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**A case study of boys' 'underachievement'
within the
English school system**

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Thesis

submitted for the qualification of

Doctor of Education

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University of Sussex

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‘Such is hope, heaven’s own gift to struggling mortals, pervading,
like some subtle essence from the skies, all things good and bad’.

Charles Dickens

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A case study of boys' 'underachievement' within the English school system

Summary

This thesis focuses on the ways in which 'underachievement' is constituted for boys identified as 'underachieving' at Stone Acre, a non-selective school in a selective Local Authority in England. It explores how performance pressures, the school processes of the curriculum, selective grouping practices and teachers' understandings of gender all shape boys' experiences of learning. It argues that these layers also interconnect with school type and ethos. In seeking to bring these less visible readings of the policy frameworks and school level processes by which gendered learning outcomes occur, to the surface, this study contributes to the debate around boys' 'underachievement' in the English school system.

The research was conducted as a case study and adopted elements of an ethnographic approach. It is grounded in the work of Connell (2012, p.1677) who understands masculinities as being continuously produced in interaction with social structures and the body as encountering 'gender regimes'. Data were gathered through a five-stage process that involved paired interviews with six boys in Year 10 (age 15) and identified at the start of the research as 'underachieving' against the key performance benchmark: attainment at GCSE level. Additional data were collected from other sources including observations of the boys during lessons and individual interviews with eleven teachers.

A key conclusion of the study was that boys identified as 'underachieving' against key performance indicators are not learning in a gender-neutral space. Some teachers were found to have essentialist understandings of masculinities that were powerful in shaping the spaces in which the boys learned. Accountability pressures were identified as having contributed to the creation of a regulatory system that shaped the practices of teachers in

both positive and negative ways. Stone Acre's school ethos and school-based approaches to teaching and learning were also found to have mitigated the boys from some of these pressures. Looking beyond the boys towards the system within which boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning, this thesis demonstrates the complex, shifting and contextualised nature of the factors involved and the need for more structural readings of these.

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Glossary of terms

BESD - behavioural, emotional and social difficulties

DCFS - Department for Children, Schools and Families

DFE - Department for Education

DfES - Department for Education and Skills

EAL - English as a second language

FSM - free school meals

GCSE - General Certificate of Secondary Education - examinations typically taken by pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 (aged 16).

Key Stages - since the introduction of the National Curriculum (1988), the English education system has been sub-divided into six key stages. Key stage 3 is for Years 7-9 (children aged 11-14 years) and Key stage 4 is for Years 10-11 (children aged 14-16 years).

LA - Local Authority

Ofsted - Office for Standards in Education carries out regular inspections of standards in all UK state schools.

SEND - special educational needs and disabilities

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Research focus: Exploring the construction of boys' 'underachievement'

This thesis discusses the findings of a small-scale predominantly qualitative research study, which set out to examine boys' 'underachievement' by exploring how a group of Year 10 (aged 14) boys at Stone Acre, a non-selective school in a selective Local Authority (LA)² in England, were experiencing their learning. The boys were identified as 'underachieving' according to the benchmark of pupils on target to attain five GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at grades A* to C including English and Maths (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). All six boys were working at GCSE grade E level in English and/or Maths at the start of the study. Government performance measures, which are based on pupils' attainment in examinations, generate published national performance tables of schools' results. First published in 1992, they include a breakdown of pupils' scores according to gender. Against the policy benchmarks, boys from low socio-economic backgrounds emerge as the lowest performing sub-group (DFE, 2015a). By the mid-1990s, the tables revealed that girls were outperforming boys in all subject areas (Francis and Skelton, 2005). Concerns amongst policymakers and in the media, (Riddell, 1998; Gorrard et al., 1999) have lead to a number of theories being proposed to explain boys' 'underachievement' by this benchmark. The problem of boys' 'underachievement' continues to attract considerable interest and this thesis aims to contribute to this debate.

Debates on boys' 'underachievement' broadly reflect two dominant theoretical perspectives on gender. The first perspective understands gender in essentialist terms, which is the idea that boys and girls are believed to be born with fixed characteristics, gender thus 'bred into our genes' (Lorber, 1995, p.13). The second holds that gender is

² Districts within England are divided into local authorities otherwise known as local councils. Local councils are made up of councillors (members) who are voted for by the public in local elections and responsible for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their area.

socially constructed suggesting that other factors outside of the human body and therefore within society, influence behaviour (Mills, 2001; Arnot, 2002). Readings that include those within the broad framework of social constructionism include feminist, psychoanalytic, and socio-cultural interpretations of boys' 'underachievement' (Lucey and Reay 2002; Jackson, 2002; 2003; Francis and Skelton, 2005; Skelton and Francis, 2009;

Smith, 2007; Reay, 2002; 2010; Skelton 2010). Previous research includes a number of studies that reflect the belief that boys and girls have innate differences in 'ability' (Caviness et al., 1996; Biddulph, 1997; Gurian, 2002; 2005; Gurian and Stevens, 2005; Lenroot et al., 2007). A number of arguments also propose that boys and girls have different subject preferences and preferred learning styles (Bleach, 1998; Ofsted 1996; 2003; Noble and Bradford, 2000; Gurian, 2002; Gurian and Stevens, 2006). In contrast, it has been suggested that gender is constantly in production as an outcome of individuals having fixed ideas about boys as learners (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Salisbury and Jackson, 1996; Younger and Warrington, 1996; Smith, 2007).

In bringing less visible readings to the surface, this study aims to offer an alternative analysis of boys' 'underachievement' by exploring how performance pressures, the school processes of the curriculum, selective grouping practices and teachers' understandings of gender all shape boys' experiences of learning. It argues that these layers also interact with school type and ethos. It calls for more structural, complex, shifting and contextualised readings of the many factors, which overlap and interact to construct boys' 'underachievement'. It concludes that the boys at Stone Acre School were not learning in a gender-neutral space. While accountability pressures were also identified as having contributed to the creation of a regulatory system that shaped the practices of teachers in both positive and negative ways, school-based approaches to teaching and learning were also found to have mitigated the boys from some of these pressures.

1.2 Contexts in which boys identified as ‘underachieving’ experience learning

Education policy

Stone Acre School is shaped by a number of different contexts. It exists within a policy framework, which values the operation of the free market and requires schools to remain competitive by setting performance measures by which they are judged (Ball et al., 2012). Power over schools’ performance, which is tied into a market regime operates in policy through the mechanism of surveillance of teachers through the ‘discipline’ (Foucault, 1977, p.136) of accountability. Teachers are responsible for pupils attaining the minimum benchmarks at GCSE, which, at the time of the study, were five A* to C grades including English and Maths. Examining the impact of school accountability measures, Hutchings and Kazmi (2015) assert that constantly working under pressure causes teachers to experience stress and pupils to feel anxious with the latter more likely to become apathetic towards learning. They argue that in framing the purpose of schooling as primarily to pass exams causes young people to encounter a narrow education rather than experiencing a broad and balanced curriculum (Hutchings and Kazmi, 2015).

Introducing Stone Acre School

Stone Acre School exists within the context of a Local Authority area whereby pupils are selected to attend grammar school.³ When the data were collected, Stone Acre School contained just over 1000 pupils. At that time there were also more boys than girls on role. Just above three-quarters of pupils who attended the school were from a white British background with just below a quarter of all pupils identified as ‘disadvantaged’. The term ‘disadvantage’ was first introduced into the school performance tables in the academic year 2012/2013. From April 2012 they were defined by the Government as those pupils known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM) at any point in the last six years (DFE, 2015a). The remainder of pupils at Stone Acre School were from minority ethnic groups,

³ The actual name of the school and the county in which the school is located are not included to preserve the school’s anonymity.

five percent for whom English was an additional language. The number of pupils from Eastern Europe was increasing with many at the very early stages of learning English. The number of pupils identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) was also just above the national average. A substantial proportion of pupils were identified as having behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) with a number on the autistic spectrum. The type of pupil intake at this school, therefore, contrasts markedly with that of local grammar schools.

In 2009, Stone Acre School was identified as 'unsatisfactory' and put into the Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) category, 'Special Measures' (Ofsted, 2015a, p.4) as a result of the number of pupils attaining below the minimum GCSE performance threshold. The teachers were therefore in a school previously identified as 'underachieving' and used to teaching pupils identified as 'underachieving' in a more pressured and surveyed space. Interestingly, the attainment gap between boys and girls at GCSE level at this school continues to remain lower than the gap, nationally (DFE, 2014a). In addition, pupils who enter the school attaining below what is expected of them continue to make some of the best progress compared to schools nationally.

Within the English context most schools/LAs are non-selective. However, in the LA where Stone Acre School is located, once pupils reach their final year at primary school (Year 6, age eleven) their academic potential is assessed by means of a test, known as the 11+. This test is presented as a measure of intelligence and children who pass are educated at their local grammar school. The remainder of young people mainly attend schools like Stone Acre where pupils' attainment overall tends to be lower and below the national average (DFE, 2014a). Pupils who attend non-selective schools like Stone Acre are less likely to progress to university than pupils educated in the grammar school system (DFE, 2014b) and they are competing with grammar schools from an unequal position.

Schools such as Stone Acre offer a curriculum, which includes vocational subjects in addition to the academic subjects required by the national performance measures. These subjects include BTEC⁴ (British and Technical Education Council) subjects in, for example, Business, Construction and Sport. Their purpose is, in part, to prepare young people for work (Tomlinson, 2005). Like vocational curricula, applied subjects such as GCSE Design and Technology (D&T), GCSE Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and GCSE Product Design require practical application (Pring, 2009) and tend to be aimed at pupils occupying the low sets⁵ in school (Unwin et al., 2004). Pupils who learn in low sets tend to be those attaining below grade C, a higher proportion of whom are boys (Cassen and Kingdon, 2012). These pupils get offered low-status curricula or access to lower grades by being entered for lower tier examinations (Gillborn, 2010). The opportunity for pupils in low sets to access academic curricula is, therefore, limited.

1.3 Researcher identity: Professional insights into gendered school experiences

I joined Stone Acre School where I conducted this case study as a teacher of English for one year from September 2012. The head teacher expressed keenness for me to conduct my research at the school. This study developed out of my enjoyment from and interest in teaching pupils in low sets and from wishing to gain an enhanced understanding of the ways in which, learning is experienced by boys who are disproportionately located in these groups. Since the mid-1990s, I have held a number of professional roles within education. Initially, I taught English and Drama in an all girls' grammar school before leading the Theatre Studies department at an all boys grammar school. More recently, I have been the subject leader of an English department and assistant head teacher working in two non-selective schools within the South East. Having worked in both selective gender-segregated schools and non-selective mixed gender schools I understand

⁴ BTEC qualifications are designed for young people who are interested in pursuing a career in a particular industry.

⁵ In school, pupils can be placed into sets/groups to learn based on their prior attainment in the core subjects including English and Maths.

there are a number of differences between working in quite different types of school. These include the focus in grammar schools on academic learning and the pressures created by the need for pupils to attain high grades for entrance to university. Whilst teaching in school I have experienced some of the pressures of supporting pupils to attain in their English GCSE and also assisted trainee teachers with helping pupils across the grade C performance threshold. I have therefore experienced distinct demands when practicing in quite different school types.

When leading vocational learning as part of my role as an assistant head teacher, I recognised that the majority of pupils in the school who followed vocational learning pathways were boys. In the main, they attained particularly well in subjects such as Physical Education (PE), Art, Drama and Dance, Construction, ICT and Media related courses. During the learning of academic subjects these same boys, who largely occupied the low sets, appeared to lack confidence and frequently presented teachers with challenging behaviour. Given that I enjoyed the challenges of teaching pupils in low sets, I was keen to explore how teachers' practices influenced the learning of these boys and I have therefore focussed on boys' 'underachievement' in my Doctorate in Education.

Having been a classroom teacher, I recognise that the setting in which teachers practice can be perplexing. Given the importance for all my classes to attain their GCSE target grades, I often felt anxious. However, integrating drama into my lessons when covering texts such as those by Shakespeare or preparing pupils to write creatively helped alleviate some of the pressures. The practical approach to learning that drama demands, seemed to direct the learning focus of my lessons away from attainment outcomes. In addition, by being a GCSE English exam marker for a number of years gave me confidence when supporting pupils to attain in GCSE English. After the English GCSE exam in January 2013, having attained grade C in English, a number of my pupils prepared for the higher tier exam. Although relieved that I had met my targets, I remained mindful about whether I had afforded my pupils enough time to explore concepts fully. I felt coerced when

teaching pupils in low sets, who frequently appeared to lack confidence because I recognised that in spite of their range of needs, I was required to demonstrate that their GCSE target grades had been met. As a consequence, the learning aims of my lessons became narrowed. The opportunity to include collaborative learning approaches into my teaching did, however, seem to improve pupils' confidence. They also appeared more self-assured by being able to recognise their success against grade descriptors in spite of them being narrow. I have drawn on some of these previous experiences throughout the research process because I recognise them as significant in directing me towards my area of interest for study.

1.4 Theoretical and methodological approach

The study adopted a social constructionist perspective and raises concerns about inequalities in relation to the nature of social structures and human agency. It sits within the academic field of critical social research the aim of which is:

not merely to give an account of society and behavior but to realize a society that is based on equality and democracy for all its members. Its purpose is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them (Cohen et al., 2007 p.26).

By questioning existing structures in which boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning, it aims to bring to the surface hidden structures, which serve to construct boys' 'underachievement'. It also aims to improve the situation of boys like those positioned in the low sets at Stone Acre School. A critical social constructionist approach has enabled me to avoid seeing the boys' situation in isolation opening up alternative readings of their 'underachievement'. Connell (2002, p70) suggests that 'some of the 'external' forces are gendered from the start'. Even in a non-selective school, there are selective practices. More than thirty years ago in a case study conducted at a comprehensive school in England, Ball (1981) analysed the social processes of schooling to explain the disappointing performance of disadvantaged pupils. By examination of pupils' experiences of schooling, Ball (1981) found that selective grouping practices produce a

sub-culture polarisation similar to that found in previous studies of secondary modern schools (Hargreaves, 1967). Historically, research into the effects of 'streaming' whereby pupils with similar attainment were taught together for all subjects, has indicated that while pupils in high streams accept the school process as the 'norm', pupils in low streams tend to develop anti-school attitudes (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970). Subsequently, Ball (1981) discovered teachers to have different expectations of pupils occupying the low sets. In a study carried out by Willis (1977, p.14) almost forty years ago, the part played by boys' masculinities in their 'underachievement' was examined. With the aim of exploring why 'working class kids get working class jobs', Willis (1977, p.14) suggests that understanding they need to compete with the middle-class 'kids', through their 'working class' counter-school culture, the boys present macho behaviours. This current study is located within the context of these seminal studies because although schools have increasingly become more accountable for pupils' attainment, a number of the gendered and classed structures and processes operating within them have remained the same.

In taking a more holistic approach to exploring the position of boys identified as 'underachieving', aspects of the theories of Connell (2002; 2005; 2012), Foucault (1972; 1977) and Ball (1993) have assisted me in exploring the overlapping and interacting layers through which gender is simultaneously in play thereby contributing to the construction of boys' 'underachievement'. Since Willis (1977), Connell (2005) suggests that masculinities can constantly change - old masculinities can disappear while new masculinities can emerge. Although boys identified as 'underachieving' might portray a number of different forms of masculinity while in school, their learning experience continues to be shaped by both the space in which they find themselves and teachers' practices which include teachers presenting a range of configurations of masculinity and femininity. Foucault's theory (1972; 1977) of how power operates through policy assisted me in understanding how teachers' practices are affected by them being blamed if pupils fall short of reaching their GCSE target grades. Ball (1993) who theorises power relations between policies and teachers' practices as having the potential to be positive, enabled

me to recognise teachers as developing alternative classroom approaches to teaching and learning within the limits of their accountability. These theories, therefore, assisted me in providing a discerning account of boys' 'underachievement' within the context of Stone Acre School.

1.5 A note on terms and constructs

In this section, I briefly discuss how I understand 'gender', 'disadvantage', 'ability' and 'underachievement' and explain how these constructs are used throughout the thesis. I approach all four concepts from a social constructionist position while recognising that others may and do approach them differently. I understand gender as a lived experience and constantly in the process of change in response to social dynamics. I disagree with the notion of intelligence as something innate and therefore reject essentialist ideas of 'ability'. I also recognise that other authors' understandings of these terms might be quite different from my own.

Discussing the intersection of gender with 'disadvantage' in this thesis

In this thesis, it is argued that gender is a social construction with factors within society shaping a person's behaviour (Mills, 2001; Arnot, 2002). Connell (2002) suggests that individuals' masculinities and femininities encounter gendered regimes viewing the body as both an object of and active agent in the social processes of which it is a part. Of course gender cannot be looked at in isolation from other social factors and the notion of 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1244) provides a framework for gender to be considered alongside other aspects of 'social structure/social identity' that give meaning to it such as race, ethnicity and social class (Shields, 2008, p.303). Social class is a difficult construct to define and consistent with my interest in national education policy and school performance measures I have used the term disadvantage rather than social class throughout the thesis. This term includes families who are entitled to claim free school meals (FSM) for their children (DFE, 2012a, p.2). Recognising that there is a link between gender and disadvantage increases our understanding of the social context associated

with boys identified as ‘underachieving’. As Lindsay et al., (2006, p.29) point out, that by being representative of only a narrow income group FSM is ‘a ‘blunt instrument’ to use to measure socio-economic disadvantage’. Consequently, although some boys might not be entitled to free school meals they might still be disadvantaged.

Discussing ‘ability’ in this thesis

Rather than approaching the notion of ‘ability’ from an essentialist perspective, it is arguable that it is rather a social construction. Scientific methods via psychometric analysis provide a process through comparison whereby judgements are made about individuals’ ‘ability’ while in school. IQ tests, such as Cognitive Ability Tests (CAT)⁶ purport to test pupils’ intelligence on entering Year 7 (age 11). However, Sternberg (1998) suggests that intelligence is no more than a process by which individuals develop their talents. As Kauffman and Sternberg (2008, pp.77-78) suggest, terms such as ‘giftedness’ ‘talent’ and ‘abilities’ are labels for which there is no one explicit set of criteria. The 11+ test which operates within the LA where Stone Acre School is located relies on essentialist understandings of intelligence to measure a young person’s ‘ability’. Similar understandings of intelligence culminate in pupils being allocated to different ‘ability’ groups inside schools based on what is perceived as their prior attainment. Both practices have consequences for pupils’ opportunities. Once placed in a low-status space, pupils are likely to be perceived as less ‘able’ and lacking in motivation, the label further limiting their opportunities. The nature of the space also places restrictions on pupils’ potential. There is, therefore, a construction of ‘ability’ through its interaction with the process of selective grouping. I chose to use the term selective grouping throughout the study rather than ‘ability’ grouping to avoid suggesting that ‘ability’ is wholly innate.

⁶ They are designed to assess a pupil’s ability in three different areas: verbal (thinking with words); quantitative (thinking with numbers); and non-verbal (thinking with shapes and space).

Discussing ‘underachievement’ in this thesis

In this thesis, ‘Underachievement’ is explored as a social construction located within the policy frameworks that focus on raising educational attainment. In the current English policy context, a child is identified as ‘underachieving’ when they have not reached the grade expected based on their predicted attainment (Smith, 2003, p.577). However, as previously suggested, the notion of ‘ability’ is a problematic social construction. Dunne and Gazeley (2008), for example, contest that teachers’ judgements of academic potential are informed by social class position. They are inherently subjective because pupils from middle-class backgrounds are viewed as being able to make progress, the opposite holding for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such judgements often rest upon essentialist understandings of intelligence. Moreover, ‘ability’ is continually in production with policy increasingly adding value to academic knowledge and therefore selective recognition. This is shown by the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (E-Bacc) in 2010 (DFE, 2015a) and newly, *Progress 8* and *Attainment 8* (DFE 2015b). Performance targets rely on fixed performance measures but overlook the processes in which learning is taking place including how one school type, such as a grammar, might impact upon the context and ethos of another - for example, the non-selective school. Although I used the measure 5A* to C grades including English and Maths to select the boys, I rather view ‘underachievement’ as constructed within an education system whereby high stakes subjects such as English and Maths drive school practices and school performance.

1.6 The research approach

The research findings presented here were part of a qualitative case study of boys’ ‘underachievement’ conducted in a single school. There were seventeen participants in the study including six boys from Year 10 (aged 14) and eleven teachers. Data were gathered by way of mixed methods, which included semi-structured interviews, lesson observations and information collected from the school records.

The study was developed over five separate stages. Stage one involved semi-structured interviews with the head of English and the head of Maths to identify two classes of boys working at GCSE grade E in English and/or Maths. Stage two involved an initial meeting with the Year 10 boys who joined in the study during which time they were given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs, in pairs, of images which best represented their experiences while in school. They were then interviewed in the same pairs. Stage three involved two elements. First, seven lesson observations were conducted with at least one of the six boys present during each lesson. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with each teacher of the lessons to explore their views about Year 10 boys' learning experiences. For stage four, a second round of semi-structured interviews was conducted with the Year 10 boys in the same pairings as those for the first set of interviews. The boys were asked a number of questions which related more specifically to how Year 10 boys, as a group, engaged with their learning in different subjects. For stage five, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with a senior teacher from the leadership team, a head of House⁷ and a Year 10 form tutor in order to gain a broader perspective of the ways in which the boys were recognised as learners and their learning in addition to how they were viewed when in lessons.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

In the following chapter, I discuss in more detail the policy context within which boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning. Stone Acre School exists within a system in which grammar schools flourish and I, therefore, consider school type and context, which affect the ethos of schools operating in disadvantaged circumstances. I conclude the chapter by comparing national performance data at GCSE in England with that at Stone Acre School.

⁷ In secondary schools pupils, in general, are grouped by year from Year 7 (age 11) through to Year 11 (age 16). Each year group is generally known as either a *House* or a *Community*.

Chapter Three, the literature review explores the ways in which educational 'underachievement' is constituted for boys, in England. It begins by exploring how essentialist notions of gender influence the learning experienced by boys identified as 'underachieving'. Connell's (2002; 2005; 2012) theory of multiple masculinities, in which the significance of social relations and external structures in reshaping masculinities are emphasised, has led to readings of gender, which avoid an essentialist perspective. I, therefore, present examples from the literature of essentialist and social constructionist approaches to explain boys' 'underachievement'. In Section Two both readings of gender are considered in relation to the school context. I focus on the curriculum and selective grouping as these are both critical factors affecting the positioning of boys in secondary schools. I examine relevant literature arguing that an academic curriculum is favoured at the level of policy. Effects on pupils of gendered curriculum subjects are then considered. Next, I explore the effects of selective grouping practices on pupils' attainment and discuss exam entry of pupils in low sets because this has gendered consequences. This section ends by drawing on previous studies to illustrate the effect of selective grouping on teachers' practices. I conclude the literature review by presenting my conceptual approach and the research questions.

In Chapter Four, I explain my methodological approach in carrying out the research. I then reflect upon the methods employed during the data gathering process. I present the limitations, which arose as a result of the research design and also consider the ethical aspects of the study. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the approach taken to the data analysis. In Chapter Five and Chapter Six, I present my findings. The first data chapter illustrates how schooling as a process is part of a larger political system which had implications for teachers' practices at Stone Acre. Chapter Six shows how selective grouping practices at Stone Acre School contributed to the construction of boys' 'underachievement' by influencing where the pupil participants learned and the type of curriculum they experienced. It also shows how teachers' essentialist understandings of

what it means to be a 'boy' were reflected in their views of the space occupied by boys identified as 'underachieving' and in their practices.

I begin Chapter Seven by examining the interactions and overlaps between the different contexts to show that complex readings of gender are needed to understand boys' 'underachievement'. I then reflect on my methodological approach for conducting the study and my development as a researcher. I then present how this research study extends our knowledge of boys' 'underachievement' and offer recommendations for policy and practice. Following, I place my study within the context of developing theories of gender. The thesis concludes with my final reflections and includes suggestions of areas for further research.

Chapter Two

Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the background to the study. It is divided into three parts beginning with the policy context within which schools in England are working to improve the attainment of young people. It then traces the historical school structure in England from which different school types emerged which include grammar and secondary modern schools. This is important because, in the area where the study was carried out, a selective school system has survived. It also considers the relationship of school context and ethos with a particular focus on schools in disadvantaged communities. The chapter concludes with national data and shows a comparison of boys' and girls' attainment at GCSE compared with pupils at Stone Acre School the year preceding the study.

