boys have encountered field conditions conducive to their dispositions, acquired schemata and emerging masculinities and, accordingly, their habitus has been reoriented "by new experiences, education or training" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 29). The focus groups concluded with boys speaking about transitioning to adulthood, the transformative impact the IYC program has had on their attitudes to learning, how the relationships developed therein had demonstrated that education was something they could enjoy and succeed in, changed their views on school, and increased their awareness of what education might offer.

It made you grow up... we're not silly wee boys no more [James, CP].

It made you realize how important education is [Mathew, FP].

It definitely changed my mind-set to say I can do something when I put my mind to it [David, FP].

It makes you feel smart [Tom, CP].

Interestingly, the boys also reported transformed relationships with their schoolteachers and spoke about how participation in IYC and the personalized support they received from the link teachers (in both IYC and school) had given them a “*chance to get to know them as people*”; and that, correspondingly, teachers now “*look differently at us*”.

It's (relationships with teachers) changed now... maybe more respect... both ways [Paul, CP].

They (the schoolteachers) seen us do well in the boxing club, and to be honest they helped us too... so you see them now in the corridor and we both kinda nod [James, CP].

Integral to how we understood the intervention, the success of the IYC was confirmed by school data which showed that: 10/11 of the (then) current cohort (2019–2020) completed the program; 9/10 attained 5 GCSEs or equivalents; all 10 either secured employment, entered FE college, or returned to school to undertake post-16 advanced qualifications (A levels). Moreover, school attendance for this cohort increased from 60% to over 90%; and behavior marks (school-recorded behavioral incidents) reduced from 27 the year before IYC to zero.

7. Discussion

The transformative attitudinal change around education so evident in these boys was achieved not by forcing them to endure the inner conflict associated with reconciling their habitus with an incongruent field (Ingram, 2018), or compelling them to re-appropriate their class and masculine identities (Stahl & Dale, 2018), but rather by changing the social and pedagogical conditions of their learning spaces. Guided by Reichert and Hawley's (2011, pp. 42–43) “boy-refined pedagogy”, the boxing club-led IYC program engaged these boys “by drawing them into a relational connection” (Reichert & Hawley, 2010, p. 38). Importantly, the data presented here show that, outside formal schooling, these boys have both the will and capacity to form and maintain relationships which are productive to their learning. Granted, the boxing club staff are predominantly from working-class backgrounds and are local to the school catchment area – and this undoubtedly helps them to establish and maintain authentic relationships with the boys in the study. However, the same can also be said about many of the teachers – yet relationships with the boys, certainly within the school environment, seem more problematic. This juxtaposition speaks to Swain's (2005) argument that schools are, to an extent, responsible for reinforcing gender hierarchies, and suggests that the difference lies, primarily, in the dissimilar levels of formality/informality of the learning environment, and perceived symmetry of relationships between educator and learner.

We have highlighted here the centrality of relationships and connections as foundational aspects of such transformation; and shown how boys previously considered disengaged can be supported to enjoy and succeed in education by enabling them to have the relationships with educators they so evidently yearn for, and to feel connected to their learning and the environment within which it occurs. In so doing, we have outlined ways in which educators who attend to the relational dimension of working-class boys' school experience can mediate the vexing dualism of respecting their aspirations and identities (Stahl, 2018) while also encouraging their engagement in education.

For sure, the oppositional strategies these boys routinely employ and direct towards the very people they seek a connection with create what Raider-Roth et al. (2008) describe as a “relational puzzle” for their teachers. However, part of the answer to these complex conundrums is illuminated in the interplay of Bourdieu's (1990) logic of practice with elements of youth work methodologies and relational pedagogies. For example, the unconditional regard which is a cornerstone of youth work practice can help teachers understand that the presentation of a boy's oppositional behavior is often and simply the natural response of his destabilized/conflicted habitus encountering a field he feels (through a lifetime of socialization and inculcation) he does not have the required capitals to successfully participate in. Similarly, teachers who exhibit persistent care and employ relationship-building and dialogue can help restabilize/reconcile boys' habitus by fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance (Reay, 2004). Furthermore, attuned, and if required informal, pedagogies which relate to his experience can fundamentally change the conditions of a field such boys have previously struggled/failed to navigate. Finally, as evidenced in this paper, the habitus of working-class boys, as a strategy-generative construct (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) will respond to and be restructured by these novel social and pedagogical experiences (Wacquant, 2016) in a way that reorients and mobiles the concept of habitus to example a transformative trajectory rather than a reproductive one.

8. Conclusions

The boys in this study may indeed represent but a small sub-section of working-class boys, yet the issues we engage in speak to a wider phenomenon of boys' disengagement from formal education. Moreover, there is nothing insignificant about the barriers to learning such boys face, the challenges their disengagement confronts the schools they attend, nor the levels of commitment required by schools and their community partners to affect the kind of transformative change so evident in this paper. While neoliberal forms of schooling often dissuade schools and teachers from engaging in alternative pedagogies, including relational ones (Connell, 2013), this study demonstrates the potential for transformative change when schools are prepared to provide institutional support, undertake the patient and energy-intensive process of developing and embedding relational approaches, and establish community partnerships to co-create transformative learning spaces more conducive to the complex needs of the most disengaged boys. Subsequent phases of *Taking Boys Seriously* will examine ways in which schools and teachers can be encouraged and supported in this endeavor.

The findings from this and the other three case studies in this phase of the *Taking Boys Seriously* research project are further

apprising the knowledge base around the disengagement of working-class boys by informing the design of a series of ‘Principles of Relational Learning’ (e.g., around persistent care, unconditional regard, and relational dialogue) which have been adopted and are currently being tested in Milltown High and 25 other post-primary schools across Northern Ireland. These findings show the value of youth work-informed relational approaches in terms of achieving this change; evidence that a crucial aspect of these boys’ emerging masculinities entails the forming of power-symmetrical relationships with their educators. Furthermore, our data show how reconfigured educative spaces can engender shifts in the performativity and reflexivity of adolescent boys’ masculinities (Borduas et al. (2023); suggest that a persistent section of boys “require a different model of interaction with adults than what may be experienced in more conventional educational settings” (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 1040); highlight that it is the responsibility of schools and teachers to “solve the relational puzzle” (Reichert & Nelson, 2018, p. 357); and encourage scholarship and policy to embrace new understandings of working-class boys as relational learners.

More broadly, the data and post-intervention academic outcomes highlighted in this paper indicate that rather than pathologizing these acutely disadvantaged learners by seeking to locate *deficits* in the habitus of working-class boys, a more fruitful enquiry for all those committed to supporting such boys would surely entail examining “deficits in the social relations embedded in the practices” in the schools they attend (Ferrare & Apple, 2015, p. 46); developing a fuller comprehension of the “relational dimension of boys’ school experiences” (Reichert & Hawley, 2011, p. 49), and a reimagining of “the conditions that contextualize the relational dynamic” (Hickey & Riddle, 2022, p. 790).

The intervention outlined in this paper examples how issues of masculinity and boyhood are understood and addressed in education contexts and provides a roadmap for such an endeavor which includes recognition of the centrality of these boys’ relationships and connections with their educators and learning spaces; schools’ commitment to youth work collaborations and relational approaches which enable such boys to engage, enjoy, and succeed in education; and the co-creation of new learning experiences that the habitus of working-class boys are strategically drawn to because their class-based dispositions and emerging masculinities are validated (Stahl & Dale, 2018), and the relational aspect of their learning needs is accounted for (Reichert, 2015).

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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