Part one: Policy level context

Stone Acre School is operating in a policy context where the measure of a school's performance has powerful effects. Education markets create a need for schools to remain competitive by ensuring that they improve their pupils' academic performance (Ball, 1993). In the area where the study was conducted pupils are selected to attend grammar school on the basis of whether they pass the 11+ test. Parents are therefore unable to choose schools identified as the highest performing. Foucault (1972) understands power as exercised rather than possessed and reinforced through political ideologies including the amelioration of education standards. Power, which is located within the internal mechanisms of institutions such as schools, is exercised, for example, between the head teacher and other staff, the teacher and the pupil. Foucault (1972) sees power and knowledge as inseparable because they imply one another and are present in all aspects of society. They are filtered through discourse. Foucault (1972, p.46) understands 'discourse itself as a practice'. Government policy invites teachers to become certain sorts of people and functions as rather coercive - a deceptive means of putting the blame for

failure on the individual teacher when pupils fail to attain their GCSE target grades. Teachers, therefore, become self-regulatory with the knowledge that if the pupils they teach fail to attain, the blame for pupils' failures will rest with them rather than being a result of the system within which they find themselves. Foucault (1972, p.47) explains that in this sense such discourses become 'regimes of truth'. Manias and Street (1999, p.53) highlight that by Foucault's method of analysis, 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1972, p.47) 'cannot be understood in absolute terms that exist outside the knowledge and power relations of discourses' from which they emerge. Foucault (1977, p.136-137) asserts that the methods by which power is exercised to form 'norms' within institutions are known as 'disciplines', which operate by manipulating and maintaining power over individuals' 'attitudes'. Surveillance of teachers through accountability measures creates pressures on them to raise pupils' attainment, shaping their practices including their relations with pupils (Gewirtz, 1997; Ball et al., 2012). Nevertheless, individuals have a choice to resist (Foucault, 1977, p.137). Pointing to Foucault (1981), Ball (1993, p.12) contends:

[Policies] create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed. A response must still be put together, constructed in context, off-set against other expectations.

Ball (1993) asserts that even though teachers' enactment of one policy might contradict their representation of another, the power relations between policies and teachers' practices have the potential to be beneficial. Ball (1993) suggests that through adaptation and innovative classroom approaches teachers can develop collaborative and workable practices within their school's context. Ball's theory of how power operates through policy, therefore, allows for teachers' relations with policy to be analysed as productive as well as repressive (Manias and Street, 1999).

Over time the regulatory power over schools' performance has intensified through an increasingly academic set of benchmarks set by the Government. Initially, the key performance measure by which schools were judged at the introduction of the national

performance tables was 5A* to C grades at GCSE. Subsequent to the White Paper, *Excellence in Schools* (DFE, 1997), with the aim of improving education standards, English and Maths were added. More recently, the Coalition Government added Science, a language and humanities subject to form an additional measure by which schools' performance is judged known as the English Baccalaureate (Ball, 2013). A new measure of school accountability was implemented from 2016, recognised as 'Attainment 8' and 'Progress 8' (DFE, 2015b, p.5). 'Attainment 8' reports on the attainment of pupils across eight subjects including English and Maths, three subjects which form the English Baccalaureate (E-Bacc) and three further subjects. These comprise GCSE subjects or other non-GCSE qualifications including vocational qualifications at Level 2 chosen for study from a list approved by the Government (Wolf, 2011; DFE, 2015c). 'Progress 8' measures pupils' progress from when they complete primary school to the end of secondary school (DFE, 2015b, p.5). These new measures of accountability, through the curriculum, have the aim of further intensifying schools' accountability. The increasing focus on academic subjects as key performance measures has the effect of devaluing vocational qualifications and also undermines the space in which vocational and applied GCSEs are learned.

Summary

Teachers have agency to adjust and develop new practices. However, given the dominance of academic subjects as key performance measures and the number of pupils attaining below the threshold in schools like Stone Acre, teachers are likely to embody messages in policy, relating to pupils' attainment, in their practices. Coercion at policy level into supporting pupils to reach their GCSE targets, limits teachers' agency. Pupils who have not succeeded in the 11+ and attend non-selective schools, like Stone Acre, nevertheless, have learning potential, which is wide ranging. However, their learning potential may be limited when they choose vocational subjects due to their perceived low-status.

Part two: The importance of school type

This study was conducted in the South East of England, which has the highest number of state secondary pupils attending grammar schools (Bolton, 2013). There are a variety of school types within the selective system in the local authority (LA) where the study was conducted. These include Academies, Foundation schools, Community and Voluntary Aided schools (Tomlinson, 2005). One or two Free Schools have also recently been opened and are largely based upon US Charter Schools and Swedish Free Schools (Ball, 2013). A small proportion of pupils also attend independent schools, some parents perhaps paying for their child's education to avoid schools such as Stone Acre. A small number of schools in the LA including Stone Acre School continue to describe themselves as comprehensive, however, they are not fully comprehensive because pupils who pass the 11+ test attend grammar schools.

The composition of schools in the LA where Stone Acre School operates is such that disadvantaged pupils predominantly attend non-selective schools. Slightly above a quarter of Year 7 pupils in their first year of secondary school attend grammar schools in the LA compared with 4% of pupils nationally (Sutton Trust, 2013). The number of boys attending grammar schools within the LA is similar to that of girls. However, a recent LA report indicates that the percentage of pupils receiving FSM and attending grammar schools in this LA is just under 3% compared to just over 13% in non-selective schools in the LA. Nevertheless, the percentage of boys identified as FSM attending grammar schools in the LA is higher than the percentage attending grammar schools in other areas.⁸

As previously explained, Stone Acre School is located within a selective LA. The historical development of grammar schools is, therefore, helpful in understanding the context within which the boys identified as 'underachieving' at the study school, experienced their learning. After the 1944 education act, the principle of 'a free education for all' was established and the 11+ test was first introduced (Tomlinson, 2005). The test was

⁸ The source of the report is not included to preserve the school's anonymity.

presented as a form of intelligence test to determine whether a young person, at the age of eleven, had the aptitude to receive a grammar school education. The essentialist model on which education was based led to pupils attending one of three types of school: Grammar, Technical or Secondary Modern, which became known as the tripartite system (Ball, 2013). During the post-war period, it was taken for granted that pupils were of three 'kinds of mind' and would benefit from one of three types of education (Ball, 2013). By passing the test, the highest performing 25% of children would attend grammar schools and follow an academic learning pathway, which led them to University (Pischke & Manning, 2006). The remainder would attend either a secondary modern school or a technical school. In contrast to the grammar schools, in these schools, there was less emphasis on academic attainment limiting the educational opportunities of pupils who attended state schools (Harris and Rose, 2013).

In 1963, a Government report provided an account of the educational experiences of average and below average pupils aged thirteen to sixteen. The report draws attention to the talents of a large number of 'average' pupils being overlooked because of the unequal chances afforded by the 11+ (Newsom 1963, p.XV). Fearful that their own children would be denied the opportunity of experiencing a grammar school education, many middle-class parents expressed their unease at the process of selection through the 11+ test (Tomlinson, 2005). In 1963 when the Labour government returned to power, recommendations were made for schools to become comprehensive which meant that pupils with differing types of potential would attend them. However, schools were not required by law to transfer to comprehensive. While the majority chose to move to a comprehensive system (Tomlinson, 2005), local authorities like those where the case study was conducted continued to select pupils to attend grammar schools when they reach the end of primary school at the age of eleven.

Historically, exam curricula have varied according to school type. Forty years ago it was unlikely that pupils who attended a secondary modern would take public examinations. CSEs (Certificate of Secondary Education) were introduced into secondary modern schools

in 1962 and were viewed as inferior in comparison to the more academic 'O level examinations (Ball, 2013). Pupils were encouraged to learn a number of practical skills, which would prepare them for manual labour (Tomlinson, 2005). The introduction of the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1988 to some extent, removed the hierarchical gap between O' Levels and CSEs. Pupils could attain a pass at differentiated levels between grades A* and G⁹. However, the introduction of 'tiering' whereby teachers allocate pupils to 'higher' or 'lower' tiered examinations, continues to place limits on the grade pupils can attain (Gillborn 2010, p.234). Currently, pupils entered for the GCSE English *Foundation Tier* examination, for example, cannot attain higher than grade C. From 2015 pupils' GCSE attainment will be judged exclusively by a single tiered examination taken at the end of the two-year course (in the summer of 2017).

It is also important to consider the relationship between school type and context as they affect the school ethos. Pupils' learning has been found to be influenced by the ethos of a school, which aims to represent all pupil groups positively, reflected through teachers' practices (Gazeley et al., 2013). Inclusive schools like Stone Acre arguably have a particular ethos, which can produce positive pupil outcomes. In the latest Ofsted inspection, Stone Acre was described as a school in which pupils made good progress because teachers have a thorough understanding of them. Previous findings by Ainscow and Sandhill (2010, p.403) reveal the importance of teachers identifying key strategies, which include collaborative learning approaches to support pupils' progress in learning. Stone Acre School's ethos is recognised, in part, through teachers' practices whereby they are all trained in using 'Kagan'¹⁰ co-operative learning strategies (1986). These are practical teaching methods aimed at engaging all pupils in learning actively with their peers. The consistency of practice amongst teachers has also been found to support pupils with learning (Lupton, 2000). Every member of the teaching staff at the study school is required to include collaborative learning approaches into each of their lessons. Previous

⁹ A* is awarded at the highest level and grade G at the lowest.

¹⁰ Professor Spencer Kagan, in 1985, proposed an active learning model which included a number of 'Cooperative learning strategies' to assist pupils in engaging in learning while in school (Kagan, 1986, p.351)

findings by Ainscow and Sandhill (2010, p.403) reveal the importance of teachers working collaboratively to reflect on their practices. Gazeley et al., (2013) also propose that teachers seeking ways to adapt their practices to meet the needs of all learners avoids some pupils being considered as problematic. Teachers at Stone Acre School are required to share practical examples from their lessons, with which pupils appear to have engaged well, with the rest of their subject department. This is so that good practices, which overcome barriers to learning can be identified. Teachers assisting one another during lessons and sharing differentiated teaching resources has also been found to further encourage pupils with their learning (Engel et al., 2010). Teachers at Stone Acre School are encouraged by the leadership team to support one another in planning for lessons and where feasible, teach together to support pupils' progress. A number of additional extra-curricular clubs have also been found to have a significant impact on pupils' learning (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010; Engel et al., 2010; Gazeley et al., 2013). At Stone Acre School, before, during and after school, clubs are organised for pupils to encourage them to feel part of the school community. A breakfast club, for example, provides them with a place to socialise with peers at the start of the school day. Engel et al., (2010) suggest that a school's high expectations of their pupils links to pupils' self-confidence and motivation, pupils thereby having high expectations of themselves for their academic progress and attainment. In some schools, older pupils are selected by teachers to support younger pupils with their learning (Engel et al., 2010). Stone Acre School embraces a whole school reading programme whereby pupils in Year 7 (age 11) and Year 8 (age 12) are paired with older pupils from Year 10 upwards, who support the younger Key Stage 3 pupils to develop their reading skills. Schools including those, which operate in disadvantaged contexts like Stone Acre can, therefore, produce positive learning outcomes through a range of approaches, which relate to a school's ethos.

Summary

The decision about which type of school pupils attend is dependent upon what they produce in the 11+ test at a particular time. As a consequence, in the Local Authority

where Stone Acre School operates, disadvantaged pupils are disproportionately under-represented in the local grammar school. Boys identified as ‘underachieving’ in schools like Stone Acre, are more likely to be from the socially disadvantaged category. Teachers in such schools are also under pressure to support pupils across the GCSE performance threshold. The ethos of schools like Stone Acre is affected by the disadvantaged contexts. This is also likely to influence teachers’ practices with boys identified as ‘underachieving’.

Part three: A comparison of GCSE attainment at national level with pupils attending Stone Acre School in the year preceding the study

The aim of this section is to draw a comparison between the attainment of pupils in the study school compared with the attainment of all pupils nationally. In order to do this I have drawn on the published data for England in state funded schools for the academic year 2011/2012 and compared this to the school level data for the same period. Where possible, I have also compared this to the data for boys and disadvantaged boys specifically. The position of Stone Acre School within the national performance tables is also relevant because schools are responding to the need to improve pupils’ attainment. Both the national and school level data presented in this section shows a persistent gap between boys’ and girls’ attainment at GCSE level which is a key performance indicator by which teachers are held accountable. It also shows that disadvantaged pupils, including boys, attain lower by this benchmark. I present the most recent data for England in state-funded schools including examples for the academic year 2011/2012. Although I did not purposively select disadvantaged boys to study some were nevertheless included as they were present in the space below the grade C/D threshold.

1. Gender gap at GCSE

For the academic year 2011/2012, the Government set a floor standard, which required 40 percent of all pupils attending state schools in England to attain 5A* to C GCSE grades including English and Maths. Nationally, the proportion of pupils attaining five A*-C, GCSE

grades including the subjects English and Maths for the academic year 2011/2012 was 22.6 percent above the minimum floor standard (see Table 1.):

Academic Year	All Pupils	Minimum Floor Standard	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	62.6%	40%	22.6%

Table 1: Nationally, pupils attaining five A*-C, GCSE grades including subjects English and Maths, (DFE, 2014a)

At Stone Acre School, pupils' performance was lower than nationally with slightly above 50 percent of all pupils attaining five A*-C, GCSE grades including English and Maths. In spite of a lower number of pupils attaining the minimum GCSE performance threshold compared to pupils nationally, the study school exceeded the national floor standard of 40 percent.

To get a picture of the 'underachievement' of boys it is necessary to look more specifically at their attainment by this performance measure, as in spite of the attention given to improving boys' performance the difference in the attainment of boys and girls at GCSE level persists (National Literacy Trust, 2012). National performance data for the academic year 2011/2012 at GCSE level shows us that the percentage gap at GCSE level including English and Maths between boys and girls was 9.4 percent (see Table 2.):

Academic Year	Boys	Girls	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	54.2%	63.7	9.5%

Table 2: Nationally, girls and boys attaining five A*-C, GCSE grades including subjects English and Maths, (DFE, 2014a)

At Stone Acre School, there were more boys than girls attending the school. However, the percentage gap between boys' and girls' attainment in this school by the GCSE benchmark was 3 percent lower than the percentage gap of 9.5 percent, nationally.

2. The disadvantage gap at GCSE

GCSE attainment

To understand the ‘underachievement’ of boys, it is not sufficient to look at national data on pupils’ performance at GCSE by gender alone. We also need to look at the attainment of boys from low-socio economic backgrounds. In this section, I therefore show data for both disadvantaged and FSM pupils. The data for both categories show the low attainment of boys.

Nationally, in the academic year 2011/2012, the data reveals the low attainment of disadvantaged pupils by the measure five A* to C grades including English and Maths. It shows a 26.2 percentage gap between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils compared to all other pupils (see Table 3.):

Academic Year	Disadvantaged Pupils	All Pupils	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	38.5%	65.7%	26.2%

Table 3: Nationally, disadvantaged pupils attaining five A*-C, GCSE grades including English and Maths compared with all other pupils (DFE, 2014a)

In the academic year 2011/2012 the data shows that FSM pupils nationally attained even lower than all other pupils by the benchmark (see Table 4.):

Academic Year	FSM Pupil	All Pupils	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	26.7%	65.7%	39%

Table 4: Nationally, FSM pupils attaining five A*-C, GCSE grades compared with all other pupils (DFE, 2014a)

These data, therefore, reveal that the attainment of disadvantaged pupils at GCSE is persistently worse than all other pupils with the percentage gap being widest nationally

for pupils in receipt of FSMs¹¹. The data highlights the importance of socio-economic background for both boys' and girls' progress. In 2011, the Coalition Government provided publicly funded schools with additional funding known as 'Pupil Premium' (DFE, 2015d, no page number) to help them improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.¹² The attainment gap continues to be a key agenda for schools (Sutton Trust, 2015). The previous discussion in Chapter One has shown that Stone Acre is a school that has an above average proportion of FSM pupils, the number higher than local grammar schools. At Stone Acre School, in the academic year 2011/2012, there was a 3 percent gap between FSM pupils attaining five A* to C grades including English and Maths and FSM pupils nationally (see Table 5.):

Academic Year	FSM Pupils at Stone Acre School	All FSM Pupils, Nationally	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	30%	26.7%	3.3%

Table 5: Stone Acre School, FSM pupils attaining five A*-C, GCSE grades compared with all other pupils¹³

The percentage of FSM pupils attaining five A*-C GCSE grades including English and Maths at the study school, was therefore, higher than the percentage of FSM pupils nationally. These data indicate that attainment gaps are linked with social disadvantage but national data also shows the importance of ethnicity with 26.4 percent of white British boys eligible for FSMs attaining five A*- C grades including English and Maths. There was, therefore, a gap of 32.4 percent between the attainment of white British Boys compared

¹¹ Data from the national school performance tables for the academic year 2013/2014 is calculated using a new methodology in which only two vocational qualifications count towards a school's overall performance. The tables include pupils' attainment on the first attempt at a Level 2 qualification. The marks accumulated for the speaking and listening component of the English/English Language GCSE are omitted from the calculation. The methodology from the academic year 2013/2014 had a negative effect on the attainment outcomes of pupils at GCSE, 5A* to C grades including English and Maths the same year (DFE, 2015a).

¹² The premium is paid for pupils who have been eligible for free school meals over the previous six years or who have been in care.

¹³ The data source has not been included for the purpose of preserving the anonymity of the study school and percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

to the national average of all pupils (see Table 6):

Academic Year	Percentage of white British FSM boys	National Average of All pupils	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	26.4%	58.8%	32.4%

Table 6: Nationally, white British FSM Boys attaining five A*- C grades including English and Maths compared to the national average of all pupils (DFE, [2013a](#))

By comparison, 40.3 percent of black boys eligible for FSMs attained five A*-C grades including English and Maths. Nationally, white British FSM boys, therefore, attain significantly lower than black FSM boys. At Stone Acre School, the percentage of white British FSM boys attaining by this measure was slightly higher in the academic year 2011/2012 compared with the percentage of white British FSM boys, nationally (DFE, 2014a). In conclusion, both nationally and at Stone Acre School, not only are boys attaining lower as a group, but white British boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds are attaining even lower.

3. The academic curriculum and progress gap

The gap in English and Maths

As previously discussed, English and Maths are key performance measures, read as part of a school's overall performance, while also being a measure of a school's overall performance. The Sutton Trust is an educational charity, which aims, in part, to address educational disadvantage. A report by the Sutton Trust (2013) reveals that the educational outlook of FSM pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 is better than their actual outcomes subsequent to their GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11 (aged 16) as fewer FSM pupils attained 5A* to C grades including English and Maths than estimated when in their final year of primary school. The national picture of the progress of disadvantaged pupils compared to all pupils, in these subjects reveals a gap, which is large in English and largest

in Maths. These are the key academic subjects in the GCSE performance measures (see Table 7):

2011/2012	Disadvantaged Pupils	All Pupils	Percentage Gap
English	53.8%	72.8%	19%
Maths	51.5%	74.5%	23%

Table 7: Nationally, disadvantaged pupils' progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 compared with all other pupils (DFE, 2014a)

At Stone Acre, for the academic year 2011/2012 the data reveals a similar picture to nationally: (see Table 8):

2011/2012	Disadvantaged Pupils	All Pupils	Percentage Gap
English	54%	72%	18%
Maths	50%	75%	25%

Table 8: Stone Acre School, disadvantaged pupils' progress at Stone Acre School from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 compared with all other pupils

The data, therefore, reveals that the progress of disadvantaged pupils from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 in English and Maths nationally and at Stone Acre School was lower than for other pupils. The progress gap of disadvantaged pupils at Stone Acre School, in Maths, was indeed slightly higher than the progress gap nationally. The data suggests it is important to pay attention to socio-economic background when examining pupils' attainment because disadvantaged pupils are not making expected progress. They are therefore less likely to attain the minimum GCSE performance threshold, and therefore 'underachieve' against the GCSE performance measure.

The gap in the E-Bacc

The English Baccalaureate (E-Bacc) qualification was introduced into the curriculum in 2010 to incentivise schools to increase the number of academic qualifications taken by pupils. It therefore includes three further subjects in addition to English and Maths: History, Geography and a language subject (DFE, 2015c). National data shows that there is a difference in the number of disadvantaged pupils entered for this academic qualification compared with all other pupils. Of pupils entered for the E-Bacc qualification nationally, there was a 16 percent gap between the number of disadvantaged pupils entered compared with all other pupils (see Table 9.):

Academic Year	Disadvantaged Pupils	All pupils	Percentage Gap
2011/2012 Entered	8%	23%	15%

Table 9: Nationally, disadvantaged pupils entered for the English Baccalaureate (DFE, 2014a)

The fact that significantly fewer disadvantaged pupils are entered for the E-Bacc examination compared with all other pupils suggests that there is less opportunity for these pupils to study an academic curriculum including GCSE subjects such as History and Geography and a language.

Of the number of pupils entered for the E-Bacc qualification at Stone Acre School there was a 10 percent gap between the number of disadvantaged pupils entered compared with all other pupils (see Table 10):

Academic Year	Disadvantaged Pupils	All pupils	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	3%	13%	10%

Table 10: Stone Acre School, disadvantaged pupils entered for the English Baccalaureate

Although the proportion of pupils entered for the E-Bacc at Stone Acre School qualification was smaller compared to the number entered nationally, there was a narrower percentage gap between the number of disadvantaged pupils entered compared to the percentage of all other pupils. Not only were fewer disadvantaged pupils entered for the E-Bacc, but fewer were successful in obtaining this qualification compared to all pupils. Nationally, there was a gap of 14.3 percent between the number of disadvantaged pupils attaining the E-Bacc qualification compared to all the pupils entered (See Table 11.):

Academic Year	Disadvantaged Pupils	All Pupils	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	5.5%	19.8%	14.3%

Table 11: Nationally, disadvantaged pupils' attainment compared with all pupils entered for the English Baccalaureate (DFE, 2014a)

At the study school the attainment gap was narrower with a difference of 8 percent between the number of disadvantaged pupils attaining the E-Bacc qualification compared to all the pupils entered (See Table 12):

Academic Year	Disadvantaged Pupils	All Pupils	Percentage Gap
2011/2012	1%	9%	8%

Table 12: Stone Acre School, disadvantaged pupils' attainment compared with all pupils entered for the English Baccalaureate

A smaller proportion of disadvantaged pupils are successful compared to all other pupils which suggests that either these pupils are essentially less 'able' or something is occurring within the schooling structure, which is influencing how well they achieve by the GCSE performance measure.

Summary

This section has shown that the widest gap in GCSE attainment nationally is between white British FSM boys compared to all other pupils. This is important for my study because it aims for an improved understanding of boys' 'underachievement' and the national school performance data shows that disadvantaged boys attain worse by the GCSE benchmark compared with all other pupils. My study also moves on to show, in part, the ways in which progress is/is not made by boys identified as 'underachieving'. The difference in progress between disadvantaged pupils compared to all other pupils in English and Maths, key performance measures at GCSE, was also significant, particularly in Maths where the progress gap was widest both nationally and at Stone Acre School. In addition, disadvantaged pupils were significantly under-represented in the number of pupils entered for the E-Bacc examination. Current national data shows that the gap between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and all other pupils by the key GCSE performance measure remains broadly similar (DFE, 2015e; Sutton Trust 2015) despite being a focus for interventions.

Since the academic year 2011/2012, the academic profile of Stone Acre School has also altered illustrating the changeability of a school's overall attainment when measured against the national GCSE performance measure set by the government. In comparison to non-selective schools in the local area with a similar pupil intake, the overall attainment of pupils in the case study school, in recent years, is now one of the highest.

The next chapter examines existing literature on boys' 'underachievement' to provide additional insights into gender and how it is understood. I then consider some of the links between gender and the curriculum, and selective grouping and their effects on teachers' practices, arguing that both are factors which contribute to the construction of boys' 'underachievement'. The next chapter also includes my conceptual approach for analysing my findings and the research questions.

Chapter Three

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter explores the ways in which educational 'underachievement' is constituted for boys in England within the current context of improving the performance of young people while in school and understandings and recognition of gender within school processes. It draws upon research largely conducted in England, but also in other countries including Australia, the USA, and in mainland Europe where they add further to our understanding of the boys' 'underachievement' debate. For example, a substantial amount of research on the effects of selective grouping practices has been carried out in the USA, aspects of which are relevant to this study. Although the literature drawn upon is mainly from texts post the 1990s, the period when the publication of national school performance tables commenced, a limited number of references to studies conducted between the 1970s and 1980s have, however, been included where relevant. Much of the literature indicates an acceptance of boy/girl as a binary rather than problematising the notion of gender. In my account, I make reference to boys and girls but am aware that is an oversimplification and recognise that more complex gender identities exist.

Fundamental to the research are understandings of what it means to be a 'boy'. Debates on boys' 'underachievement' broadly reflect two dominant theoretical perspectives on gender. The first understands gender in essentialist terms, the idea that boys and girls are believed to be born with fixed characteristics, gender thereby 'bred into our genes' (Lorber, 1995, p.13). The second perspective takes the view that gender is socially constructed suggesting that factors outside the human body and therefore within society, influence behaviour (Mills, 2001; Arnot, 2002). From this perspective, gender is 'constantly created and recreated out of human interactions, out of social life and is the texture and order of that social life' (Lorber, 1995, p13). Section one, therefore, presents

the general debates on theories of gender, each theoretical perspective underpinning approaches taken in the literature to explain boys' 'underachievement'. It also explores teachers' gendered classroom practices and boys' behaviours.

The second section examines the literature on the curriculum and selective grouping practices in order to explore boys' positioning within school processes as this is a factor in the construction and production of their 'underachievement'. I begin by considering approaches towards vocational learning which the literature suggests is both low-status and male and draw on research, which illustrates the benefits for pupils of vocational learning alongside academic learning. I consider examples from the literature, which link curriculum subjects to gendered messages. Smith (2007) suggests that teachers are key to how gender is constructed. I, therefore, examine teachers' attitudes towards gender and boys' 'underachievement' focussing in particular on selective grouping practices and teachers' expectations of learners in these spaces. The literature review concludes with how I frame my analysis of the data and presents the research questions.

Section one

3.1 Essentialist perspectives

Arguing from the perspective of evolutionary theory which proposes that the differences between males and females are essentially genetic and therefore behaviour foreseeable and inevitable (Brando and Lindsey, 1994, cited in Alsop et al., 2007), it has been suggested that the absence of male role models in the classroom, particularly in primary schools, creates problems for boys in terms of their engagement in learning (Charlesworth, 1996). While proponents of evolutionary theory imagine boys and girls to be naturally different emphasising, for example, the importance of the father figure in a boy's educational development (Platten, 1999), proponents of brain difference theory have previously suggested that boys and girls have essentially differing abilities. In explaining boys' 'underachievement', brain difference theorists underline the importance

of classroom practices, which reflect boys' and girls' assumed needs thereby normalising what are considered as the essentialist learning needs of boys (Bleach, 1998).

Findings from a number of educational commentators reflect the belief that differences in boys' and girls' attainment are due to innate differences in ability (Caviness et al., 1996; Biddulph, 1997; Gurian, 2002; 2005; Gurian and Stevens, 2006; Lenroot et al., 2007). Initial research during the early part of the twentieth century on the differences in the brain claimed that the corpus callosum, the nerves that link the left and right sides of the brain, are different in size between men and women. Gurian (2005) asserts that by adolescence, a girl's corpus callosum is significantly larger than a boy's. Based on the theory that girls use the left side of the brain and boys the right, Gurian (2005) suggests this accounts for girls being better at language skills including reading and writing (Gurian, 2005). Further, Sax (2010) found that the area in the brain involved in spatial memory develops earlier in boys than girls and suggests that this affects how boys learn. Fausto-Sterling (1992) found no evidence to suggest a link between the differences in male and female brains and intelligence. More recent research also refutes such arguments that suggest the differences in brain structure of males and females influences intelligence. For example, using magnetic resonance imaging, Clements et al., (2006) discovered that men and women use different parts of the brain for different types of language when processing visual information. As Francis and Skelton (2005) assert, findings that suggest differing effects of the physiology of male and female brains does not confirm that girls are bound to outperform boys.

Previous research on boys' and girls' learning styles tends to be based on essentialist understandings of gender suggesting that boys and girls have different orientations towards school work (Biddulph, 1997; Ofsted 1996; 2003; Gurian, 2002; 2005; Gurian and Stevens, 2006). For example, it has been proposed that boys learn better actively, preferring lively discussion, which includes an element of competition, preferring whole class teaching rather than working in small groups (Ofsted, 1996; Pickering, 1997; Noble

and Bradford, 2000). In contrast, girls have been found to prefer collaborative group-work and activities, which offer them the opportunity for reflection and creativity (Spender, 1982). However, Arnot (1998, p.28) suggests that girls' alleged inclinations towards open-ended sustained tasks and boys assumed preferences towards 'memorising abstract, unambiguous facts and rules that have to be acquired quickly', have been influenced by the idea that different subjects demand different gendered learning styles to which boys and girls have traditionally been partnered. This, Arnot argues, has also attributed to girls favouring English and Humanities subjects and boys preferring Maths and Science.

The consequence of essentialist recognitions of gender is that boys' and girls' inclinations towards learning have been found to be quite different. In a report on boys' achievement, Ofsted (2003, p.19), explain 'there is nothing as clear-cut as a boy's learning style'. The report found:

Boys in particular responded well to carefully structured work in lessons. Their responses were strongest when the work had clear objectives, when it was set in real-life contexts, and when it involved well-focused short-term tasks on which there was quick feedback. They also reacted very favourably when the work had an element of fun and competition. (Ofsted 2003, p.19).

It was also suggested:

[Boys'] motivation can be enhanced by giving them greater access to computers for interactive learning or to help them improve their presentation for coursework (Ofsted, 2003, P.12).

Such accounts suggest that boys' and girls' learning preferences mirror their essential learning needs. In the teaching of writing, for example, drawing on previous research the DFE (2012b, p.20) recommends teachers to include the use of active learning tasks, including drama, to specifically support boys learning. When homogenising boys and girls in this way, individual learning preferences are likely to be overlooked.

Linking essentialist and social constructionist perspectives

Within the broad framework of social constructionism, commentators adopt a number of different perspectives to suggest that gender is continuously produced including through essentialist ideas about boys as learners while in school. Barker (1997), for example, discovered that teachers sometimes read gender through an essentialist lens in terms of how they recognise boys' and girls' attitudes towards learning. Findings by Barker (1997) indicate that teachers consider girls as better organised than boys, displaying better communication skills and being more articulate and confident. Teachers have been found to view girls as self-learners, planning meticulously, particularly for coursework (Head, 1997). Teachers have also been found to consider boys as more vocal than girls and therefore better at oral work (Younger and Warrington, 1996). Although boys have also been found to be perceived by teachers as keen to contribute to class discussions, they have also been discovered to consider boys as more boisterous (Younger and Warrington, 1996). Teachers have additionally been found to attribute boys being nurtured by a single female parent/carer as causing an anti-learning culture amongst them owing to the absence of a successful male role model (Pickering, 1997; Bleach, 1998).

The essentialist understandings of gender that underpin some teachers' expectations of boys seem likely to shape the learning space occupied by boys identified as 'underachieving' and their learning experiences. Younger and Warrington (1996) found that the negative dynamics between pupil/teacher interactions were important in relation to low attaining pupils in terms of the negative impact on their performance in GCSE examinations. In their study, they reveal how both male and female teachers expressed that girls present fewer classroom management issues than boys (Younger and Warrington, 1996). Salisbury and Jackson (1996) assert that some teachers concentrate more of their time and energy on boys in the classroom with boys demanding more approval than girls. Previous research by Mac an Ghail (1994, p.47) revealed that male teachers assume that boys cause more trouble than girls and are more difficult to

discipline. Younger and Warrington (1996) found that overall boys believe they receive less support and encouragement from teachers. Teachers have also been viewed as being harsher towards boys, which has been found to cause them to lose interest in learning (Younger and Warrington, 1996). Few teachers have been found to recognise that they might be responding to girls and boys differently (Younger and Warrington 1996). Gender is, therefore, being actively constructed through teachers' essentialist understandings of gender.

Connell and the notion of multiple masculinities

Drawing on Connell's (2002; 2005) theory on masculinities and femininities, I explain my own perspective on gender and how I understand this in relation to the learner. The work of Connell is important because in her reading of gender she understands biological and cultural factors as being fused together:

Bodies are both objects of social practice and agents in social practice. The same bodies, at the same time, are both. The practices in which bodies are involved form social structures and personal trajectories which in turn provide the conditions of new practices in which bodies are addressed and involved (Connell, 2002, p.47).

People's physical experiences are therefore part of being masculine or feminine and cannot be separated from the culture within which they are living (Connell, 2002; Connell, 2012). The body is, therefore, an object of and active agent in social processes whereby male and female bodies act within social institutions encountering 'gender regimes' (Connell, 2012, p.1677). Education policy on raising standards is one example of a gendered structure whereby high-stakes testing, which is so central to the creation of education markets, has gendered outcomes for the ways in which boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning, as discussed in Chapter Two. Connell (2002, p.47) suggests that there is a 'circuit, linking bodily processes and social structures'. Connell (2002, p.47) labels this circular process 'social embodiment' or 'body-reflexive practice'. Viewed from this perspective teachers can be seen to encounter gendered

education systems whilst also constructing the very social structures of which they are a part through their practices.

Sex role theorists suggest that men and women become masculine or feminine through social conditioning thereby reinforcing the idea that the behaviour of males and females is essentially different (Oakley, 1972; Seidler, 1989). Such accounts propose that the gender role that relates to our biological sex is learned through interactions with social structures. Gender is constantly in the process of production as a result of boys living up to conventional notions about what it means to be a 'boy' while in school. However, by rejecting the idea that essential differences between males and females alone prompt men and women to behave differently, Connell (2002) offers a more complex theorising of boys' masculinities, which evades such binaries. While recognising the importance of the body in terms of who a person is, Connell (2002) contends that does not explain the different forms of masculinity and femininity that might exist. Neither does it account for the many changes that might occur during the individual lives of men and women or adequately describe the very processes by which a specific gender is taken-up. Connell (2002) also disagrees that culture alone determines gender differences (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). A further theoretical perspective on gender is that of the postmodernist. Abbott et al., (2005, p.236) suggest that central to the theory of post-modernism is the idea that:

Identity is multiple and provisional – race, sex, age sexuality and so on are constantly revised and negotiated [...]. By rejecting the idea of a central core constituting the person. Postmodernism shifts attention away from the subject as a manifestation of her "essence" to "the subject in process" – never unitary and never complete.

By the subject continually developing suggests that gender identities are not fixed, the unconscious thoughts and emotions of individuals shaped through their involvement in particular discourses. Butler (1990, p25) views gender as a performance recognising the notion of identity as free-flowing, 'constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'. Rather than a person's identity relating to any kind of essence, it is rather how an individual acts at a particular time within a particular context. However, Connell

(2002, p.71) argues that, from this standpoint, because identities can be engaged with then cast aside, it becomes less fascinating. Moreover, she suggests that it is difficult to ignore that relations and gender identities can change slowly. Connell (2002) argues that a more specific theory is required to understand why changes in gender might occur and be resisted. Connell (2002, p.71) asserts that 'Structures develop *crisis tendencies*, that is internal contradictions or tendencies that undermine current patterns and force change in the structure itself'. Connell (2002) understands both the body and social structures fused together in the construction of gender. While Connell (2002) accepts the importance of the socialisation theory in terms of the influence of, for example, the family and schools, she proposes that conflicting models and messages are likely. Having established a foundation for the study of masculinities Connell (2002) developed the idea that there are a number of different ways of being a man or a woman. She suggests that masculinities can constantly change - old masculinities can disappear while new masculinities can emerge. As a result of their own diversity of life experience, teachers, for example, present a range of configurations of masculinity and femininity when interacting with pupils in the classroom because they too are not homogenous.

Connell (2002) uses Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony to make the broad distinction between 'hegemonic masculinity' and other forms of masculinity. It is a form of masculinity where there are relations of dominance between groups of men some of the behaviours of whom include appearing macho, and very heterosexual. 'Hegemonic masculinity' is established by one masculinity being dominant over another (Connell, 2002, p.59). Boys do this by winning the approval of other males and females to secure their authority. They can position others by way of their 'subordinated', 'complicit', or 'marginalized' relationships (Connell 2005, p.76). Rather than 'hegemonic masculinity' being understood as a fixed character type, it is rather 'the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations' in a particular situation at a given time (Connell, 2005, p.76). Subordinated forms of masculinity could include

ethnically differentiated masculinities, homosexuality and other 'softer' forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005, p.78).

While Connell (2005, p.80-81) maintains there has been an increasing recognition by commentators of the existence of multiple masculinities and therefore an interplay between gender, race and class, her caveat is against oversimplification by merely thinking, for example, 'that there is a black masculinity or a working-class masculinity'. Connell (2002, p.70) suggests that 'some of the 'external' forces are gendered from the start' and therefore her approach allows for 'where different groups are located in the structure under pressure, and how they come into being within that structure'. It is arguable that not only are boys identified as 'underachieving' likely to portray a number of different forms of masculinity while in school but the way in which boys experience their learning is continuously being produced by and through the schooling system. Systemic factors include policies on improving pupils' attainment, the school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping practices and teachers' understandings of gender, their masculinities and femininities likely to be varied and shifting.

Becoming one of the lads: teachers' classroom practices and boys' behaviours

A number of studies to explain boys' 'underachievement' have developed which recognise that multiple masculinities exist which are influenced by a number of different social factors. Reay (2002, p.221), for example, finds links between some pupils inner emotional struggles and external structures. She explores the story of Shaun, a 'white working-class boy' who attempts to combine upholding his boyish masculinities in front of his peers, while in school, with working hard. Reay (2002) argues that for boys like Shaun, the construction of 'working class boys' as macho has psychological costs as they experience tensions between their inner emotional beings and school structures and processes which, she suggests, require substantial psychic restorative work. Jackson (2003, p.37) argues that 'the construct of 'laddishness' acts as a self-worth protection strategy'.

Jackson (2003, p.37) suggests that they wish to avoid being recognised as 'underachieving' or being viewed as feminine. Jackson (2003, p.37) argues that the learner experiences of 'underachieving' boys are influenced at the level of the conscious through external processes connected to attainment measures, which results in boys often presenting challenging behaviours. Lucey and Reay (2002), however, draw attention to the influence of the wider political structure on behaviour. They assert that while the rationale behind free market politics is to provide parents with more freedom of choice of schools for their children, the ideology actually exaggerates anticipated stereotypes about which schools might be best given the sorts of pupils who attend them, exacerbating anxiety amongst parents. Adopting Klein's (1952) theory of anxiety, and the relationship between unconscious (internal), and conscious (external) emotions, Francis and Skelton (2005, p.28) (extending Lucey's and Reay's (2000) point and relating it to the boys' 'underachievement' debate), suggest that 'working class boys might be seen as demonised repositories for fears around educational failure and/or lack of responsibility'.

The 'poor boys' discourse Epstein et al., (1998) centres around the idea that boys are the victims in education whereby the organisation of school, including teaching practices, favours girls (Spender, 1982; Stanworth, 1983; Howe, 1997). Such arguments often proposed by members of the Men's Rights Movement also blamed the feminist movement including female teachers for favouring female learning styles (Gurian, 1998). Boys were believed to be at the mercy of feminist teachers and therefore considered as victims of an education system which appeared to benefit girls rather than boys. Ideas predominantly suggested by anti-feminists, at that time, include a number of solutions such as an alteration of classroom practices to include more masculine approaches to enable boys to reach their full potential (Gurian, 2002). A number of studies contest accusations that boys have suffered due to the efforts of feminists to improve the situation of women (Epstein et al., 1998; Gillborn and Gipps, 1996; Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Francis, 2000). Raphael Reed (1999) for example, argues that more structured, masculinised learning styles are likely to cause girls to lose interest in learning by them

being taught in a procedural way. Raphael Reed (1999) asserts that such strategies serve to reinforce hegemonic masculinities and are likely to contribute to some boys' own sense of manliness within the classroom. Even more responsibility for boys' apparent failure, therefore, rests with the teachers. More recently, the notions of male marginalisation and beliefs that 'all' girls achieve have been interrogated (Skelton and Francis, 2009; Skelton 2010). Arguments such as these, therefore, suggest that essentialist understandings of gender are inadequate when attempting to explain boys' 'underachievement'.

Previous studies conclude that 'working class' boys construct their 'underachievement' by engaging in different types of masculine behaviours that result in them rejecting school work (Willis, 1977; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Willis (1977, p.1) argues that it is the reproduction of the social conditions within which 'Working-class' boys experience their learning that constructs their 'underachievement'. Willis' (1977) seminal study conducted in a small working class town in the Midlands is important because it formed the basis of subsequent studies that adopt Connell's (2002; 2005) theory that masculinities and femininities are relational. Willis (1977, p.14) identified two groups of pupils: the 'working class' boys, who were found to display 'anti-school' behaviours including 'having a laff' and emanating sexist and racist attitudes, and the 'ear 'oles' whom the non-conforming boys looked down upon, seeing them as wasting their time on school work. Accepting their fate as working class and resigned to the idea they are born to manual labour the boys in Willis' (1977) study are unable/unwilling to recognise any value in following a system which constructs academic learning as the most valued.

More recently, it has been argued that male teachers can reinforce boys' 'macho' masculinities through their relationships with boys and their pedagogical approach (Martino, 2008). Mac an Ghaill (1994) found that at one level virile male teachers assert their masculine authority in an attempt to maintain social control amongst boys. They view themselves in a position of dominant male authority and criticise female teachers' supposedly weak strategies for attempting to discipline the young men. As Salisbury and

Jackson (1996) contend, boys learn to expect dominant authoritarian behaviour from male teachers who give out powerful messages about how to be a boy. But as Raphael Reed (1999) contests in response to a scheme put in place for boys to shadow businessmen to improve their self-discipline, such male practices, which take a military style approach, are more likely to further embed hegemonic masculinities. More recently, the teacher training programme 'Troops to teachers' was set up by the Government to encourage service leavers to join the teaching profession. The trainees are perceived as being able to develop strength and resilience in young people, the qualities thought necessary in policy, for pupils to attain the GCSE performance measure (DFE, 2015f).

At another level Mac an Ghaill (1994) found authoritarian teachers to conspire with boys' clashes with schooling as a means of endorsing macho behaviours. More recently, research by Smith (2007) argues that as a reaction to the teaching professions soft image (Skelton, 2001; Martino, 2008), male teachers invest in what they view as normative masculinity, thereby eliminating all other behavioural preferences from themselves such as homosexual inclinations which serve to perpetuate working class anti-school behaviours. Martino (1999) suggests there is a stigmatisation felt by boys when aligning themselves with anything thought to be feminine. The author proposes that boys' constructions of hegemonic masculinities are enacted as a means to defend themselves against accusations of being gay. Epstein (1997) argues that to avoid any association with academic work, or at least to be seen to be avoiding it, is one means by which boys identified as 'underachieving' can preserve their reputation as remaining one of the lads. More recently, Smith (2007, p.181) found that the pressures from educational policy on teachers' accountability affect some teachers' classroom practices. A number of teachers were found to encourage boys to be 'macho' during lessons in order to establish friendly relations in the hopes of minimising classroom management issues and maintaining student engagement in order to improve the exam grades of 'disaffected young men'. As Smith (2007) highlights, teachers are compelled to resort to strategies of becoming one of

the 'lads' in order to survive pressures of education policy, which through measures of surveillance holds teachers accountable for the success of their pupils.

Summary

In this section I have opened up the key debates around gender challenging essentialist assumptions about what it means to be a 'boy'. I have shown that teachers are not free from these different readings of gender and that consciously or unconsciously, they often practice with understandings of gender as essentialist rather than recognising the existence of multiple masculinities. Some teachers also present a number of different masculinities and femininities, gender thereby continuously being produced through their practices. These understandings are an important factor in the construction and production of boys' 'underachievement' because they form part of the gendered regime in which these boys experience their learning.

Section two

3.2 Positioning of boys within school systems as a factor of 'underachievement'

Introduction

Section one of the literature review has problematised boys' 'underachievement' from a gender perspective. In this section, I examine the literature on two key processes affecting the positioning of boys identified as 'underachieving' in secondary schools: the curriculum and selective grouping. I examine how an academic/vocational hierarchy is constructed within the curriculum by English and Maths being positioned at its centre by the key performance measure. I consider how being located in a low set also limits opportunities for learning. The chapter concludes with my conceptual approach to the study.

Curriculum as a hierarchy: performance measures and status

This section examines relevant literature, which suggests that the national school performance tables privilege the academic curriculum. The profile of pupils currently

offered vocational courses while in school is predominantly low attaining, male and disadvantaged. While schools have used vocational qualifications¹⁴ as an alternative to the study of GCSEs to boost their position in these tables in the past, this led to a response by the government articulated by the Wolf Report (2011), which suggests there is a false binary between academic and vocational learning.

The separation between academic and vocational subjects was previously established. As explained in Chapter Two, the notion of 'ability', which has historically rested upon an essentialist understanding of intelligence values academic knowledge above vocational learning as evidenced by the 11+ test. By some subjects being compulsory and others not also alters the status of the subject. With the aim of raising the status of vocational subjects and to avoid manipulation by schools of the national performance tables, Wolf (2011, p.20) recommends that non-GCSE subjects be chosen from an approved list, identified as providing the level of demand and relevance to the futures of young people. However, Wolf's (2011) recommendation that only those courses identified as having 'rigour', should contribute to an individual pupil's overall performance, the importance of pupils obtaining academic qualifications is emphasised. The introduction of the E-Bacc in 2010, whereby three further academic qualifications form part of the national school performance tables serves to skew the learning experiences of young people further towards an academic learning experience and away from other types of learning thereby decreasing the value of non-academic subjects. Wolf (2011) recommends that all qualifications which are offered to young people, whether academic or vocational, should provide them with the opportunity of finding employment:

No young person should be in an education or a training programme which denies them the chance to progress, immediately or later in life, or fails to equip them with the skills needed for such mobility (Wolf, 2011, p.20).

However, changes to the value of vocational courses have resulted in schools reducing

¹⁴ Vocational learning in schools in England refers to those subjects, which are relevant to employment (Pring et al., 2009)

their offer of such courses rather than taking into account what might be best for the pupils (Doyle, 2012).

In spite of the importance of an academic learning experience evidenced by English and Maths being at the centre of the curriculum (DFE, 2014a), as previously explained the popularity of vocational courses increased due to them being considered as 'easy wins'. This was owing to their value in the performance tables in the years preceding 2011. A further outcome was that a number of young people including those from low socio-economic backgrounds followed subjects, the qualifications of which, 'were not well regarded by employers or universities' (H.M. Government, 2011, p37). Vocational courses were first introduced in England to address the perceived 'underachievement' of boys, specifically at GCSE. Vocational courses continue to be aimed at those who have not succeeded academically (Unwin et al., 2004) and are therefore followed by pupils in low sets. The specifications of work-related courses such as BTECs, in the main, demand more practical skills (Pring et al., 2009). These pathways resemble applied courses such as GCSEs D&T and ICT, which also require practical application. However, the skill sets by which pupils are judged by the GCSE performance benchmark require academic engagement. A disproportionate number of boys follow vocational subjects (Paechter, 2000) including a disproportionate number of disadvantaged boys (Cassen and Kingdon, 2012). Positioned in low sets, they have limited opportunity to develop the skills required to attain in academic subjects such as English and Maths. The outcome is that the boys are having a gendered learning experience. Their opportunities for preparing for university entrance are limited. Given that the status of different subjects is recognised by teachers and pupils (Young, 1971), this might influence the way in which boys identified as 'underachieving' view themselves as learners.

Wolf (2011, p.20) suggests that the 'lowest attainers' and those most 'highly disaffected' should focus solely on passing English and Maths at GCSE level before being permitted to follow vocational courses. However, not all pupils may be able to attain the minimum

benchmark grade C to permit them to do this. This might leave them feeling frustrated at not being able to follow vocational learning pathways and ignores the potential benefits to pupils of learning vocational courses alongside academic subjects (Doyle, 2012). The study of vocational subjects might be an important incentive for some pupils to attain in not only those vocational subjects but also in English and Maths. A study by Doyle (2012) asserts that new learning can potentially occur as students move between vocational and academic subjects. Doyle (2012) found that some pupils make connections between the knowledge gained from vocational learning with that developed in academic subjects. Some pupils expressed that vocational learning had supported generic skills such as essay writing, in the more academic subjects. Doyle (2012) suggests that as pupils move between academic and vocational subjects, in addition to developing and changing their relations between persons and activities, they are acquiring new knowledge whilst developing new skills and improving their understanding. Pupils are making connections between theories and practices in academic and vocational subjects whilst also being able to reflect on their individual development as learners. This suggests a false binary exists within policy perspectives on the relationship between vocational and academic learning.

In addition, in Doyle's (2012) study the positive nature of the pupils' responses to their vocational learning experience suggested they were both enthused and engaged. As part of the study, when asked why pupils had chosen to follow vocational courses pupils made reference to the relevance of the subject to their future career choices, to the enjoyment they anticipated and the practical elements of the courses. Once pursuing their vocational studies, pupils reported that being able to demonstrate their abilities motivated them to learn. Pupils also considered their teachers to be providing them with ample encouragement. While Doyle's (2012) findings suggest that vocational learning can have positive effects on pupils' learning experiences, academic attainment is favoured at policy level as evidenced by the way that academic subjects have been prioritised within the national school performance tables.

The curriculum as a gendered space

Previous research suggests that gender is constructed through the way in which boys are interacting with particular beliefs about curriculum subjects, viewed as being masculine/feminine. Explicating how certain subjects have come to be recognised as masculine/feminine, Paechter (2000, p.27) explains:

‘Pure’ knowledge, worth knowing for its own sake [...] has generally been given a masculine marker and concomitant high status.

Walkerdine (1988) asserts that exemplars of knowledge are found in Pure Mathematics and to some extent Science, which stems from the Enlightenment beliefs.¹⁵ Such ideas valued ‘public over private, the mental over the physical or manual and by analogy masculinity over femininity (Gatens, 1991, cited in Paechter, 2000, p.36). Paechter (2000) explains that certain knowledge such as Mathematics and Science have also been traditionally constructed to exclude women. For example, during the early part of the twentieth-century girls spent limited time studying Science and Maths and therefore were unlikely to gain access to learning them at a higher level. Paechter (2000) suggests that exclusions to accessing the learning of certain subjects have lead to stereotypical masculine characteristics of subjects to be reinforced. Subjects in school which are considered to preserve a rational focus such as Maths and Science tend to be viewed as masculine (Paechter, 2000) while the study of subjects associated with femininity such as English and Art are considered to pose a threat to boys (Head 1997). Martino (1995) found that amidst a culture in which each year the subject discussion is played out in term of the ‘soft’ versus the ‘hard’ subjects in relation to A’ level choices and the stigmatisation associated with following courses in Media Studies or Sociology, the subject element acts to further disengage some boys. Some boys have been discovered to consider such subjects as ‘more suited to girls’, lacking seriousness and rigour unlike Maths and Science (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Warrington and Younger 2000).

¹⁵ A European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries emphasising reason and individualism rather than tradition.

Previous research suggests that both before and after GCSE, boys have been generally found to prefer to study Science, Maths, ICT and PE while girls have been discovered to prefer English and Humanities subjects and Music (Gallagher, 1997; Arnot et al., 1998; Bleach 1998). Salisbury and Jackson (1996, p.34) argue that some boys might deliberately opt for feminine subjects to reject the masculine culture which threatens them and the 'real lads' - the heterosexual macho boys, can purposely choose to follow masculine subjects to avoid being viewed as 'uncool' and the likelihood of being bullied. Understandings of subjects as masculine/feminine, therefore, indicate that traditional beliefs about subjects being masculine/feminine are embedded.

It has been previously suggested that subjects which require the learning of practical skills which include the use of the body, as in the subjects of PE and D&T, have traditionally been considered more suited to boys than skill sets which demand a more academic approach (Paechter, 2000). Connolly (2006) suggests that subjects perceived as feminine such as English are likely to place limits on boys' attainment overlooking the existence of multiple masculinities, where it has been shown for example that middle-class boys attain well in English (Lucey and Walkerdine, 2000). And while subjects perceived as effeminate including Art and Humanities might be possible for some pupils to avoid (Mac an Ghaill, 1995), the study of English is compulsory. Essentialist understandings about the nature of subjects as masculine/feminine are therefore already present in the debates around the curriculum process. However, they are also in play in the learning experiences of boys identified as 'underachieving' because they are present in the wider structures and attitudes towards boys as learners.

Boys' 'underachievement' and selective grouping practices

The practice of selective grouping

This section provides a second example of how education structures create and define the space in which boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning. While not intentional, the impact of selective grouping practices is greatest on disadvantaged boys

(Muijs and Dunne, 2010). Previous research indicates that the attainment of pupils in low sets is curtailed by the level of examination pupils are entered for as this limits the grades that can be attained (Gillborn, 2010). Pupils are also likely to become subject to teachers having low expectations of their potential and attitudes towards learning (Gillborn, 2010). Despite these concerns, it is a practice recommended at policy level. New Labour's commitment to setting was also outlined in the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997). Contrasting with findings in both national and international research (Gillborn, 2010), the Labour Government considered selective grouping as a positive measure towards raising 'academic standards, recognising students as better engaged in their own learning' (DFES 2005, p.58). The Coalition continued to support selective grouping (Gillborn, 2010) and more recently it has been reported that David Cameron, former Leader of the Conservative Party expressed that in his view, all schools should be setting pupils by ability, particularly in English and Maths (Groves, 2015). The process of selective grouping acts to systematically raise the status of notions of innate forms of intelligence over others (Cremin and Thomas, 2005). In addition, selective grouping implies an essentialist understanding of 'ability' as something which is both measurable and 'relatively fixed' (Boaler, et al., 2000, p.631). This is reflected in both the national context through how achievement is measured by whether pupils attain 5A* to C grades including English and Maths and in the local context whereby the 11+ is presented as a measure of intelligence. Teachers have also been found to essentialise the notion of 'ability' (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Younger and Warrington, 1996). In spite of the continuing concerns about the benefits of selective grouping, the practice continues to be advocated at policy level.

Evidence suggests the system by which pupils are allocated to particular sets is biased against disadvantaged boys. Previous research by Muijs and Dunne (2010) reveals that while pupils' prior attainment is the main factor in the decision by schools to allocate pupils to particular groups, pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to find themselves allocated to low sets, indicative of the process being biased against disadvantaged pupils. Other factors by which pupils have been allocated to low sets

include 'behaviour', 'teachers' perceptions,' 'student motivation' and 'teacher effectiveness' (Muijs and Dunne, 2010, p.405). Mac an Ghaill (1994) discovered that teachers' understanding that boys cause more trouble than girls with boys being considered as more difficult to discipline had implications for which sets pupils were allocated. These findings, in part, echo those found by Ball (1981), who suggested, more than thirty years ago, that teachers' opinions of pupils went some way towards where they were placed. Importantly, a number of studies, around that time, also linked the practices of streaming and selective grouping to the 'underachievement' of pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981). The practice of selective grouping is therefore linked to disadvantage and gender, and together these have an unequal impact on the learning experiences of boys identified as 'underachieving'.

Evidence in the literature about how selective grouping positively and negatively affects pupils' learning calls into question why policy advocates setting as a within school process. Previous research indicates that selective grouping practices are counter-productive for pupils who occupy the low sets. For example, Ball et al., (2012) suggests that pupils occupying the low sets do not have the same access to interventions to help them progress as those near the GCSE grade C benchmark. The progress of 'underachievers' is, therefore, likely to be limited. However, Muijs and Dunne (2010) suggest that teachers' practices can support pupils from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds when they are allocated to a group where the most effective teachers are assigned. For some teachers, setting is seen as an advantage in terms of planning lessons towards teaching pupils who have been identified as a similar ability by the benchmark (Macintyre and Ireson, 2002). However, previous findings suggest that non-specialist teachers are sometimes allocated to the low sets and they have been found to have fixed ideas about the level of work expected from pupils rather than taking pupils' personalised learning needs into consideration (Boaler, 2000). The practice of selective grouping, therefore, has mixed benefits.

How selective grouping practices impact on attainment

The literature on selective grouping practices shows mixed effects on pupils' attainment in different countries (Kulick and Kulick, 1992; Gamoran and Berends, 1987; Slavin, 1990). Research in the USA, for example, where a significant amount of research has been undertaken found that the relative attainment of pupils in academic, general and vocational 'tracks' (whereby pupils are separated into ability groups for all subjects), 'is very small (Slavin, 1990), negligible benefits to pupils in high tracks at the expense of pupils in lower tracks (Kerchhoff, 1986). Slavin (1987) did however find positive effects on pupils' performance in subject specific grouping in Maths and reading, while Kulick and Kulick (1992, p.76) discovered that where setting was linked to more differentiated teaching methods the attainment of higher 'ability' pupils improved without apparent detriment to lower 'ability' pupils. However, given that their focus was attainment, the disadvantages of selectively grouping pupils might be assessed in other ways.

More recently in the UK, the effects of setting pupils have shown that pupils with the same prior performance attain higher when placed in a higher set (Ireson et al., 2002), the reverse holding for pupils in low sets (Hallam and Ireson, 2003). In a study on the overall effects of selective grouping for English, Maths and Science GCSEs on pupils' attainment, while Ireson and Hallam (2005) and Slavin (1990), found no significant effects, they did, however, discover that higher performing Year 9 pupils attained higher grades when placed in mixed 'ability' groups. This challenges previous results that have shown that higher performing pupils attain higher when taught in groups with pupils attaining similarly. As Hallam and Ireson (2005) point out, such results suggest that other factors such as the curriculum, teachers' attitudes and practices are likely to mediate the impact of selective grouping. Overall, evidence in the literature suggests that the system of selective grouping offers little advantage to improving the attainment of pupils located in low sets.

It has been shown that students are disaffected by the limits placed on their attainment in Maths when preparing for examinations that only gives them access to the lowest grades (Boaler et al., 2000). Once placed, pupils occupying low sets have been found to believe it unlikely they will be moved to a higher set. One source revealed that once pupils have been placed into a low set, they are unlikely to be moved (Noble and Bradford, 2000). In addition, (Boaler et al., 2000) have shown that pupils in low sets, recognising that they are not taught the same work that is assessed in the high sets, believe that they are prevented from attaining the grades needed for them to be able to move up. Making some exams available to some pupils and not others affects pupils' access to learning and impacts upon their attainment against performance indicators as a measure of 'underachievement'. Currently, for GCSE Maths, English and Science pupils generally take one of two-tiered examination papers, foundation or higher, which provides them access to attaining different, but overlapping grades (Ireson and Hallam, 2005). Mathematics encompasses three tiers: a foundation tier (grades D-G), an intermediate tier (grades B-E) and a higher tier (grades A*-C). The allocation of pupils to a particular group can limit the grade a pupil can attain (Hallam and Ireson, 2007).

Elwood and Murphy (2002) found that more boys than girls are likely to be entered for the foundation examination tiers in the core subjects: English, Maths and Science, due to being perceived by teachers as less motivated. Aware that the most a pupil can attain is a grade C in a foundation tier examination, teachers have also been found to teach pupils to pass the exam (Popham, 2001). Teachers have also been discovered to teach in a way that will almost guarantee pupils will attain grade C without necessarily supporting them to attain higher (Gillborn, 2010). In addition to the low set space being shaped by the academic level of the exam paper, the limited method by which pupils are taught is also likely to hamper their progress (Gillborn, 2010). Regardless of pupils' potential, evidence suggests that selective grouping practices can lead to differential expectations amongst teachers (Gamoran and Berends, 1987; Boaler et al., 2000) including teachers teaching 'to the test' (Thrupp and Hursh, 2000, p.647).

The effects of selective grouping on teachers' practices

Previous research on the effects of selective grouping practices on pupils identified as 'underachieving' suggests that the space being occupied is low-status. Previous research by Boaler (1997) suggests that in the teaching of Maths lessons whereby pupils are set, teachers assume that pupils' approaches towards learning are similar. Muijs and Reynolds (2005) draw attention to the possible harm to pupils' self-concept when taught in a low set where teachers are less likely to have such high expectations. Previous findings suggest some teachers believe that pupils in lower sets are more likely to have more negative attitudes towards school, are thought to be more difficult to motivate and are more likely to radiate disruptive behaviour (Finley, 1984; Reay et al., 2010). Hallam and Ireson (2003) suggest that finding it more difficult to engage pupils in low sets is likely to undermine teachers' own sense of efficacy. They suggest that those teachers' attitudes may contribute to pupils' feelings of alienation. Pupils are therefore created as successes or failures depending on the set in which they are placed (Boaler et al., 2000). This raises the question about whether the process of setting causes pupils to feel alienated or whether teachers' attitudes towards pupils in low sets causes feelings of alienation amongst pupils. Pupils occupying high sets are more likely to be viewed by teachers as hard working whilst those in low 'bands' are liable to be regarded as lacking 'ability' (Ball, 1981, p.47). Research by Hallam and Ireson (2006) revealed that the labelling and stigmatisation of those perceived to be low-achieving are likely to result in pupils in low sets expressing negative attitudes towards school.

Previous research indicates that teachers have been discovered to change their practices when teaching pupils in low sets. Boaler (1997, p.593) found that the pace of lessons in low sets is suited 'to an imaginary average pupil'. In addition, teachers have been discovered to find the system of selective grouping helpful in streamlining the content of lessons to support pupils in achieving the success criteria (Cahan et al., 1996). Pupils who occupy low sets have also been found to be given routine practice exercises to complete suggesting that the kinds of tasks set lack meaning with the absence of an appropriate

level of challenge (Hansell and Karweit, 1983). Previous research by Ireson and Hallam (2002) revealed that the pace of lessons in lower sets is often too slow with pupils expressing that work set is too easy. Teachers have been shown to interact more positively with pupils positioned in high sets (Gamoran and Berends, 1987). It has also been suggested that teachers' behaviour towards pupils is also likely to be shaped by pupils' encouraging behaviour rather than their academic performance (Ball, 1981; Finley, 1984; Hargreaves 1967; Lacey, 1970). Teachers have been found to compromise the quality of instruction when working with pupils in low sets to meet differentiated standards thereby offering pupils a narrowed curriculum (Harris, 2012).

Pupils occupying low sets have been found to describe teachers' practices as lacking in group work, with more book work offering limited variety, less involvement in the lesson and less thinking time (Boaler et al., 2000). Teachers who express interest by listening to pupils, taking the time to explain concepts, and helping them to understand have been found to be valued by pupils (Ireson and Hallam, 2005). Low 'achievers' have been found to appreciate interactions with teachers during which they are made to feel valued, and where teachers provide sufficient time in the lesson to explain demanding concepts (Ireson and Hallam, 2005). Boys have also been found to perceive that girls receive more praise than them (Jones and Myhill, 2004). Pupils in high sets have been discovered to feel more valued by their teachers (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

Summary

Access to academic learning for disadvantaged boys is limited because they are predominantly positioned in low sets. Although a curriculum binary exists, previous literature indicates that there is much value to be gained from learning vocational subjects alongside those that are traditionally academic. There is also a gender dynamic in play with some curriculum subjects being viewed, whether consciously or unconsciously, as masculine/feminine, and as more/less suited to learning by boys. Some teachers' practices are affected by these kinds of essentialist understandings, which is also likely to

affect the learning experiences of boys, particularly those identified by the GCSE performance measure as 'underachieving'.

Selective grouping has been found to affect the attainment of boys, particularly those identified as 'underachieving'. Some teachers have been discovered to adjust their teaching practice based on essentialist assumptions about the kinds of learners they believe boys to be and secondly, with the belief that boys' 'ability' is somehow predetermined. Pupils in low sets have also been found to believe that some teachers have low expectations. This has been found to affect their views towards their learning as well as shaping their learning opportunities.

3.3 An approach to re-conceptualising boys' 'underachievement' at Stone Acre School

In this final section of the chapter, I outline my conceptual approach to boys' 'underachievement'. It rests upon the understanding that boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning within a regulatory system formed by a number of interacting layers. These include performance pressures, the school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping practices and teachers' understandings of gender which, overlapping and interacting, construct boys' 'underachievement'. Stone Acre's school ethos is also important and this is affected by the school's context including the school type.

The literature reviewed in section one demonstrates that there are multiple interpretations of gender in relation to what it means to be a 'boy' and that an essentialist understanding is just one perspective. Importantly, attitudes and behaviours towards boys are likely to be shaped by whether gender is perceived as rooted in essentialist explanations or rather understood as socially constructed. The review of the literature indicates that teachers can play a key role in the construction of 'underachievement' by bringing a range of masculinities and femininities to the classroom. In addition, whether

knowingly or unconsciously, their understandings of how boys learn can be based on essentialist understandings of gender, for example, in relation to assumptions about boys' learning styles and perceptions of their behaviour. Therefore teachers' practices and their interactions with boys constitute a layer that serves to shape how boys experience their learning. The following diagram (Fig.1) illustrates the different interacting layers through which gender is simultaneously in play:

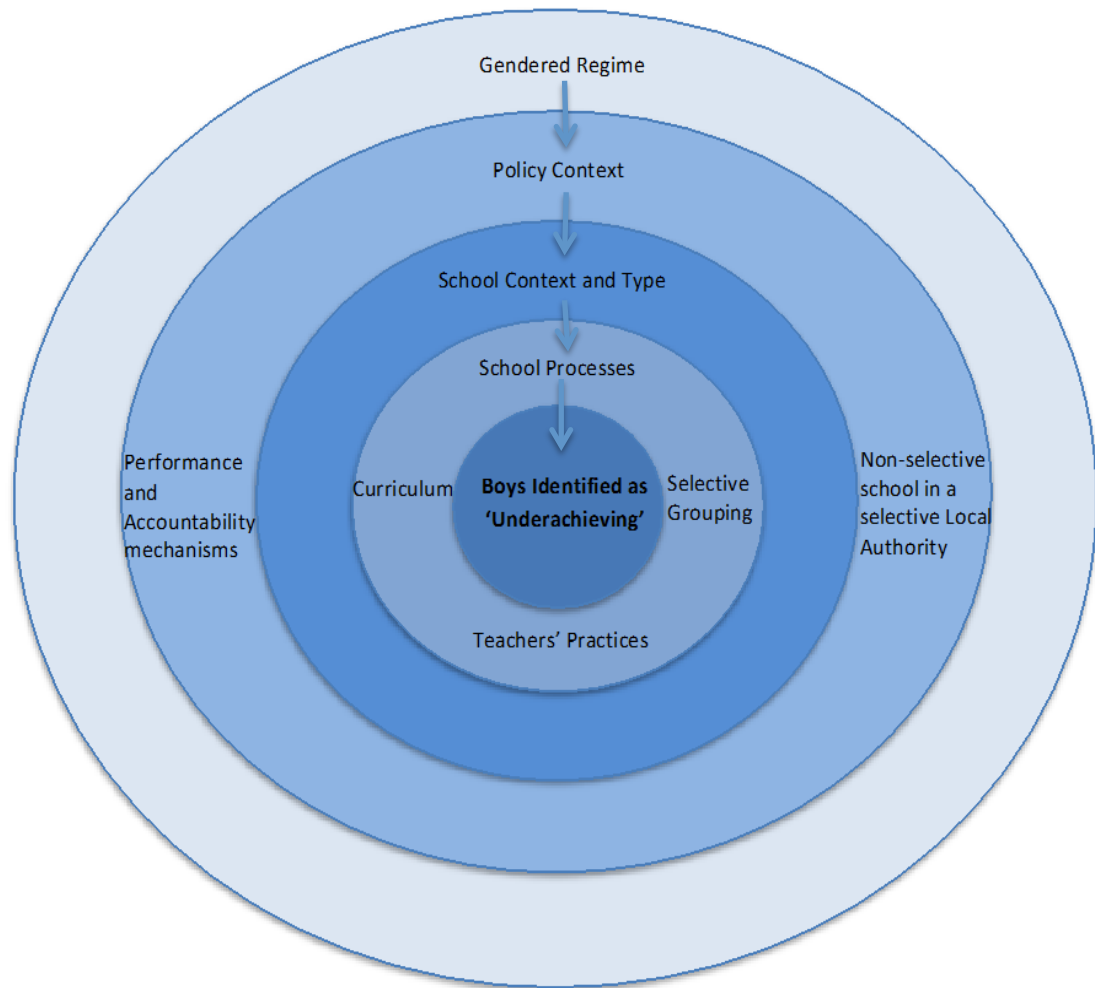


Fig. 1. The contexts and processes contributing to the construction of boys' 'underachievement'

The school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping form a further layer, which interacting with teachers' practices construct the space occupied by the boys. Previous literature suggests that boys identified as 'underachieving' are more likely to find

themselves situated in a space that does not necessarily provide the most beneficial opportunities for their development as learners. The vocational space and the low sets both have negative connotations and both are low-status. Both spaces are where subjects accepted as masculine and require a practical approach are assumed to favour the learning needs of boys. The notion of what it means to be 'boy' interacts with the space occupied by boys identified as 'underachieving' through both processes, particularly in the subjects English and Maths illustrated, for example, by the different examination tiers. In addition, boys occupying low sets may be subject to some teachers' essentialist assumptions about 'ability' as fixed and have low expectations for their learning. Their 'reflexive practices' are therefore likely to construct the social structures of which they are a part (Connell, 2002, p.81).

A further layer indicated by the literature, which contributes to the construction of 'underachievement' is the context in which disadvantaged boys experience their learning. An essentialist view of intelligence on which the 11+ test rests has historically operated against disadvantaged children by deselecting them to attend non-selective low-status schools. Therefore the type of pupils who attend schools like Stone Acre is quite specific. Under pressure to improve the attainment of a number of boys identified as 'underachieving', who are absent from grammar schools, is likely to affect the way in which teachers' understand them as learners. Given that school type and context have also been previously found to affect the ethos of schools like Stone Acre, which operate in disadvantaged circumstances, is also likely to affect teachers' classroom practices with boys identified as 'underachieving'.

The GCSE performance measure which has a number of gendered effects is a further layer in the construction of boys' 'underachievement'. Given the surveillance regime, teachers at Stone Acre School are likely to find themselves under pressure when teaching boys identified as 'underachieving'. This is exacerbated by the fact that the school was previously identified by Ofsted as 'failing'. Rather than focussing solely on the boys for

explanations of their 'underachievement', by exploring these factors, this study aims to offer an alternative reading. This has led to the development of the following research questions:

1. How are the learning spaces occupied by Year 10 boys identified as 'underachievers' at Stone Acre School shaped by the focus in policy on the GCSE five A* to C benchmark measure of achievement?
2. How are the learning spaces occupied by Year 10 boys identified as 'underachievers' at Stone Acre School shaped by the school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping practices and teachers' understandings of gender?
3. What do contextualised understandings of these interactions suggest about the constructions of boys' educational 'underachievement'?

Chapter Four

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the methodology including the methods employed for the study in order to explore boys' 'underachievement'. The research took the form of a case study with elements of an ethnographic approach. The case study method, discussed in more detail later in the chapter, assisted me in reporting on some of the ways in which boys from Year 10 at Stone Acre School experienced their learning. It was conducted in the secondary school where I was working from September 2012 over a period of two terms. A small number of participants were identified from Year 10 all working at grade E level in English and/or Maths at GCSE. Assuming a social constructionist, critical approach and drawing on data, which includes school level data, interviews with the boys and the teachers and lesson observations, I was able to develop inductively derived analytical interpretations of the data whilst also establishing theoretically informed interpretations (Glaser, 1978). The aim of a critical approach is to question existing structures and bring those less visible to the surface (Cohen et al., 2007). Given that my motivation for conducting the study was to improve the situation within which boys identified as 'underachieving' find themselves, the need to remain reflexive was paramount. I needed to try to make the relationship between my position and my findings evident. This chapter is organised into the following sections: 4.1 Methodological/theoretical approach; 4.2 Case Study; 4.3 Researcher identity; 4.4 Identification of the participants; 4.5. Research Design; 4.6 Discussion of Research Methods; 4.7 Limitations of the research design; 4.8 Ethical considerations; 4.9 Data analysis. I begin by outlining my methodological approach and its theoretical underpinnings.

4.1 Methodological/theoretical approach

Habermas (1972, p211) suggests that research knowledge serves three different types of interest, 'technical', 'practical' and 'emancipatory'. The first characterises the scientific, positivist method:

Positivism strives for objectivity, measurability, predictability, controllability, patterning, the construction of laws and rules of behaviour, and the ascription of causality (Cohen et al., 2007, p.28).

From this viewpoint, human behaviour is predictable and is largely based on quantitative data gathered by way of strict procedures (Robson, 2002, p.21). By this methodological approach, objective knowledge can be gained from observation. In contrast, in the 'practical' paradigm meaning and interpretation are exemplified. The researcher's aim is to understand peoples' 'utterances and conditions' (Habermas 1974, p.8). My purpose in conducting the study was neither to attempt to measure phenomena relating to boys and 'underachievement' nor try to make predictions, but rather to problematise it by examining how gender is produced.

As both the 'technical' and 'practical' interests underplay the political and ideological contexts, the positivist and exclusively interpretive paradigms provide incomplete accounts of social behaviour. In contrast, the intention of the third 'emancipatory' interest is constitutive of a critical theoretical research approach:

Its intention is not merely to give an account of society and behavior but to realize a society that is based on equality and democracy for all its members. Its purpose is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them. (Cohen et al., 2007 p.26).

For me as a teacher researcher, I am concerned about the unequal opportunities offered to boys identified as 'underachieving', some of whom are socially disadvantaged, who are positioned by a system which has gendered outcomes that affect how they experience

their learning. With the aim of promoting equality and democracy, a critical approach seeks to question existing situations by bringing less visible readings of structures to the surface with the intention of transforming them (Cohen et al., 2007). Complex readings of gender have assisted me with understanding how different, less visible structures interact to produce boys' 'underachievement'. In reframing boys' 'underachievement' and not considering the boys' situation in isolation, a critical social constructionist approach has enabled me to open up other readings of this, including those that show its socio-cultural location and the power interests at work.

My decision to conduct the study came about largely because of my interest in how power operates in structures through education policy with the aim of improving understandings and practices in respect to boys identified as 'underachieving'. I, therefore, acknowledge that my research is politically motivated in addition to being values driven. However, Foster (1996, p.340) assert that in any research the researcher should aim for a 'value neutrality' asserting that politically motivated research is subject to the researcher's values, which could influence the findings. Guba (1990, cited in Carspecken, 1996, P.6) also suggests that the values of the researcher can influence the facts found in the field and advocates that 'good critical research should not be biased'. However, Gewirtz and Cribb (2009, p.152) argue that researchers have a responsibility to consider how their research relates to 'the ethical and political context in which it is located'. They emphasise the importance of the researcher remaining sensitive to the values they hold, recognising their implications for the research rather than attempting to remove them completely. As I am arguing that gendered school structures and processes are having an unequal impact on the learning experiences of boys identified as 'underachieving', this study is inherently political. I have therefore constantly examined the ways in which my values have influenced the research process. I have also attempted to present my findings in as transparent a manner as possible.

In theorising gender, I have drawn on the work of Connell (2002; 2005; 2012) who rather than understanding gender as biological and therefore essentially fixed, recognises the

importance of structural factors in its production. Rejecting an essentialist view of gender, I, therefore, recognise that being a 'boy' is not based on inherent characteristics but rather understand that boys' masculinities are produced in interaction with a number of different contexts. Connell (2012) understands the social structures as shaping bodies and bodies as active in the social processes. Gender is, therefore, being produced within schooling through the school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping, which interact and affect teachers' practices. Teachers also have assumed ideas of gender, whether consciously or not and these also impact on the learning experienced by the boys.

An important part of the process of the construction of boys' 'underachievement' is the policy context. Drawing on the work of Foucault has helped me to examine discursive forms of power. According to Foucault (1977, p.49) power is exercised through policy discourse producing 'truth' and 'knowledge' about 'the objects of which they speak'. Supplementing Connell's (2002; 2005; 2012) concerns with material conditions, Foucault (1972) argues that rather than discourse referring to language, which is spoken or talked through texts, discourse rather discursively constitutes the subject. Foucault understands discourse as constructing knowledge and reproducing it. 'Discourse itself as a practice' (Foucault, 1972, p.46) linked to power, decrees some things as important while concealing other things. Boys' 'underachievement' is located within policy and practice whereby pupils' performance at GCSE is measured by whether they attain 5A* to C grades including English and Maths. Historically, the education system in England was based on an essentialist model of education in which a young person's aptitude towards receiving an academic learning experience was judged on the basis of whether they passed the 11+ test. The grammar school is a context, which rests upon essentialist notions of 'ability'. The outcome that pupils produce when they sit this test, which is, as previously explained, based on fixed notions of intelligence directs them to a particular kind of school. Teachers' practice in relation to boys identified as 'underachieving' also cannot be considered in isolation from the policy framework. The GCSE performance measure in policy emerges

from the discourse as a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1972, p.47) and can be recognised through the way in which teachers are responding to the school system and processes. Teachers teaching to the test, for example, runs counter to what might be considered as good learning practices, including targeting pupils attaining below the performance threshold. Although pressures on teachers to improve pupils' attainment puts constraints upon them, it is arguable that they are not merely passive recipients of policy but also have agency to explore different possibilities in their approach to teaching and learning. Pointing to Foucault (1981), Ball (1993, p.11) asserts that 'policy texts **enter** rather than simply change power relations' and rather than researchers attempting an analysis of policy based on 'constraint or agency' of actors, an understanding of 'the changing relationships between constraint **and** agency is required which takes account of the contexts in which meanings are made'. Ball (1993, p.12) suggests that power can operate productively whereby teachers engage in 'creative social action not robotic reactivity' within the limits of their accountability and the context within which they are located. Drawing on Ball (1993), my theorisation of policy in relation to this study, therefore, draws on aspects of a Foucauldian post-structuralist approach.

4.2 Case Study

In conducting this study I wished to adopt a research strategy, which allowed me to study the phenomenon of boys' 'underachievement' by examining the ways in which Year 10 boys experienced their learning while in school. Yin (2004) states that in choosing the case study method, the process includes defining the ideas to be studied, which can include an actual concern, which in this particular 'case' is boys' 'underachievement'. According to Robson (2002, p.178), case studies involve 'looking at a case or phenomenon in its real-life context usually employing many types of data'. The six boys and eleven teaching staff were located within Stone Acre, a non-selective school within a selective school system. This case, which draws on predominantly qualitative data, explores a number of overlapping and interacting layers including policy, the school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping practices and teachers' understandings of gender to enhance our

understanding of the phenomenon of boys' 'underachievement' within the context of Stone Acre School.

Nisbet and Entwistle (1970) raise concerns about the difficulty posed by the case study method in being able to generalise findings from a small sample to a wider context, arguing that it is impossible to ensure that a small sample is representative in all aspects. However, as Walker (1974, p.189) emphasises, the strength of the case study is that the detail of 'an instance in action' can be captured and the element of a situation that gives it meaning, represented. I was able to capture some of the minutiae of the ways in which Year 10 boys, in one school, experienced their learning to gain a more in-depth understanding of the factors which contribute towards the construction of boys' 'underachievement' which might not otherwise have been visible in a study conducted on a larger scale (Nisbet and Watt, 1984).

The case study method enabled me to collect data from a range of sources. These included interviews, which involved the use of photographs, lesson observations and school level data. The six boys were interviewed twice and I observed them in lessons. I interviewed the teachers of the boys and other members of the teaching staff to explore how they each understood the ways in which the boys experienced their learning. By gathering data from more than a single source I was able to gain a better understanding of the situation within which the boys found themselves. Because I wished to avoid the data being reliant upon the declarations of the boys or a single classroom teacher, I aimed for 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973, p.21). By drawing on a number of rich sources of data the complexities surrounding the case of 'boys' 'underachievement' emerged. In commenting on the case study, Cohen et al., (2007, p.289) state that this 'single instance' is formed by when and where it occurs. The teachers at Stone Acre School were both subjects and agents of education policies, the discourse of which shaped the school processes in which boys identified as 'underachieving' experienced their learning at a particular time within a specific context:

An individual emerges through the process of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate (Davies and Harré, 1990, p.46).

Foucault (1972) asserts that not only do subjects shift positions but what each location or position might mean shifts over space and time and contexts. This understanding is fundamental to the fluidity and multiplicity of subjectivities that is central to thinking about the 'changing relationships between 'constraint and agency' ' (Ball, 1993, p12-13). It is through policy discourse that meanings are made, and practices of struggle and productivity occur. By developing a sympathetic position towards teachers positioned within a surveillance culture of accountability, I was able to explore some of the complexities of teachers' coercion, at a particular historical instant, within the foci of the construction of gendered effects on the learning experiences of the Year 10 boys which is a context which is certainly not intended to be representative.

4.3 Researcher identity

My researcher identity is not straightforward. The way in which I see myself and how others view me may be different. Primarily, I come from an affluent background. I did, however, support myself financially from a relatively young age. Although, born into a middle-class family, since leaving home I have always viewed myself as working-class. Whilst my two children were young I studied part-time in order to go to university with the aim of becoming a teacher. However, in terms of my profession, the pupils and/ or teachers may have viewed me as middle-class. Brooks et al., (2014) state that:

A critical analysis of the identity of, and the positionalities and power relations between the researcher and the researched, is part of the process of being ethical and being reflexive (Brooks et al., p.100).

Dunne et al., (2005. P.32) state that 'social relations are about power relations in the research'. I understand that there were issues of power in terms of my role as a teacher

researcher and that in terms of my relations with the participants these power relations were shifting and changing.

I followed the advice of Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) and continuously reflected upon my identity as a teacher researcher. For example, during lesson observations some teachers may have felt that I was in some way inspecting their practices whilst observing their interactions with the boys. Dunne, et al., (2005) declare that the exchange between the interviewer and interviewee during an interview is also likely to be affected by the social identity of those involved, making their positioning integral to the research. By having the same occupation as the staff participants, I recognised that whilst interviewing them, to some degree, I was attempting to understand how the boys learned through a 'shared lens' (Drake, 2010, p. 87). To some extent this calmed my unease with being the person who ultimately controlled the interview although I was still a relatively new staff member. Although the teacher participants had power in deciding how they responded to each of my questions, as the teacher researcher, I had the ultimate power to decide when to begin and end the interview and which data I was going to use (Brooks et al., 2014). I recognise that when interviewing more senior members of the staff they appeared keen to speak, but I was aware that like the other participant teachers, power rested with them in that they chose what they wished to say in response to my questions. Issues of power are therefore complex and clearly the senior teachers held more professional power than the teachers holding a similar professional status to me.

I also recognise the significance of power in terms of my role as a teacher in the school and understand that this will have influenced the boys' perceptions of the study, their decisions to take part and the responses they gave to my questions during interview. I held less power when observing the boys in lessons than when interviewing them because, I mainly positioned myself at the back of the room. Because I was a teacher and much older than the pupil participants this might have influenced how much or how little of Year 10 boys' learning experience they wished to share with me. In terms of my gender,

I was a woman investigating boys' 'underachievement'. I therefore recognise that I did not share the boys' gendered experiences directly.

When interviewing participants I aimed to create an environment in which they felt they were able to talk freely thereby offering me a full range of responses (Davies and Hughes, 2014). Some things were said by some teacher participants that I did not wish to hear such as boys being viewed as largely unmotivated compared to girls or boys being seen as not being particularly interested in learning. These kinds of remarks suggested that the teachers felt they were able to respond to questions quite freely. Although I did not teach any of the boys being interviewed I was mindful that given I was a teacher and therefore in a position of authority, they may, in part, have told me what they believed I wanted to hear in order to please me and/or might have, at times, been speaking reticently.

Because I was a teacher within the school, I was able to understand some of the pressures on teachers and the boys to attain. According to Merriam (1988, p.23), concern with the cultural context is a distinguishable feature of an ethnographic study. For this type of study, the ethnographer becomes immersed in the particular culture of the group being studied to enable a detailed description to emerge (Robson, 2002). Thomas (2009) explains that the researcher is central to the research process and should use his/her knowledge of the social structures and systems to be able to present detailed understandings of the particular case to the reader. Thomas (2009, p.118) explains,

Ethnographers study a situation from within. They try to become part of the Situation they are studying, to understand it like the other players.

The study had ethnographic elements in that I was a teacher in the school and therefore part of the same community as the Year 10 boys. I was, therefore, knowledgeable about the systems within which they experienced their learning. I was able to better understand their situation and recognise some of the pressures experienced by teachers of working within a performance culture.

Dunne et al., (2005, p.61) state that minimising 'bias' during the process does not determine the quality of the research and that by cross-examining the relationship between the researcher and the research rather enables any issues viewed as problematic to be identified in the final report. When I approached the interviews with the boys, although I was a teacher/researcher, I retained the teacher/pupil relationship with which they were familiar when seeing me during the school day. I did, however, wish to reduce the extent of which I was a figure of authority. I kept my arms at the side of me so that my gestures remained open and convivial. Open-ended questions that allowed for the boys' responses to be wide-ranging seemed also seemed to assist with them appearing at ease. The purpose was to create an ambiance in which they felt comfortable to tell me about some of the issues relating to teaching and learning, which may have been important to them and to the research. I am unsure about the extent to which I was successful in creating a setting, which allowed the boys to express their views freely.

Being a fairly new member of staff in the school helped me to maintain a degree of formality when interviewing the teachers. Recognising that my own identity was constantly being produced throughout the research process, Throughout the interviews with staff, at the end of each of their comments, I added remarks such as 'that's interesting' and 'your comment provides a clear summary', to avoid guiding their responses. I ensured that I remained polite and thanked each of them for offering me their time to be interviewed. In endeavouring to remain reflexive and also following the guidance of Gewirtz and Cribb (2009), who emphasise the importance of the researcher's political tendencies and ethical principles being integrated into the research account, I have aimed to offer a full account of my personal involvement in the research.

4.4 Identification of the participants

1. Pupils

To begin, a group of six boys was selected for the purpose of this study. According to Silverman (2011, p.388), 'purposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are interested in and choose our sample case carefully on this basis'. The boys were selected on the basis that at the time of data collection they were identified within the school as among those working at GCSE grade E level in English and/or Maths. The boys were, therefore 'underachieving' by this key performance measure.

Only thirty boys fitted the profile that I was looking for to form the sample. Of this number, the head of English requested that I not consider three of them. Although the school supported the research, the head teacher also made clear that disruption to pupils' learning needed to be kept to a minimum. Logistically, it was necessary for me to fit the research around what was ordinarily taking place in the school. I was teaching pupils during the school day and was responsible for their progress. In the main, data gathering therefore needed to take place in my free time and when teachers gave their permission for the boys to be taken out of their lessons. I also had to physically collect the boys from their lessons and return them to class once the interviews had finished. Where possible, the boys were picked to come from the same lesson. For example, for Maths, I was able to observe all six boys in one go. It was therefore more feasible to select a small number of boys to work with in pairs rather than trying to conduct focus groups in order to include larger numbers. Although having access to more boys might have strengthened the study, the school's curriculum manager had also informed me that removing large numbers of pupils from class would cause more disruption to lessons than removing just one or two. A major priority was therefore to minimise disruption to the learning of pupils. Because it was also necessary to avoid interrupting the learning of pupils in my lessons, I was unable to include pupils from subjects that were being taught at the same time that I was teaching. This led to a decision to work with six boys only and to interview them in pairs.

The names of all the Year 10 boys who fell into this category except those whom the head of English had requested not to be included were put into a hat and the first six names drawn formed the sample for the study. A further four names were drawn and formed a reserve list in case any of the participants chose not to take part.¹⁶ Although one parent expressed keenness for her son to participate, after consideration, the participant decided to withdraw and was replaced by Sam. The Head teacher gave her consent for this method to be taken to select the boys. With her permission, the boys were approached during their tutor time when they were invited to come to the English department office where each was given an information sheet (see Appendix 1), the contents of which were clearly explained to them. The boys were then each given a letter to give to their parents, which included a consent form (see Appendix 2). The following table (Table 13.) shows the name of each pupil participant and presents their attainment grade and target grade for English and Maths (allocated by their teacher), the vocational subjects they followed and includes whether they were receiving free school meals when the data were gathered:

¹⁶ The names forming the reserve list were Mark, Ben, Sam and Nathan

Participant Number and Name	Grade for English	Target Grade English	Grade for Maths	Target Grade Maths	Vocational/ Applied Subjects	Eligible for Free school Meals
Sam	E	C	E	C	Sport DIDA* Art	No
Gareth	F	D	E	C	Sport Graphic Design ICT	No
Paul	D	C	E	C	P.E DIDA D&T	Yes
Joshua	E	D	E	C	P.E DIDA D&T	Yes
Robert	E	D	D	C	Sport DIDA Art	No
Tom	E	C	E	C	Sport ICT Art	Yes

* DIDA (Diploma in Digital Applications)

Table 13: Pupil participants' current and target grades, details of the vocational subjects studied and the boys' disadvantaged status

The boys' target grades were calculated by the school based on their prior attainment whilst in their final year at primary school (Year 6) and represent the grades expected to be attained at the end of Year 11 (age 16) when the boys completed their GCSE examinations. When the data were gathered, each of the six boys was working at GCSE grade E level in English and/or Maths. All six boys were white British. Three out of the six boys were identified by the school as eligible for free school meals. Because they were from families with low incomes (at any point in the previous six years) they therefore fall into the category 'disadvantaged' (DFE, 2012a). This is unsurprising as I was interested in the space below the GCSE performance threshold and the low sets are where a greater proportion of disadvantaged boys are located.

2. Staff

The study included eleven staff members in total. Each teacher participant was given a letter inviting him/her to take part in the study. Because I wished to conduct observations of the Year 10 boys in lessons to explore how they were experiencing their learning, a number of teacher participants were also selected on the basis that each taught at least one of the boys in the study. The head of Maths taught all six boys. As I also wished to observe all six pupil participants in English lessons, it was necessary to include three further teachers of English in the study. I also wished to observe the boys in subjects other than English and Maths and as the boys followed different subjects, a teacher of GCSE P.E and BTEC Sport, a teacher of GCSE ICT who also taught DIDA (Diploma in Digital Applications) and a teacher of GCSE Art and D&T were also included. A form tutor, a head of House and a senior teacher who was also in charge of teaching and learning within the school were also interviewed in order to gain the perspectives of staff members who did not teach the boys in lessons but with whom the boys had contact.

4.5 Research Design

The research study was developed from my understanding of boys' 'underachievement' as socially constructed. Silverman (2011) advises that designing the research requires careful thought and that methods should not be chosen simply because they appeal. The choices I made about methods were based on how they would assist me in better understanding the ways in which the Year 10 boys experienced their learning and reflect my values and concerns as a researcher. The following figure (Fig.2) shows the five stages of the research process:

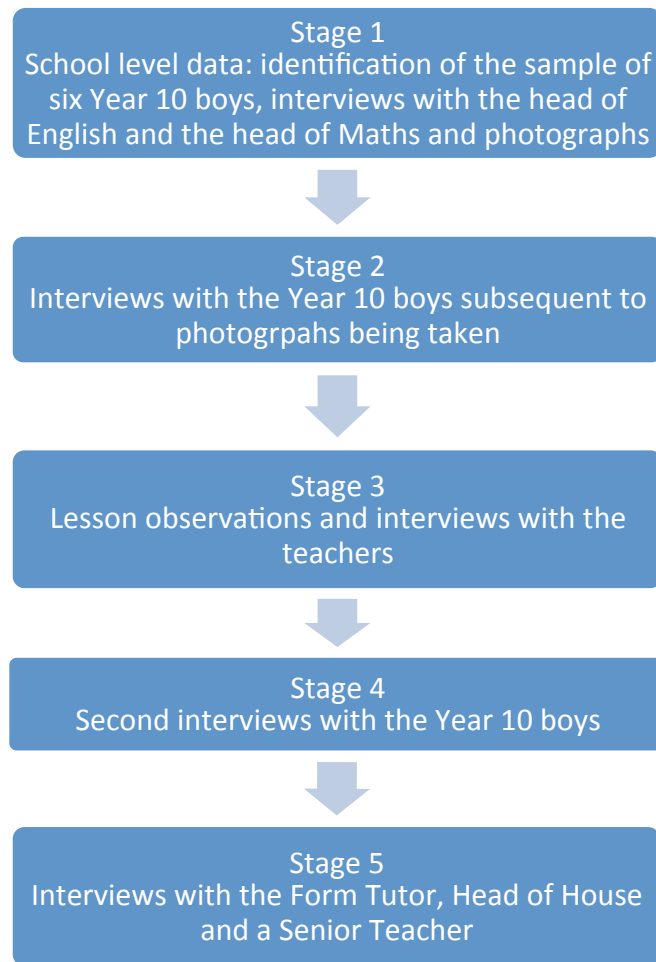


Fig. 2. Five stages of the research process

Stage one

Referring to school level data, the Year 10 boys working at GCSE grade E in English and/or Maths were identified. The head of Maths and the head of English assisted me with identifying the classes that consisted of boys most suitable to invite to participate in the study. They were also interviewed to find out their perspectives on Year 10 boys as learners. The six pupil participants were divided into pairs. Each pair was given a disposable camera and asked to take photographs within the confines of the school which best represented Year 10 boys' experience as learners.

Stage two

Because I wished to gain the perspectives on Year 10 boys as learners, for stage two, the boys were interviewed in pairs. Photographs taken by them were used as a stimulus for discussion of how they best represented Year 10 boys as learners.

Stage three

For stage three, by observing the boys during lessons and subsequently interviewing the teacher of each lesson, I was able to gain their viewpoints on how the Year 10 boys were experiencing their learning.

Stage four

For stage four the six boys were interviewed, in pairs, for the second time when they were asked more specifically about their learning during lessons.

Stage five

I wished to understand how the learning of Year 10 boys was recognised from the perspectives of the form tutor, the head of House and the senior teacher. Two of the six boys, Sam and Robert were members of the form tutor's group. He was selected because I wished to appreciate how Year 10 boys were recognised as learners when not in lessons. The head of House supported the six boys both pastorally and academically. I considered that both she and the senior teacher would provide a broader picture of the boys as learners within the community.

4.6 Discussion of Research Methods

Thomas (2009) explains that the data collected as part of a case study can be by a number of different methods, which combine to complete the story being presented. In this section I discuss the methods used to gather both qualitative and quantitative data under the following three headings:

- School level data
- Interviews
- Observations

The following table (Table 14.) shows the three sources from which data were drawn and points to the participants involved for each method:

Data sources	Participant and subject details
School level data	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of boys working at GCSE grade E level in English and/or maths and their GCSE target grades 2. Identification of additional subjects chosen by the boys to study at GCSE level 3. The boys' attainment according to government benchmarks subsequent to their GCSE examinations in 2013
Interviews: 17	6 boys 11 teachers
Lesson Observations: 7	3 English 1 Maths 1 BTEC Sport 1 DIDA 1 Art

Table 14: Summary of the data sources

School level data

Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Cohen et al., 2007, p.182) recommend documents and records as a source of data. I chose to use school level data to help me identify the boys in Year 10 who were working at GCSE grade E level in English and/or Maths. This data also enabled me to find out the gender composition of the groups occupied by the boys and which subjects other than English and Maths they were studying which helped me organise which lessons I could observe. Although the school level data represented a record of the boys as 'underachieving' and therefore assisted me in selecting my sample of pupil participants, given how pupils' attainment is measured against a very narrow set of indicators 5A* to C, GCSE grades including English and Maths, I did not accept that the school level data essentially reflected the boys' potential rather understanding this as constantly in production.

Semi-structured interviews

Regarding the interview as a research tool for the collection of data Cohen et al.,(2007, p.349) remark:

Interviews enable participants - be they interviewers or interviewees - to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view. In these senses the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable.

Meaning is therefore generated through an interactive process, which takes place through 'an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest' (Kvale, 1996, p14). Suggesting the importance of interviews, Dunne et al., (2005, P.114), remark:

The views and interpretations of certain social actors are important to your research questions. Their knowledge about the specified social context, their accounts of that social arena are significant in your research.

I chose interviews as a research tool to explore how the boys viewed their experiences of learning while in school and the ways in which teachers' practices influenced their learning. I chose the method of semi-structured interviews wishing to avoid a highly structured format for interviewing because as Robson (2002, p.279) advocates, 'less structured approaches allow the person interviewed much more flexibility of response'. Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity for open questions to be posed to enable unplanned questions to follow depending on what the interviewee had said. For example, one of the questions posed to the pupil participants was, 'when do you think Year 10 boys enjoy lessons most?' Robert's comment that by being able to discuss ideas in lessons helped him understand, prompted me to ask whether it was routine for Year 10 boys to be given the opportunity to discuss ideas during lessons. A more structured approach with predetermined questions may not have necessarily allowed for such a range of responses, rather directing their outcome. I wished to avoid predetermining the participants' answers.

A total of seventeen interviews were conducted which included two with each pair of boys and eleven individual one-off interviews with the staff participants. Each interview lasted no longer than thirty minutes and the permission of the participants was sought before commencing each one. With their permission, I chose to record the interviews because I wished to make as accurate a record as possible. I also made notes during and after each interview. Interviewing is a method generally favoured by qualitative approaches to undertaking research, however, Houtkoop-Seenstra (2000, cited in Robson, 2002, p.279) suggests:

Interview results can only be understood as the products of the contingencies of the interview situation, and not as is usually assumed the unmediated expressions of the respondents' real opinions.

Recognising that the situation of an interview was artificial I accepted that the responses given by all the participants might not have entirely reflected their views or the situation

within which they found themselves. However, the interview process allowed me some access to some of the ways in which Year 10 boys experienced their learning. I also recognised that the replies given to the questions by the teachers may have been influenced by the extent to which they wished to offer me a pleasing response given their support in wishing to take part in the study.

I experienced interviewing the teachers and the boys differently. For example, when interviewing the head of English I felt nervous. Being a relatively new teacher at the school I contemplated whether she may have been making judgements about what she believed to be my outlook on teaching and learning, for example, on the practice of selective grouping. I, therefore, remained aware of my values and position when responding to her. However, being a teacher in a position of authority and it being routine for the boys to be asked about their learning experiences, while in school, I felt more comfortable with interviewing the pupil participants.

Interviews with the boys including photographs

The method of interviewing the pupil participants included the use of photographs. As a research tool still images have been advocated for exploring participants' representations of their environment without suggesting response categories (Wilson et al., 2007). Silverman (2013) suggests that the use of visual methods for data collection increases the opportunity for participants to be able to respond openly. The images used at the beginning of the paired interviews appeared to encourage dialogue and shaped my discussion of the findings. I had employed a similar method in a previous study conducted in the first year of the Doctorate programme, which aimed to explore the motives behind a number of boys appearing to avoid schoolwork even though they were identified as attaining by the GCSE performance benchmark. For that study, the boys were told they could take their photographs before and after school because I was keen to explore how their experiences outside of school might have impacted on their learning in school. Subsequent to handing each pair of boys a disposable camera for this study, I specified to

them that the photographs should be taken during the school day because I wished the images to represent Year 10 boys as learners. The guidelines, however, were broad within the school. The Head teacher and teachers gave their permission for the photographs to be taken during lessons. Each camera allowed for twenty-four photographs to be taken. The boys were given three days to complete the task. Given that Stone Acre School's ethos encouraged practical activities amongst peers, may have explained, partly, why the boys appeared comfortable with this kind of approach. All six boys expressed that they had found the visual images to be a good stimulus for helping them express their views about their schooling and given that talking about photographs is a commonplace activity, they were a useful tool for setting the boys at ease.

Once the photographs had been developed, the first semi-structured interviews with the pupil participants were conducted. The boys were interviewed in the same pairings as when they took the photographs (see Appendix 3). They were given the first ten minutes of the interview time to select up to six photographs which they thought best represented a typical Year 10 boy's school day and explain why they had selected each of them. Discussion of the images shaped my interviews dictating their content, to some extent. They provided a picture of Year 10 boys within their learning environment and helped me to recognise how the different spaces in school shaped the boys' learning experience. Examples of the kinds of images taken by the pupil participants included pupils chatting in the main hall during breakfast club, pupils playing together on the school field during lesson breaks, and photographs of artwork within the school grounds and outside classrooms. As part of the first interview, the boys were then asked a number of general questions about the way in which Year 10 boys experienced learning while in school (see Appendix 4.). Guided by Arksey and Knight (1999), I devised my questions in a way, which aimed to avoid complex vocabulary, and language, which may have been prejudicial. I also aimed to avoid being ambiguous or speculative. The questions were open and were not in any way personal to the boys. The aim was to avoid giving any sense of 'underachievement' or attaching any kind of stigma at any point during the study. The

emphasis of the questions being on Year 10 boys as a whole group helped to ensure that the boys were able to speak on behalf of the group rather than feeling pressured to talk about themselves.

A second round of semi-structured interviews was conducted with the boys once the lesson observations had been completed. They were asked a number of questions which related more specifically to lessons and to some of the general ways in which Year 10 boys engaged in teaching and learning in different subjects (see Appendix 5). During this second round, data from the lessons observed were discussed together with the findings from previous interviews in order to get the boys' perspectives on the learning of Year 10 boys.

The pupils at Stone Acre were familiar with participating in one-to-one interviews with teachers, which focus on matters concerning their schooling. I did, however, need to ensure that I took particular care when structuring the interview questions. I ensured that any views that I might have held about the pupil participants as learners did not influence any of my own responses during the research process. The questions that I posed related to this topic only. For example, one of the questions asked was, 'what do think boys benefit from most in lessons?' I kept my questions open-ended to allow for a free response. This also put the ownership of the data much more firmly with the participants (Cohen et al., 2007).

The boys responded quite differently when interviewed. For instance, when questioned, Paul and Joshua seemed very keen to reply. Sam, on the other hand, appeared more reticent. Interestingly, when on duty at break-time, Tom and Gareth greeted me on the tennis court. Appearing delighted, they explained to their friends that they were helping me with my research. These boys appeared to have gained some recognition and status from taking part in the study.

Interviews with staff

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the heads of English and Maths at stage one of the research process. The semi-structured interviews conducted with each teacher subsequent to the lesson observations were used to explore their views about the learning of boys in Year 10 generally (see Appendix 7). As part of stage three, the teachers of the pupil participants were interviewed following the lesson observations. In the main, the interviews with teachers took place after school in their individual teaching rooms. The senior teacher was interviewed in his office. On one occasion only when a pupil interrupted the interview by knocking at the door, the interview ceased and the recording was paused. The interview recommenced once the pupil had left the room.

During the semi-structured interviews with the head of English and then the head of Maths they were asked a number of open indicative questions which included what they thought were some of the challenges to teachers practicing with different 'ability' groups. (see Appendix 6). They were also asked about how pressures to improve pupils' attainment might affect both teachers and pupils. Cohen et al., (2007, p.357) suggests that questions which enable an 'open-ended response contain the 'gems' of information that otherwise might not be caught in a questionnaire'. The questions were not specific to individual participants but rather pertained to general issues relating to teaching and learning and the ways in which they understood all Year 10 boys as learners.

Lesson observations

According to Somekh and Lewin (2005, p.140), observation is one of the most important methods of data collection involving being present in a situation in order to interpret and record what takes place. The primary agent in this instant was the researcher. The collection of sensory data was through the ways in which I observed the lesson. The following table (Table 15.) shows the number of lesson observations conducted, the subject and number of boys present:

Subjects	Number of observations	Pupil participants present
English	3	6
Maths	1	6
BTEC Sport	1	4
Art	1	3
DIDA	1	4

Table 15: Summary of lesson observations

Findings from observations helped me to better appreciate the context within which the boys found themselves and assisted me in further understanding the ways in which their learner experiences were being shaped. While it is routine for teachers to conduct lesson observations on a regular basis while in school, the lesson observations conducted for the purpose of this study were different and focused on the boys for whom consent to participate had been obtained. Although data on the remainder of pupils was not recorded, it was difficult to disregard their presence completely when attempting to appreciate the boys' interactions with their peers during lessons. I did not consider it necessary to gain permission from every pupil before conducting my observations because, at the time of data collection, the school policy was such that all members of staff were encouraged to observe one another teach with the aim of further developing their own practices. Whole classes were, therefore, accustomed to teachers other than their class teacher being present in lessons. I did, however, ensure that the thesis made reference only to the pupil participants by name, from whom permission had been sought.

When someone comes into the classroom to observe, the very presence of another adult may influence what happens (Wragg, 1994, p.14). However, Dunne et al., (2005, p.87) assert that 'reflexivity provides the space where, as researchers, we critically reflect upon the social conditions in which we have conducted our account' which still enables us to

construct a well-informed reading of what we see and hear. As previously explained, at Stone Acre School it was not uncommon for teachers to observe one another teach, either for short periods or for an entire lesson. However, aware that the presence of any observer was liable to create a disturbance within the research field, I aimed to constantly monitor my own interactions with the group being investigated. For example, in my first observation of a Maths lesson, two of the boys who sat together, called me over to their table during a paired activity and asked me to look at their work suggesting their keenness to show me what they were learning. Although I moved to where the boys were working to observe them I did, however, remain mindful of how they may have behaved differently if I had not been present.

Human behaviour is clearly very complex and to record an entire situation would be impossible, the record, therefore, becoming necessarily a 'product of choices' (Somekh and Lewin, 2005 p.140) about what to observe and record in advance. As Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p.234) point out, 'any attempts to consider the nature of classroom interaction must be aware of both the diversity and complexity of the processes involved'. Broadly identifying areas on which to focus, I aimed to observe ways in which the boys responded to the teacher, to one another and to the tasks set. The lesson observations were unstructured. I did not take any pre-prepared notes into the lessons observed because I wished to try and avoid making assumptions about how the boys may have engaged with their learning during the lesson. For example, in the Maths lesson, I began by observing the lesson from the back of the room during which time I was able to identify where the boys were sitting and record the focus for the lesson explained by the teacher. When the class worked in pairs on answering a number of questions, which required them to calculate the radius/diameter/circumference of a circle and having previously gained permission from the teacher to circulate the room, I was able to observe the boys' actions including how they interacted with one other. I also observed how they related to the teacher. For example, the boys appeared able to ask the teacher questions and seemed keen to share their answers with both the teacher and with each other. These

observations are examples, which assisted me in my interpretations of how well the boys engaged with learning (see Appendix 8 for extracts).

4.7 Limitations of the research design

I have already addressed the limitations of each method; however, a number of further challenges presented themselves as a result of the research design. Because I was working full-time as a member of staff at the school, I was restricted in the number of lessons I was able to observe because the majority of lessons in subjects other than English and Maths took place when I was teaching.

A larger number of participants would have resulted in more data being generated from both the interviews and the lesson observations. This would have added to the richness of my research account but this was not possible. The time-scale for data gathering was therefore discussed with this senior staff member who integrated the procedure with the school's yearlong timetable for Year 10 pupils. This avoided participant interviews taking place during particularly busy periods. My findings are therefore limited to the learning experiences of six Year 10 boys and their reflections on Year 10. If I had included a number of boys from different year groups comparison could have been drawn between the learning experiences of boys identified as 'underachieving' of different ages and therefore at a different point in their learning journey. I might also have drawn comparisons between the experiences of the Year 10 boys identified as 'underachieving' with a group attaining above the GCSE grade C threshold in English and/or Maths, but this was beyond my practical scope.

Finally, I was often required to teach shortly after the completion of an interview or lesson observation. I, therefore, planned to complete a journal at the end of each school day to add a further opportunity for reflection. Given that the school day often continued after the pupils had left, completing my journal early was not always possible and at times I felt concerned that I may have missed relevant data.

4.8 Ethical considerations

Because my research involved other people, it was necessary to demonstrate care in terms of ethical considerations in both the planning and implementation of the study. Ethics refers to rules of behaviour in order to conform to a set of principles. Standards are then implemented on the basis of the original expectations (Reynolds, 1979). Cohen et al., (2007, p.71) emphasise the importance of all researchers following 'the ethical codes and regulations governing their practice. Before commencing my study ethical approval was sought and approval given from the University of Sussex where I was studying for my Doctorate in Education.

In addition to safeguarding the participants, ethical considerations add to the trustworthiness of the research undertaken (Ely, 1991). Subsequent to being granted permission to conduct the study, I arranged a meeting with the Head teacher to outline the research design and acquired her verbal and then written consent for the study to be conducted. Although all members of the teaching staff had access to student records, because the data I wished to access was for the purpose of the study, I also obtained informed consent from the Head teacher to access them (see Appendix 9). Subsequent to obtaining her permission, I conducted an assessment, which took into account any risks relating to the boys in the study taking photographs while in school. A risk assessment was also undertaken before the semi-structured interviews took place with the students.

Interviews with the pupil participants were conducted during the school day (8.40am to 3.15pm), but outside of lesson times. They took place in a classroom within the area of the English department. The classroom was situated downstairs between two adjoining classrooms. In addition to a teaching member of staff being present in each adjoining room whilst the interviews were conducted, a member of the pastoral team also remained in the vicinity but distant enough not to overhear the interviews. It is general practice for a teacher to speak to students within the confines of the classroom on a daily basis.

I explained to the pupil and teacher participants before beginning each interview that they did not have to respond to any questions that they felt they did not wish to answer. I also explained that they were free to withdraw from the interview at any point and the study itself and withdraw any data relating to them at any point up to when I began writing up the study. I emphasised to the boys that withdrawing would have had no bearing what so ever on their relationship with me as a teacher in the school or any future academic progress that they may have made.

Sturman (1999) draws attention to the importance of ethical considerations where a case study involves people who might be identifiable or institutions, which might be recognisable. I clarified my position with the Head teacher in terms of the need to obtain written permission from parents/carers and the need for confidentiality to ensure that any participants' involvement in the study placed their welfare above my own at all times (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005, p.35). Maintaining confidentiality is considered customary for educational research (BERA, 2011). This included not revealing characteristics that might have identified someone participating in the study to anyone outside of it (McNiff and Whithead, 2005). I also suggested that the name of the school remained fictitious and to preserve its anonymity I have presented only a snapshot of the school's performance data. The name of each pupil participant has been substituted with a pseudonym. In order to preserve the anonymity of the staff participants, they were divided into three groups: 'Academic teachers', 'Vocational teachers' and 'Additional teachers'. The 'Academic teachers' include the teachers of English and Maths. This group also comprises the head of English and the head of Maths. The 'Vocational teachers' group includes the teachers of Art and D&T, P.E/Sport and the ICT/DIDA teacher. The 'Additional teachers' group, includes the head of House, the form tutor and a teacher from Stone Acre School's senior leadership team. All eleven staff participants were subject teachers with some holding extra responsibilities within their curriculum area.

All participants were required to sign and date the form attached to the letter giving their consent to taking part in the research with the understanding that they could withdraw from the project at any time. In addition to the consent given by the boys to participate in the study, parents were also required to give permission for their child to take part and therefore also received a letter explaining the study and setting out what would be expected of their child.

I recognise that the whole idea of consent is complex (Oliver, 2008) and that it was important to make the aim of the research as clear as possible to all the participants. I also acknowledge that there are different positions from which participants can offer their consent. For example, some teachers might have felt less inclined to refuse to take part given that the head teacher had given her permission for the study to proceed. Each participant - teacher and pupil - was given the opportunity to decline to take part. However, consent was more complicated with regard to the pupils as parental consent was also required. Interestingly, one parent gave her consent for her son to participate, but her son then altered his mind and decided not to participate. I checked that consent to participate in the study had been sought from the parent(s) in addition to the pupils before commencing the research process. The head teacher also required that parents gave their consent for their child to participate. Subsequent to interviewing the boys, I did not re-check consent before conducting the observations because I had explained in the letter that the study would involve the pupils being interviewed and observed during lessons. To re-obtain consent prior to observation would have been disruptive. However, in retrospect I can see the value of gaining continuous consent.

Brooks et al., (2014) draw attention to whether participants could provide their informed consent on the basis that the aims of the study had not been fully explained to them. They suggest that some ambiguities, however, might be justified. In my case I chose not to explain in the letters to parents or in the information sheets given to the boys that they had been selected on the basis that they were 'underachieving'. As previously explained, I

view 'underachievement' as a social construction stemming from the policy level focus on pupils' performance. The pupil participants were therefore only 'underachieving' according to how attainment is recognised within GCSE performance tables. I did not view the boys as 'underachievers' and felt it unethical to label them as such. Using the term may have affected how the boys felt about themselves and their learning and their parents' opinions about these things too. They might also have thought incorrectly that this is how I saw their sons as learners. I do, however, recognise that my decision not to use the term raises the issue about whether the parents could genuinely give their informed consent. As the staff participants were aware that the boys were 'underachieving' by the GCSE benchmark and would also not have had the same emotional response, rather than interpreting the term in the way that policy makers are encouraging them to, they were giving their consent to take part in the study on different terms. I felt that this difference was strategically unavoidable because I wished to gain the consent from the boys and their parents to take part in the study without causing any harm or offence. I believe that consent to participate that was given by the pupils who took part and their parents on the understanding that my aim was to improve Year 10 boys' opportunities for learning was a fair and ethical representation of my aims. The term 'underachievement' serves to fix pupils attaining below the GCSE benchmarks. As it turns out, the boys' relative success also suggests they were not underachievers and therefore the term was unfitting.

Statements were drawn up to safeguard these points and distributed to all participants subsequent to them agreeing to take part in the project. As McNiff and Whitehead (2005) advocate, this is part of good research practice which goes some way to ensuring the researcher's own credibility. In addition, consent from the parents of the boys, the boys and the Head teacher was sought before any use of photography was included in the study. The photographs taken by the boys were not used for any other purpose other than for the study. During the period of data collection, the data collected together with letters, information sheets, consent forms, interview questions and all other

administrative information were kept in a locked filing cabinet in the English department office at the school, to which only I had access.

The questions that I devised to put to both the boys and the teachers were not invasive or personal to them. I made it clear to all the participants that they did not have to respond to any questions they did not wish to answer. I remained aware that a child may have felt sensitive about issues relating to their schooling such as those of confidence, motivation and self-esteem. The pupil participants may have expressed themselves in a way that might have affected me emotionally. I, therefore, took extra precautions in an attempt to prevent this: At no time did I resort to terminology, which may have affected the boys' self-esteem, confidence or motivation. Such terms as 'underachieving' or 'underperformance' were not used at any point during the project and I did not position the boys' participating in the study as either 'underperforming' or 'underachieving' and avoided all other terms, which had similar meanings or connotations.

I remained mindful that a teacher might also have felt uneasy during the interview process. I, therefore, aimed to avoid a situation where any participants became distressed or expressed themselves in ways, which may have been emotionally disturbing to myself. I was mindful that I might have had to suggest the interview ended early. If an occasion had arisen where the participants or me, felt emotionally affected during any part of the study I was willing to seek support from my line manager (head of English) and/or the Deputy head who was responsible for the wellbeing of pupils and staff while in school. I also understood the importance of ensuring my actions were not subject to any misinterpretation either by the pupils or the teachers.

I have learned the importance of building a reputation for good practice which includes the marks of integrity, loyalty and trust, a model in which courtesy and respect for others remains at the forefront at all times so that professional relationships remain strongly protected. As a teacher in the school, I was fully aware that I had a duty of care to maintain professional relationships at all times with pupils and staff. In my role as a

teacher/researcher, I remained within the boundaries of my responsibilities as a teacher at all times. As a recent member of a senior leadership team and therefore responsible for a number of child protection issues while at my previous school, I fully understood the need to work within the field of my expertise as a classroom practitioner. In the unlikely event that one of the boys in the study had made me aware of a child protection issue, I planned to act in accordance with school policy. I would have informed the pupil that I was obliged to pass on the information to the child protection officer in the school.

4.9 Data analysis

The process of analysis was conducted within the framework of a case study. The aim of this method is to present participants' thoughts about their real life experiences within the contexts they find themselves (Robson, 2002). According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p.322), the case study method 'blends a description of events with the analysis of them'. Through systematic data collection, which draws upon aspects of a 'grounded theory' approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.23) to assist with the analysis, I aimed to remain reflexive, transparent and robust in my interpretations. Through 'constant comparison' of the findings, my aim was to identify themes emerging from which meanings could be drawn (Thomas, 2009, p.198).

To begin with the focus in the research questions was on the boys, however, these have since developed with the emphasis in the present study being on the system (see Appendix 10. for preliminary research questions). Ezzy (2002, p.12), states that 'many grounded theorists emphasise the role of pre-existing theory in sensitising the researcher to orienting questions that need to be examined during the research'. While my reading of pre-existing theory and previous research assisted me with forming initial research questions, they have become progressively more focussed through the process of interpreting the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) including the way I have come to think about boys' 'underachievement'. Flick (1998) suggests that including context increases the complexity of the data by enabling new theory to emerge. A number of

unexpected themes emerged from the data, including Stone Acre's school ethos, which is associated with the school's context. As my analysis progressed I recognised that the English education system which positions boys identified as 'underachieving' in non-selective schools like the study school was having both positive as well as negative effects on this sub-group of boys. Guided by Ball (1993), through my interpretation I recognised that teachers were not merely resisting policy measures on improving pupils' attainment. within the limits of their accountability, they were finding ways to adapt their practices so the boys were mitigated from some of the pressures of meeting their GCSE target grades and passing their exams. Moving between the literature and the data that I had gathered, I set out to develop an alternative account by exploring what is occurring within the system to contribute towards the construction of boys' 'underachievement' informed by identifying what is missing from previous studies. The research questions I wished to address therefore developed from focussing exclusively on the boys to examining the systems and processes within which they experienced their learning.

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Stages of data analysis

Stage one: Transcription

For stage one the data were transcribed in full. This assisted me with reflecting on the issues of the research (Ezzy, 2002, p.70).

Stage two: Concepts

For stage two the data were conceptualised using the process of ‘open coding’ (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.65). This pertains to the naming of phenomena informed by the context in which the boys learned. For example, in response to being asked the extent to which teachers thought education policy gets interpreted in ways that puts pressure on them to ensure that students meet their targets, Academic Teacher 1 explained that the aim of organising additional Maths classes was to support pupils to attain grade C who were performing just below this benchmark. The conceptual label ‘limited learning opportunity for pupils working below grade C/D’ was added in bold type within the text of the interview transcript (See Table 16.):

We offered four Saturday mornings before each exam and we targeted pupils who were expected to get a grade C or above [...]. **(limited learning opportunity for pupils working below grade C/D)** Lesson six (form time) was just for the pupils targeted grade C The students below the C/D borderline see it as we’re not interested in them. **(Policy on performance)** If parents phoned and said, ‘my child has not been invited to a Saturday class but I’d like them to go’, we said, ‘come along’. **(parents able to negotiate the system)** (Academic Teacher 1).

Table 16: Example from a teacher interview transcript showing conceptual labels (in bold)
(Further examples can be found in Appendix 11)

Stage 3: Line by line analysis

‘The Flip-flop technique’

A line-by-line analysis was then carried out whereby particular words, which appeared thought provoking, were identified and interpreted both in and out of context. This was a useful tool to raise questions about possible meanings thereby opening up the data. For example, the word ‘responsibility’ was identified in the comment by Academic Teacher 3 that ‘students tend to abdicate **responsibility** to the teachers because they know that the teachers will tell them everything they need to know’. With the context in mind, I created a mind-map on which I noted all the possible meanings of the word that might bear some

association. I then turned the remark by Academic Teacher 3 on its head – ‘the flip-flop technique’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.84). This assisted me with understanding that some teachers might be cautious of allowing some pupils considerable responsibility for their learning given the pressure on them to ensure pupils met their target grades (See Appendix 12 for a further example of a single word analysis).

‘Waving the Red Flag’

Strauss and Corbin (1990) advise that it is important to recognise assumptions and beliefs that researchers and participants might bring to the research. They suggest that some participants’ acceptance of words or explanations indicates bias and should be taken as a signal to the researcher to wave an imaginary ‘red flag’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.87) and take a closer look. For example, in explaining some boys’ ‘underachievement’, one teacher participant made the assumption that ‘boys are far less mature than girls’. In my mind the ‘red flag’ was ‘waved’ and on re-examination of the data, similar comments showing teachers’ beliefs about boys as learners were identified.

Stage four: Categories

Once concepts began to accumulate, those of a similar kind or that had similar meaning were ‘grouped under more abstract concepts termed, ‘categories’’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.66). Below shows an example of five concepts grouped under the category heading ‘English and Maths as the most accountable subjects’:

<p>Category: English and Maths as the most accountable subjects</p> <p>Concepts: Pressure</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Importance of target grades</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Responsibility for attainment</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Fear of failure</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Learning interventions</p>
--

Table 17: A category formed by a number of related concepts

(Further examples of codified categories can be found in Appendix 13).

Stage five: Properties

Once a number of categories and their concepts had been identified, following the prescription of Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.68), I was able to develop the concepts in terms of their specific 'properties' (attributes of a category) and examine how they varied across a 'dimensional range'. The extent to which teachers believed they had sufficient time to teach pupils formed one property of the concept 'narrowed curricula' and was placed along the dimensional range as shown in Table 18:

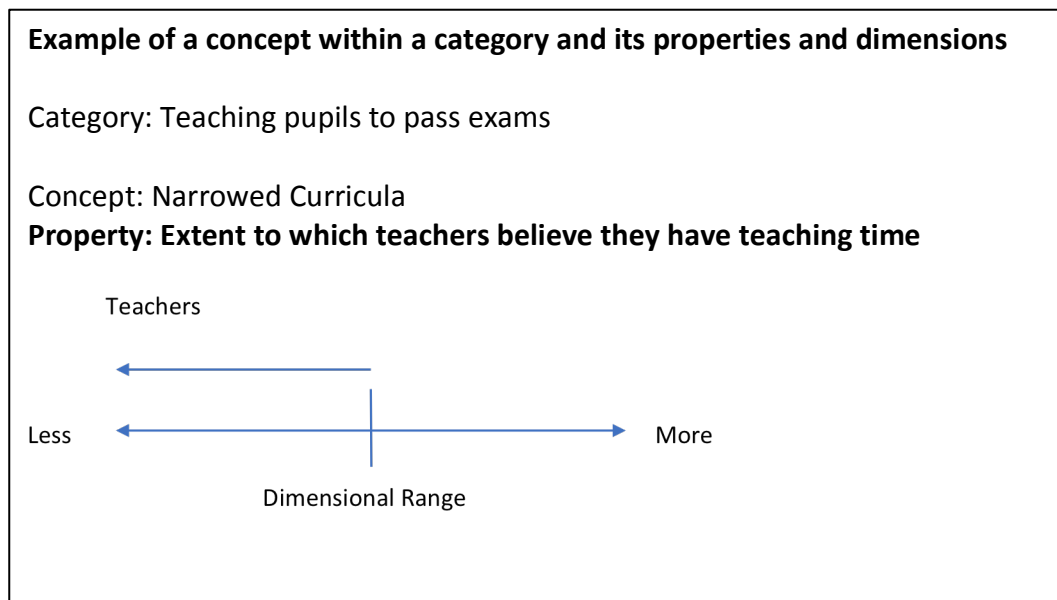


Table 18: The concept 'Narrowed Curricula' and its properties and dimensions

Note: The vertical line on the dimensional range indicates its centre point

Some teachers experienced limited teaching time (from the centre point of the dimensional range, the arrow points in the direction of 'less' time rather than 'more'). This is a simple classification and therefore impressionistic. On reflection, a numerical classification would have added precision to the analysis. However, I was able to identify that as an outcome of having very limited teaching time some teacher participants offered pupils a narrowed curricula which was characteristic of them teaching pupils to pass the exam.

Another feature relating to the importance given by teachers to pupils passing exams was that some teachers believed they felt ‘more’ responsible for pupils learning than the pupils themselves (See Table 19.).

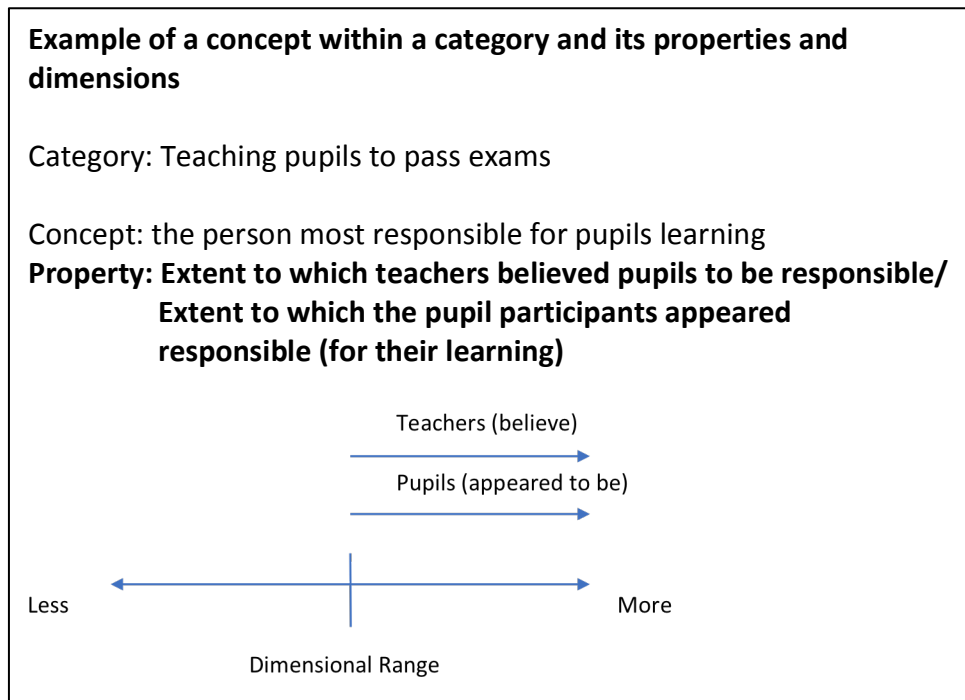


Table 19: The concept ‘the person most responsible for pupils learning’ and its properties and dimensions

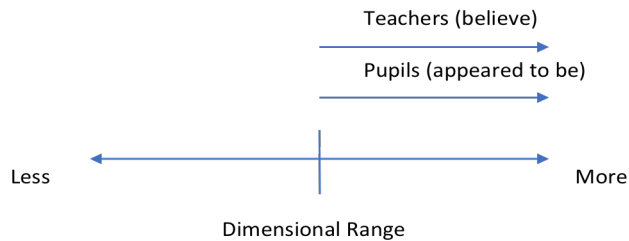
However, the interviews with the pupil participants and the lesson observations showed that the boys did appear to take ‘more’ responsibility for their learning than was suggested by some teachers. The degree of importance given by some teachers and the boys to them to meeting target grades revealed an interesting pattern which when compared with further categories and their properties suggested that messages about the importance of attaining the minimum GCSE benchmark grade C, particularly in English and Maths was communicated by the teachers to the boys (See Table 20):

Example of a concept within a category and its properties and dimensions

Category: Teaching pupils to pass exams

Concept: Importance of grades

Property: Level of importance of grades to the participants



All 11 teachers made reference to the importance to of pupils achieving their target grades.

All 6 boys made reference to the importance of achieving their target grades.

Table 20: The concept 'Importance of grades' and its properties and dimensions

By defining a concept's particular characteristics and how they varied along their dimensional range helped me to give a category specificity thereby developing my understanding of the data.

Stage six: Axial Coding

'Axial' coding puts the data back together in new ways by making connections between a central category and its subcategories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.97). For example, 'Gender regime' formed the central category from which sub-categories could be drawn such as 'teachers' accountability'. 'vocational/academic teachers' formed a further subcategory. The data revealed that although all eleven teachers experienced pressure to improve pupils' attainment, some teachers of English and Maths experienced more pressure emphasising these subjects key position in the GCSE performance tables. Strauss

and Corbin (1990, p.98) explain that the focus in axial coding is on uncovering the relationships between categories and their subcategories and suggest that it is quite possible for the researcher to move between open and axial coding with little awareness. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.98) suggest that 'structure/conditions' create circumstances in which issues or events pertaining to a phenomena arise such as teachers' accountability developing from policy on improving pupils' attainment. They refer to the concept 'process' to signify the 'actions/interactions' between participants within the 'structure/conditions' they find themselves (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.98). Teaching pupils to pass exams may have been the 'consequence' of the 'actions/strategies' taken by some teachers to relieve some of the pressures on them. By linking 'subcategories to a category in a set of relationships' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.98), I was able to think about the data systematically and relate them in complex ways so adding to the density and precision of the analysis. Theory was then established against the data and further properties of subcategories and categories sought.

Stage seven: The 'Conditional Matrix'

Strauss and Corbin's (1990, p.163) 'Conditional Matrix' assisted me in tracking an event through the level of 'actions/interactions' through the various 'conditional' levels in which 'negotiations' take place to determine how they relate. Figure 3. shows the 'Conditional Matrix' adapted for the purpose of this study:

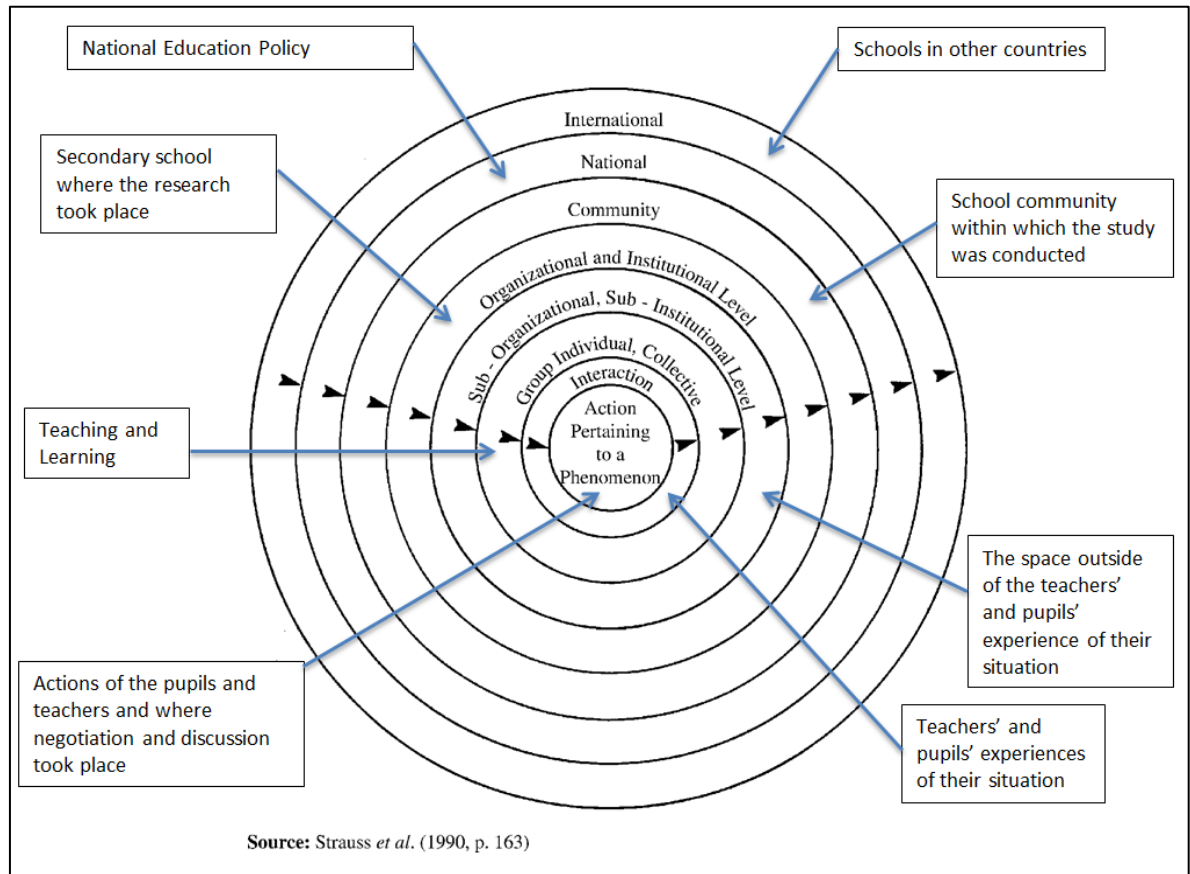


Fig. 3. The 'Conditional Matrix' adapted from Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.163)

The outermost ring represents the political context within which teachers are practicing. The 'conditions' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.163) refer to the situation at each level. For example, at the organisational and institutional levels this signifies the way in which the curriculum is structured. One outcome is that boys identified as 'underachieving' find themselves positioned in low sets. The 'negotiation' context pertains to the phenomenon of association at the 'action/interaction' level (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.163). For example, teachers are negotiating the conditions of accountability during their interactions at the level of the classroom through their practices. By combining 'structure' and 'negotiation' (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.163) I was able to specify the nature of teachers' 'negotiations' and the particular 'conditions' that gave rise to them (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.163). In the following 'interaction', at the 'individual' level (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.163), Academic Teacher 1, described some boys as 'quiet and lacking in

confidence'. At the 'sub-organisational' level – in the classroom (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.163) such beliefs about the kinds of learners the boys were was reflected by some teachers through their practices. At the 'organisational' level – whole school (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.163), the space the boys occupied was determined by the boys previous attainment, which can be linked to education policy, the discourse of which recommends selective grouping practices. By this method, the 'conditions' and 'consequences' can be connected directly to the 'action/interaction' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.163). Importantly, the 'conditions' that give rise to the way in which teachers negotiate their situation interact with one another.

Trustworthiness

Cohen et al., (2007, p.141) assert that relying on a single method for gathering data is likely to 'distort the researcher's picture of the particular slice of reality being investigated'. By the method of triangulation, I aimed to add to the trustworthiness and transparency of my findings. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.5) suggest that the method of triangulation is 'a strategy that adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to an enquiry', rather than a means by which the 'truth' can be established (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). By employing the method of 'constant comparison' (Thomas, 2009), I was able to compare the findings from the interviews with the boys with those conducted with the teachers and compare these findings with those gathered from the lesson observations.

In the next chapter, I present the data that shows how teachers' classroom practices at Stone Acre School were affected by working under a system of surveillance and how this affects the learning experiences of boys identified as 'underachieving'.

Chapter Five

The construction of boys' 'underachievement' within the performance table policy regime

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which education policy operates to construct boys' 'underachievement' by shaping teachers' practices and the learning experiences of boys identified as 'underachieving'. The Year 10 boys in this case study occupied the space just below the GCSE grade C/D threshold. When the data were collected the boys were working at the level of grade E in English and/or Maths at GCSE. In Chapter Two I presented the context constructed at policy level within which teachers at Stone Acre School practiced. I argued that the GCSE performance threshold has a powerful effect on boys identified as 'underachieving'. As a consequence of 'ability' resting upon the understanding of essentialist forms of intelligence and the number of pupils attaining below the national average at Stone Acre, this school is positioned lower down in the national performance tables than grammar schools. This chapter presents the data, which shows how a surveillance regime, created pressures on teachers at Stone Acre School and affected their practices and the ways in which the boys experienced their learning. The study suggests that some teachers found alternative ways of managing some of the demands by employing different approaches to teaching and learning which mitigated the boys from some of the pressures. I, therefore, begin the chapter by focussing on research question one:

1. How are the learning spaces occupied by Year 10 boys identified as 'underachievers' at Stone Acre School shaped by the focus in policy on the GCSE five A* to C benchmark measure of achievement?

The discussion for section one is divided into three sections:

5.1 Section one

Performance criteria and pressures exerted teachers' perspectives and pupils' perspectives

Part one: Teachers under pressure to meet the GCSE five A* to C benchmark

Part two: Effects of English and Maths as the most accountable curriculum subjects on the learning experiences of boys identified as 'underachieving'

5.2 Section two

How performance pressures shape learning contexts and teachers' practices – effects on classroom contexts and teaching to the test

Part one: Shaping of classroom learning

Part two: Teaching pupils to pass exams

5.3 Section three

Collaborative learning and school ethos (teachers) and how this feeds into boys' maintaining motivation

Section one begins by presenting the data that illustrates teachers' understandings of the focus in policy on pupils' attaining GCSE 5A* to C grades including English and Maths.

5.1 Section one

Performance criteria and pressures exerted - teachers' perspectives and pupils' perspectives

Part one: Teachers under pressure to meet the GCSE five A* to C benchmark

Ball (1993) suggests that teachers are not merely passive recipients of policy but rather have agency to develop sustainable practices counter-balancing the demands of policy. In this section, I present the data which shows that teachers experienced pressures to ensure pupils' target grades were met and I suggest that this is linked to how power operates, their agency limited due to them being accountable for how well pupils attain at GCSE level.

All eleven teacher participants suggested they felt under pressure to ensure that pupils attained the minimum target grade C at GCSE level. Academic Teacher 1, expressed that pressures on teachers to improve pupils' attainment by the benchmark were inestimable:

The fact students' results are linked to your performance management means that there is immense pressure on teachers to get their pupils a grade C.
(Academic Teacher 1).

She expressed strong feelings towards being coerced due to her performance being measured by how well pupils attained. In the literature review, I argued that English and Maths are the core subjects and are therefore most in focus in the league tables. Academic Teacher 2 stated:

There are pressures because there is this benchmark grade of a C and that seems to be the standard by which everyone is judged. (Academic Teacher 2).

This teacher suggested that she recognised the importance of English as one of the core subjects by which 'everyone' including schools, teachers and pupils are judged. Even though there is a hierarchy of subjects within the school performance tables all the teachers interviewed felt under pressure to support pupils to attain. Vocational Teacher 1

also recognised the importance of target grades to evaluate the attainment of pupils and he spoke of the pressures on teachers:

We all feel pressure and some would argue that the expectations are unrealistic. I don't like the fact that I am judged as a teacher because of my results. At times I feel a prisoner to statistics. [...] Can we really quantify their (pupils') progress with an A, B or C grade or is it more about giving them (pupils) life skills for the future ahead? (Vocational Teacher 1).

This teacher indicated that he did not wish to be 'judged' by whether pupils attained their grades. He suggested he preferred to teach in a way, which was more orientated towards pupils' individual needs. Recognising the dilemma between needing to attain target grades and having the autonomy to teach in different ways, he questioned why there are minimum benchmarks.

Although Ball (1993) suggests that teachers do have agency and are therefore not merely recipients of messages in policy, the teacher's reference to being 'a prisoner to statistics' does not suggest this and there is a strong sense of teachers' agency being limited because blame rests with them if the pupils they teach fail to reach the GCSE performance threshold. This raises the issue of how teachers can escape their accountability. Vocational Teacher 1 then second-guessed himself:

You beat your head against the table asking yourself, am I doing the right thing? Am I putting enough interventions in place to ensure that I'm giving pupils the best opportunities? But then I ask myself whether I can only do so much because there are other factors in their lives, which are contributing to them not doing so well such as their home life. (Vocational Teacher 1).

Questioning why he felt that the responsibility for pupils attaining should rest with him, he displaced the onus for pupils 'underachieving' to their situation outside of school.

Even though graded high by Ofsted in 2012, Additional Teacher 1, who was interviewed explained that he feared being considered as a 'failing teacher' if his pupils were not successful:

There are so many different ways you've got to teach individual pupils to help them meet grade C. Sometimes it's hard to give the help to those who need it most. Unless you have a good TA [teaching assistant] with you it can be very demanding. When a group sucks everything out of you it's hard to give those individuals who you know need help most and you can be seen, are seen, as a failing teacher. (Additional Teacher 1).

Seemingly aware that by being accountable had a negative bearing on his practices by 'sucking everything' out of him, this teacher appeared anxious that his professional status would be scrutinised if the pupils he taught did not attain their targets. He appeared to convey frustration and guilt at being coerced into offering less opportunity for teacher/pupil interaction to those attaining below the grade C/D benchmark. Appearing coerced, Vocational Teacher 2 commented:

Education policy restricts your teaching. It stops you developing the students because you are tied to getting them results and justifying yourself at the end if you don't get them. (Vocational Teacher 2).

He seemed uncertain about how he might provide pupils with a rich learning experience given that he was accountable for their attainment. Although power is seemingly invisible, the technique of surveillance of teachers whereby they are measured on their pupils' GCSE attainment, appeared to create a pressured space for teachers across different subject areas with different levels of experience, within which learning was taking place.

Academic Teacher 4 explained that some pupils were unlikely to make sufficient progress to reach the minimum benchmark even with support:

If they [the pupils], have say got a target of a D grade in English but are targeted grade C in Maths then they will be the types of kids that we will put interventions in place for, to try and get those D kids up to a C. If we are saying they are an E it seems a big jump to make two grades of progress. (Academic Teacher 4).

The grades that pupils might attain are projected and yet their importance to this teacher was evident by the way in which she fixed pupils' achievement at a grade suggesting that she believed it was real and actually measuring something. The importance given to pupils attaining GCSE grade C or above emphasised by the performance tables assumes that pupils' attainment can be matched directly to grades. However, children are more than data that merely measure-up. Interestingly, all six boys in the study met their target grades for GCSEs English and Maths.

In contrast, Academic Teacher 1 explained that she motivated pupils in the interests of them attaining the benchmark:

Although some (pupils) have a target grade, which is lower than grade C, by telling them they are targeted a C, gives them more incentive towards learning. (Academic Teacher 1).

By telling the pupils they were 'targeted a C' did not guarantee they would attain it and did not appear to be in the interest of meeting their individual learning needs. By being accountable the Maths teacher's agency appeared such that she encouraged all pupils to aim beyond their targets. Interestingly, the number of pupils who attained grade C in Maths was 25 percent higher than the pupils in English. Her 'creative' (Ball, 1993. P.12) response to policy was therefore in the interest of improving pupils' attainment outcomes. The teacher would also have been considered as 'failing' if the pupils she taught 'failed' - however, the teacher is only 'failing' according to how attainment is recognised in policy.

Previous literature highlights that pressure on schools to achieve the minimum GCSE performance benchmarks results in pupils who are considered unlikely to attain grade C in

English and/Maths being excluded from receiving extra support to improve their grades (Ball et al., 2012). Academic Teacher 1 explained that the opportunity for the Year 10 boys to receive support to improve their grades was limited:

We offered four Saturday mornings before each exam and we targeted pupils who were expected to get a grade C or above [...]. Lesson six (form time) was just for the pupils targeted grade C. The students below the C/D borderline see it as we're not interested in them. If parents phoned and said, 'my child has not been invited to a Saturday class but I'd like them to go', we said, 'come along'. (Academic Teacher 1).

At Stone Acre School, the boys targeted below grade C were not receiving the same opportunities to improve their grades as those targeted above reflective of the emphasis in policy for schools to improve their performance. By only the pupils attaining near the grade C/D benchmark being in a privileged position to obtain extra support, affects the progress of those achieving below it. The pressures on teachers to improve pupils' attainment outcomes, therefore, left them feeling fearful, and limited their agency, and the progress of pupils attaining below the grade C threshold.

Part two: Effects of English and Maths as the most accountable curriculum subjects on the learning experiences of boys identified as 'underachieving'

The government identifies GCSEs English and Maths as key performance indicators evidenced in their central position within the data published in the national tables since the academic year 2004/2005. English and Maths are therefore the most accountable subjects and these teachers are under particular pressure. In this part, I present the data, which illustrates the Year 10 boys' awareness of the pressures to attain, particularly in the subjects English and Maths, which is reflective of the performance hierarchy. I argue that the pressure experienced by the boys was an outcome of policy pressures trickling down from the teachers who, coerced, conveyed the importance of attaining by this benchmark to the boys encouraging them to believe that the most important learning is linked to grades. The following findings highlight the separation of English and Maths from other

subjects in terms of how attainment and 'underachievement' is recognised at the level of policy.

When asked what the school's expectations were in terms of pupils achieving, the importance of succeeding in English and Maths was evident in the pupil participants' following comments:

Joshua: we are expected to achieve a grade C in English and Maths, more so than in other subjects other than Science.

Paul : Ye, definitely.

All of the boys thought English and Maths to be essential:

Robert: Definitely English and Math. You don't get a choice, you have to do them.

Sam: I think English is the main one.

The benchmark grade C appeared to be central to the boys' learning experiences and although they enjoyed BTEC Sport, they did not consider this vocational subject as having the same value as English and Maths:

Gareth: BTEC Sport is the most popular but you need to have Maths and English.

Tom: Ye, they will help you more in life than my BTEC Sport.

The importance of English and Maths appeared to have been transmitted to the boys by the teachers. This is also a reminder that historically, the perceived status of different subjects has been recognised by both teachers and pupils (Young, 1971).

Wolf (2011) asserts that all subjects should provide the opportunity for pupils to find employment however the boys recognised that learning English and Maths was of more significance:

Gareth: English and Maths are more pressured as you need to get a C in them to get a job.

And:

Robert: There's more pressure in the main subjects to get a C (grade). They are the main qualifications you need to get a job.

Sam: Ye, they are the main subjects you need to pass to get a good job.

These comments suggested that Gareth, Robert and Sam felt more coerced to attain in English and Maths. 'Discourse as a practice' (Foucault, 1972, p.46) was detectable in the importance expressed by the boys of needing to attain grade C in English and Maths in order to secure their futures with power thereby operating effectively in establishing the 'norm' for an academic learning experience.

Paul spoke of the importance of remaining attentive in lessons:

In English and Maths, we have to concentrate all the time and it's really hard. (Paul)

Paul recognised that focussing in lessons was essential, indicative of messages filtering down from policy to teachers and conveyed to the boys about the importance of attaining by the benchmark. Gareth, similarly drew attention to the importance of having to remain engaged during lessons:

In Maths we have to listen and learn or we will have problems in the future and then will have to learn it all again. (Gareth).

The reference by Gareth to Year 10 boys' future prospects being compromised if they did not attain in GCSE Maths, by the benchmark, was likely to generate fear amongst them and is a subtle reminder of the emphasis on academic learning in policy (Wolf, 2011) for the purpose of gaining employment and overlooks the value of other types of learning.

Academic Teacher 5 drew attention to the injustice of pupils' achievements not being recognised when pupils had made progress but not achieved grade C in their exam:

I think this is unfair because for some kids to get a grade D in their exam is a real achievement and that doesn't always seem to be recognised by the school as being a success. (Academic Teacher 5)

This teacher appeared vexed by pupils' progress being judged against a benchmark, which does not account for pupils' attainment below grade C or indeed other kinds of achievement.

This section has shown how the performance measures affected how the boys recognised the context in which they learned. Power operated through policy to maintain the status of the GCSE subjects English and Maths. This was evident in the way in which the boys experienced pressures to attain in these subjects more than in non-academic subjects. The pupil participants recognised the importance of remaining focussed particularly, in English and Maths.

5.2 Section two

How performance pressures shape learning contexts and teachers' practices – effects on classroom contexts and teaching to the test

The government's focus on raising standards through the method of surveillance has been found to affect teachers' practices (Ball et al., 2012; Woods and Jeffery, 1996). In this section, I present examples from the data arguing that monitoring pupils' attainment outcomes in the interests of raising educational standards affects how the boys felt as a result of teachers' practices.

Part one: Shaping of classroom learning

Evidence of the compulsion with pupils attaining grade C communicated by teachers to the pupils was evident in some teachers' practices and boys like Sam were clearly aware of this:

In English the teachers are more on your case, making sure you're learning and That. We have to get a C [grade]. (Sam)

Observation of a Maths lesson, for example, suggested how these pressures shaped classroom practices. Teachers were also aware of how they were teaching to the test and the implications of this for independent learning by limiting pupils' opportunities to learn autonomously. Within a very short space of time, the boys were reminded of the importance of attaining grade C. Early in the lesson the boys were told that they were 'aiming for grade C'. The teacher demonstrated how by being able to use the correct formula to find the circumference, radius and diameter of a circle would 'achieve grade C' and whilst the boys subsequently practiced various examples, they were again reminded that it was 'important to achieve grade C'.

During the same lesson, Academic Teacher 1 eagerly redeployed the class from holding up small individual whiteboards on which were displayed formulas for finding the circumference, radius and diameter of a circle to answer a number of questions at speed which required them to put the formulas into practice. The teacher drew the class' attention to an electric timer, displayed in red, on the whiteboard which set a time limit for questions to be answered. This suggested the teacher felt anxious to move the lesson forward seeing the timer helpful in enabling the boys to attain. The added sound of a short alarm, which signalled the class to move to the next question seemed to create a sense of panic amongst the pupil participants, who appeared to work with increasing speed each time the alarm sounded. The boys conveyed expressions of anxiety in response to the ticking of the clock, which indicated time passing. The teacher appeared compelled to move the lesson forward rapidly, the use of the clock controlling the way in

which learning took place. Rather than adopting a child-centred approach to learning, coerced by the pressures exerted at policy level the teacher rather executed a displacement activity. Through her practice, the teacher shared the pressure with the pupils. The trickle-down effect served to increase the pressure, the teacher self-regulating. Her practices were shaped around improving pupils' attainment outcomes.

During the second paired interview Joshua remarked on the incessant need for pupils to prepare for exams:

Once you're in Year 10, in English and Maths, some people think they have to get ready for exams coming up and so you have to keep working and working all the time. (Joshua).

Evidence of the importance of passing exams being transmitted to the pupils was indicative of some teachers self-regulating with the aim of avoiding 'failure', however, the actions of some teachers did not guarantee pupils passed the exam and secondly, were counter-intuitive because it narrowed their practices and consequently the boys' learning opportunities. Even in subjects where individual creativity might have been assumed, the choices and freedoms appeared limited. In the Art lesson, I observed Sam working as part of a group planning for the task of composing an individual visual representation of the topic 'global warming'. When I asked the teacher of the lesson whether pupils were ever assessed on how they worked together, he explained:

We'd like to explore other avenues, you know, assess group work - how they develop socially, but often there's just not the time. Because we're pushing the kids so hard they stop being learners [...] and we take away the skills and the fun of learning by needing to prepare them to answer exam questions. (Vocational Teacher 1).

Appearing conflicted, Vocational Teacher 1 drew attention to the lack of opportunity for teachers to take a more child-centred approach towards teaching and learning.

With the aim of improving pupils' attainment, teachers paid close attention to the exam criteria. The boys' progress at Stone Acre School was recognised in terms of their grades - progress and targets viewed as one and the same thing. Academic Teacher 5, for example, lead a lesson in which the poem, 'Battle of the Somme'¹⁷ had been discussed in terms of how the poet had used linguistic techniques to convey meaning. Ten minutes before the end of the lesson the pupil participants assessed one another's work. Robert, Joshua and Tom each recorded the relevant grade reflecting their partner's attainment. The boys then identified a target using the success criteria and then noted, under the pupil's work, how further improvements could be made. Pupils' progress during the lesson was fixed at a particular grade. Prior to beginning the task, Tom asked the teacher 'are we doing DIRT today sir?' suggesting that 'DIRT time' (directed improvement reflection time) was expected amongst pupils. Progress in learning in relation to grades was recognised as the 'norm' and embedded in the teacher's practice. The value of learning other than that which is linked to attainment outcomes was not evaluated. This echoes the policy focus on performance outcomes rather than recognition of the value of other types of learning, which is not linked to grades.

Part two: Teaching pupils to pass exams

The data includes findings, which suggest that the importance of achieving the GCSE benchmark grade C lead some teachers, particularly those of English and Maths, to resort to teaching pupils to pass exams. The boys viewed learning in terms of passing exams, particularly in the subjects English and Maths. Several teachers wished to avoid risking giving responsibility for learning to the pupils arguably because they wished to avoid blame if the pupils they taught 'failed' by the benchmark. Appearing anxious, Vocational Teacher 1 explained how the consequence of teachers feeling pressured affected their practices:

We do find that we are teaching to exams because there is so much pressure to meet deadlines and get work to an acceptable standard.
(Vocational Teacher 1).

¹⁷ The poem, 'Battle of the Somme', was written by the First World War poet, Wilfred Owen.

Popham (2001, p38) asserts that the priority given to exam results by the government encourages teachers to 'teach to the test'. Academic Teacher 3 explained that he felt teaching had become about preparing pupils for exams:

Without this pressure teachers could deviate from the curriculum more or go into more depth in some areas – it would be deeper learning. It's shallow learning at times as they are taught to pass exams [...]. It's not always about the kid's themselves. (Academic Teacher 3).

This teacher suggested that he had to differentiate the curricula to ensure essential aspects were taught to enable pupils to pass the exam. The kind of learning being experienced was limited to pupils achieving by the narrow benchmarks. Although the teacher suggested that pupils would benefit more from experiencing a rich and broad curriculum, he remained mindful of the importance of preparing them to pass the exam. Exams were recognised as a significant part of the boys' learning. Paul and Gareth remarked:

In English and Maths, we are focussed on the exams as we need to get a C. (Paul).

And:

Gareth: We are constantly told that we must get a C to pass our English and Maths exams. (Gareth).

Academic Teacher 1 indicated that teaching pupils to pass exams, for her, had become instinctive stating, 'I can find myself teaching pupils to pass exams'. Interestingly, there was awareness amongst Year 10 boys of the urgency to prepare for tests:

When we do our English assessments we don't normally have time to think; it's hard and we get pushed into it straight away. (Paul).

The pressure experienced by Year 10, suggested by Paul, echoes the passing of time as the clock ticked during the Maths lesson - the lesson during which, the boys were constantly reminded of the 'importance of achieving grade C'.

Ofsted (2012, p.6) reported that learning has been found to be limited in lessons where teachers focus too much on 'a narrow range of test or examination skills'. Given the focus on teaching to the test, it was not surprising then that the learning aims in lessons, particularly those in English and Maths appeared narrow. The learning aim of the lesson lead by Academic Teacher 2 was linked directly to the requirement of the examination: 'to discuss how Steinbeck had presented the character, 'Curley's Wife' in the novel 'Of Mice and Men'. Although the teacher offered the class the opportunity to discuss characterisation by allowing the class to work in small groups the boys' interpretations were discussed in terms of how each met the criteria to pass the exam. Shortly after the teacher had emphasised the importance of the text being understood with reference to quotes, I noticed Sam remark on the effect Curley's wife's loneliness had on other characters in chapter 4 of the novel. Although indicating he had understood the theme of loneliness at a more complex level than that needed to attain grade C, when explaining his ideas, after sharing his point he asked the teacher whether it was sufficient for him to pass the exam. He did not appear to appreciate the intrinsic value of his comment.

One of the key issues was that teachers took responsibility for the pupils learning because they felt they had to. Vocational Teacher 1 drew attention to the adverse effect of teachers teaching to exams:

We can end up telling pupils everything they need to know to pass the exam, which is counter-productive because it removed the responsibility for success from the pupil to the teacher. (Vocational Teacher 1)

By virtue of being accountable, teachers are at risk if the responsibility for learning is passed to the pupils. They are also likely to feel more at risk than teachers of higher

attaining pupils. Even in the subject Art, which is not at the centre of the performance tables indicated the teacher felt coerced into telling pupils the information they needed to pass their exam. But given the pressures, how do teachers decide whether or not to pass the responsibility for learning to the pupils, particularly those teaching pupils below the benchmark who are likely to experience increased pressure? In the interest of improving pupils' performance, some teachers adapted their practices, transmissive learning being indicative of the method of surveillance being counter-productive because boys identified as 'underachieving' were unlikely to be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. During the observation of an English lesson, the class learned how to answer an exam question on how the writer had used presentation features in a short article on the sinking of the Titanic on its maiden voyage in 1912. While Academic Teacher 3 drew attention to the most important techniques, appearing to listen passively, Gareth and Paul recorded the features in their workbooks. The teacher explained:

The pressures are on teachers now to meet the grades rather than the students. The students tend to abdicate responsibility to the teachers because they know the teachers will tell them everything they need to know to pass the exam. (Academic Teacher 3).

Academic Teacher 5 remarked that what was taught in lessons was in anticipation of the exam:

We feel limited in what we can include in the lesson because we know that at the end of the day there's an exam to pass. (Academic Teacher 5).

Nevertheless, the boys did take responsibility as evidenced by them being aware of the importance of attaining, particularly in English and Maths when remarking on the importance of grades to gain employment. Their sense of responsibility was also evident in their keenness in lessons coerced by the clock ticking and the rapid pace - frequent reminders of the importance of them 'needing to achieve grade C to pass the exam'.

By being responsible for pupils' attainment lead some teachers to try and secure pupils' performance outcomes. In 2009 the government introduced the replacement of coursework by controlled assessments whereby pupils prepare to answer the question set in the examination. Vocational Teacher 1 explained:

At times teachers can tend to push students in a certain way [...]. Teachers can influence work that is submitted or how it is conducted in a controlled environment aware of the pressures of results and the time available.
(Vocational Teacher 1).

This teacher indicated that under pressure teachers went to great lengths to push pupils across the grade C threshold.

In discussing the boys' responses under controlled conditions, Academic Teacher 3 explained:

You can't tell them what they need to write when they go into the exam, but it's difficult because you know that if they include certain points it will improve their mark. They need to work out what they want to say but we know they have to pass the exam. We aim for a balance, but it's difficult at times. (Academic Teacher 3).

On the one hand, this teacher appeared to want to provide pupils with the opportunity to learn independently, but on the other, seemed trapped. During the observation of the lesson lead by Academic Teacher 3, the class was asked to consider the layout of the article. The pupils were given just a couple of minutes to consider their ideas before the teacher explained at length what the pupils needed to write to attain grade C. There was limited time for Gareth and Paul to work freely. The government identified that by pupils not being given sufficient time in lessons to work independently, this prevented their learning development (DCFS, 2008). However, this demand on teachers appears difficult given the extent to which they are accountable for pupils' performance. When asked what factors affected the learning of boys in Year 10, Additional Teacher 2 explained:

It's actually trying to get staff to allow students to learn independently and that means a lot of work outside of the classroom preparing lessons and thinking about the needs of each individual pupil. And then the lesson should work out, but inevitably there is some teaching to the test. (Additional Teacher 2).

He appeared to overlook how teachers of boys below the grade C/D benchmark might experience the pressures of balancing offering the boys the opportunity to work independently with supporting them to pass their exams. In using the word 'inevitably', he suggested that the GCSE benchmark indicators were of primary concern at school level. This raises the question of how policymakers, who are removed from the classroom, might understand the pressures on teachers of boys identified as 'underachieving'. Additional Teacher 2 added:

Being a small community school means that there is always pressure because there are a number of larger academies nearby which is where parents are likely to send their kids if our results drop. (Additional Teacher 2).

Interestingly, Academic Teacher 4, remarked, 'intake has been affected by the school being in special measure two years ago'. The context chapter drew attention to schools in competition with one another and some parents wishing to choose a 'successful' school in performance terms. The comment made by Additional Teacher 2 was indicative of a non-selective school, which had previously been in special measures, under pressure to reach the GCSE performance threshold and improve attainment. This was in order to remain competitive in a selective LA where schools of all types are being judged by the same performance measure.

5.3 Section three

Collaborative learning and ethos (teachers) and how this feeds into boys maintaining motivation

In Chapter Two I examined the historical school structure, the outcome of which has left Stone Acre School situated in an area where pupils continue to take the 11+ test. Stone Acre is, therefore, a lower status school because those who pass the test attend their local

grammar school. The next set of data shows how teachers were surviving the surveillance regime in which they were under pressure by being held accountable for the boys' attainment. Ball (1993, p.12) asserts that 'policies **are** textual interventions into practice' Ball (1993, p.12) argues that rather than simply identifying the ways in which actors resist policy that researchers need to examine the changing relationships between 'constraint and agency' as power can be productive when teachers engage in 'creative social action' within the limits in which they practice. I argue that Stone Acre school's ethos, in which pupils were encouraged to collaborate with one another as a means of enhancing their learning, was one way in which teachers mitigated the boys from some of the pressures.

Approaches to teaching and learning at Stone Acre included all teachers being required to include learning techniques in their lessons, which encourage pupils to collaborate with one another as a means of enhancing their learning. Kagan (1986) developed a number of co-operative methods for teachers to use in their practice to encourage active learning amongst pupils. At Stone Acre, whole school systems required teachers to include at least one 'Kagan' strategy in every lesson. During the English lesson in which the aim was to understand how poetic devices had been employed to convey meanings in the poem, Academic Teacher 5, fervently asked the class to stand up, walk around the room and greet their peers. When the teacher put his right hand in the air the class remained still and raised their right hand. Robert, Tom and Joshua as did the rest of the class, paired up with the person nearest to them and sat at the table closest. This Kagan technique, 'stand-up, hand-up, pair-up' created an energetic atmosphere amongst the boys as they eagerly awaited their next instruction. The topic being covered was World War One poetry. Each group was given a different photographic image depicting ways that soldiers and citizens had experienced war. Once seated in groups of four, the boys were each given a number from one to four. The class was asked to share their ideas about what was being conveyed by the image. The class was instructed to work in a 'Round Robin': each pupil took turns in offering his or her ideas beginning with pupil number one. Pupil number four was also given the task of recording the group's ideas. The boys appeared to enjoy sharing their

ideas and interestingly when interviewed subsequent to the lesson two pupil participants explained:

When you see a picture you get a better description in your head than when someone is just explaining it to you. (Joshua).

And

When we discuss ideas together it helps me to understand. (Robert).

After five minutes the teacher switched to the activity 'Envoies', a Kagan strategy whereby an expert from each group was then chosen to move to a different group where he shared his group's ideas with the new group - the pupils from the new group did the same. By this method, the teacher facilitated the learning. After about five minutes the experts moved back to their original groups and the learning sequence concluded with the teacher selecting pupils by number. Robert explained to the class how his group's discussion had developed their understanding of events in the poem. Previous research highlights pupils' individual needs being met through whole school systems as a factor of a school ethos in which pupils' encounter a positive learning experience (Gazeley et al., 2013). In spite of teachers working within a pressured space, encouraged by them to work co-operatively, the boys appeared to be actively engaged in learning.

The discussion of photographs suggested that the different spaces outside of lessons were influential in the boys' learning experience. Joshua presented an image of nine boys on the school field. He remarked:

Joshua: A lot of Year 10s go and play football here. Year 11 play too and some of the younger years. (Joshua).

Of the six photos chosen by each pair to discuss, all of them included examples of the boys spending time with friends before, during and after school. This suggests the school ethos was such that the pupil participants felt comfortable. Engel et al., (2010) argue that

schools that provide before and after schools clubs where pupils are encouraged to interact with their peers provide additional support to pupils with learning. At Stone Acre, planned as part of the school day, breakfast club appeared to be a period when pupils were encouraged to develop their relationships with peers. Two boys showed me a photograph of the school field:

Paul: This is the one (photo) of breakfast time. We go to breakfast club before school and then afterwards we play football with each other in teams and do stuff like that.

The values placed by the school on the role of friends in supporting their learning appeared as a protective factor against a performance context that places pupils under pressure. This was reflected in what the boys said about the value of friends in helping them learn:

Robert: It (having friends) helps your confidence I guess.

And:

Tom: Very important.

Gareth: Ye.

Tom: I think it plays one of the biggest parts in learning.

Gareth: You need friends in lessons, not just to talk to but to help as well.

The boys' friendships outside of the classroom may have explained their positive responses towards their learning experience in lessons. Consistent with previous findings by Lupton (2000) who identifies pupils' interactions with one another as significant to their learning outcomes, Vocational Teacher 3 drew attention to the importance of pupils working with friends for learning to be successful:

The pupils collaborate with each other in their work and peer-assess. We encourage them to be test buddies. They have to ask their peers before us [...]. We support them to learn from one another and they like it. It helps with their confidence and it gives pupils more control over their learning. (Vocational Teacher 3).

By being encouraged to learn together, appeared to have a positive influence on the boys' learning experience. Previous literature suggests that the importance of developing teacher/pupil relationships to assist young people with learning is recognised in schools that have been found to have an inclusive ethos (Gazeley et al., 2013). All six boys in the study considered the relationship between teachers and pupils as important to Year 10 boys' expectations of themselves. Academic Teacher 3 drew attention to the importance of providing a learning environment in which the boys felt encouraged to learn. He remarked:

The boys respond well when praised, them trusting you, which seems to build a sense of trust between the teacher and the pupils. If they start getting (grade) Cs and perhaps the odd B grade for an oral piece [...] or for an essay where they do classes and say so [...] so when they're doing well they tend to engage much more. (Academic Teacher 3).

Interestingly, Paul remarked on the support offered by Academic Teacher 3:

When we do WWI poems sir explains things well. He supports us and encourages us, and he shows us pictures of real things that happen, which gives us good ideas. (Paul)

In contrast to findings by Younger and Warrington (1996) who suggest that pupils' negative relations with teachers can have a negative effect on low achieving pupils' attainment, appearing to value his teachers' high expectations, Paul remarked that he felt inspired by the teacher to learn. Consistent with findings which suggest that a school community which encourages high expectations (Engel et al., 2010) has positive effects on pupils' learning, findings here suggested that in spite of teachers feeling coerced into supporting pupils to meet the GCSE benchmark grades, they were committed to creating an inclusive learning environment where the boys could feel they belonged. For example, the boys were encouraged to recognise the value of their work by being encouraged to publish it on the school's website for wider readership, as Vocational Teacher 3 explained:

Sometimes they [the pupils] take part in public speaking exercises about their work which we put on school community website so that parents can watch.
(Vocational Teacher 3).

A photograph taken by two of the boys revealed an image of the school motto displayed near the main entrance to the school. They presented a second photograph of a large canvas on which the school motto was similarly displayed. Sam explained:

Sam: I take GCSE Art and this is a piece, which my group worked on together. You can see it as you go into where the art rooms are. Ye, it represents everyone within the school community and what everyone does.

Robert: Ye, they both do really. (both boys giggled)

Sam and Robert appeared proud to be part of the Year 10 Art group, members of which had composed the representation. The boys' comments suggested that the school ethos was such that it had a positive influence on Year 10 boys as learners. Interestingly, during the first interview, Sam commented that he did not always like school and yet, in spite of his disaffection he was excelling in Art and appeared to be coping. In spite of practicing within a regulatory system, the ethos of Stone Acre School was such that teachers adapted their practices to provide an inclusive environment in which the boys were able to engage with learning.

Summary

This chapter has shown that teachers experienced considerable pressure to support the boys to attain the GCSE benchmark indicators 5A* to C grades including English and Maths. The GCSE threshold had become a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1972, p.47) embodied by teachers in their practices. Affected by the surveillance regime, teachers were found to be fearful of being considered as 'failing' if the pupils they taught 'failed' to attain by the benchmark. Messages in policy relating to the importance of academic qualifications were transmitted to the boys illustrating how the relationship between policy and practice shaped the boys' learning experience. The hierarchy of the curriculum

was evident by the boys knowing that they were constantly being pressured to attain, particularly in the subjects English and Maths. They appeared panicked in lessons by the urgency conveyed by teachers of English and Maths for them to reach their targets. In spite of recognising policy as defective, coerced, some teachers felt they had no option than to narrow the curriculum to provide the best opportunity for pupils to pass their exams. The boys were reconstructed as avoiding taking responsibility for their learning and yet the boys appeared to recognise the significance of academic learning to secure their futures. An inclusive school ethos in which the boys felt they belonged served to mitigate some of the pressures for them.

Chapter Six

Gendered school processes

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping as these are two significant factors that contribute to the construction of boys' 'underachievement'. Selective grouping affects where boys identified as 'underachieving' are positioned within school, which then influences the type of curriculum that they can access. Previous literature shows that vocational and applied subjects are typically aimed at those who are less successful academically. Data presented in Chapter Two indicated the lower attainment of disadvantaged boys (DFE, 2013a; 2014a) and that they are over-represented in low sets (Cassen and Kingdon, 2012). These two processes overlap and interact with teachers' practices. I begin by presenting my findings which show how the process of selective grouping affected where boys identified as 'underachieving' were positioned within Stone Acre School. I then outline how some teachers recognised the boys as 'underachieving' and explain this in relation to essentialist beliefs about boys' 'ability', learning styles, subject preferences and masculinities. Essentialist understandings of gender, therefore, lead some teachers to overlook the gendered processes of the curriculum and selective grouping. This chapter, therefore, addresses the second research question:

2. How are the learning spaces occupied by Year 10 boys identified as 'underachievers' at Stone Acre School shaped by the school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping practices and teachers' understandings of gender?

Chapter Six is divided into three sections:

6.1 Section one

Selective grouping practices

Part one: Boys disproportionately in the low sets

Part two: Selective grouping and motivation

6.2 Section two

Curriculum process

Part one: Curriculum process as gendered

Part two: Academic/Vocational Curricula

6.3 Section three

Recognising multiple masculinities: challenges to essentialist beliefs about boys as learners

I begin by presenting the findings that show how the process of selective grouping affected where the boys were positioned within Stone Acre School.

6.1 Section one

Selective grouping practices

Part one: Boys disproportionately in the low sets

Connell (2002, P71) suggests that we need to look at the structures to understand the different ways in which gender is being produced. In the review of the literature, attention was drawn to how the education system serves to categorise pupils into teaching groups based on their prior attainment (Gillborn, 2010). The GCSE performance measure, five A* to C grades including English and Maths, is a social construction, one of the effects of which is that it positions pupils identified as 'underachieving', by this benchmark, in low

sets (Cassen and Kingdon, 2012). At Stone Acre School a disproportionate number of boys occupied the low sets. For example, there were four teaching sets in English and four teaching sets in Maths. The two top sets in Maths and the two top sets in English each consisted of thirty pupils. The target grades for pupils in these sets were predominantly A/A* with some pupils estimated to attain grade B. The following data shows that the pupils' GCSE performance targets within each class set covered a broad spectrum. The pupils occupying each of the groups were working towards attaining their GCSE target grades (see Table 21.):

Class Sets	English target grades	Maths target grades
Sets 2	B-C	B-C
Sets 3	E-C	E-C
Sets 4	C-F	E-F

Table 21: Pupil participants' target grades by set

At the time of the study, 51% of pupils at Stone Acre were boys. Of the total number of pupils occupying set 3 and set 4 in Maths, 66% were boys and in English, 77% were boys. This data contrasts with the percentage of boys in the two top sets for English and Maths, which was 47% in Maths and 49% in English. Boys were, therefore, under-represented in the high sets and over-represented in the low sets. The following table presents the data, which shows the gender composition of the Maths and English sets which consists of pupils attaining below the GCSE performance threshold (see Table 22.):

Subject	Number of girls	Number of boys	Percentage of boys
Maths Set 3, G1	7	14	67
Maths Set 3, G2	7	13	65
Maths Set 4	5	9	64
Total in Maths	19	36	66
English Set 3, G1	6	15	71
English Set 3, G2	3	19	86
English Set 4	5	14	74
Total in English	14	48	77
Total in English and Maths Sets 3 and 4	33	84	72

(the letter 'G' signifies 'Group')

Table 22: Number of boys compared with girls who occupied the space below the GCSE grade C at Key Stage 4

The data shows that boys disproportionately occupied the low sets. They were predominantly present in the low English sets. This suggests that the system of setting was having an unequal impact on where boys identified as 'underachieving' were positioned within the school.

Previous research indicates that boys from low socio-economic backgrounds are also over-represented in the low sets (Gilborn and Mirza, 2000; Connolly, 2006). Of the combined number of boys occupying Set 3 and Set 4 in Maths and English at Stone Acre, 68, (57%) were identified as disadvantaged by the FSM indicator. In contrast, in the highest sets for English and Maths, 17, (8%) of boys were identified as disadvantaged. The intersection of gender with disadvantaged is evidenced by boys being over-represented in the low English and Maths sets and under-represented in the high sets when studying these subjects.

Importantly, the type of group pupils find themselves in affects the grade they can attain (Boaler et al., 2000). Pupils unlikely to attain higher than grade C are those likely to be

entered for the GCSE English *Foundation Tier Examination*.¹⁸ Academic Teacher 1 emphasised the importance of setting due to the skills required to attain the performance threshold being quite different to those required in the *Higher Tier Examination*. However, Academic Teacher 3 drew attention to pupils recognising that being placed in a low set limited their attainment outcomes:

Once they're in a foundation class they know they can't aim for anything more than a grade C. (Academic Teacher 3).

His comment suggested that the pupils were aware that by being located within a low set they were not receiving the same learning opportunities as those in high sets. This is, therefore, a barrier, affecting boys more than girls. However, Joshua commented:

I was in a higher set for Maths last year and went down so that I could get more help to achieve grade C. (Joshua).

Joshua was observed during the Maths lesson. He appeared engaged in solving questions suggesting that he was keen to improve his chances of attaining grade C in Maths. This may have partly explained why he understood the low set as a space he should be grateful to occupy even though the most he could hope for was the minimum benchmark. Academic Teacher 2, however, related what she considered to be pupils' lack of commitment to a lack of 'ability':

Those in the low sets are not that able and they struggle with English and then they're not always engaged. (Academic Teacher 2).

Rather than questioning the rationale behind pupils being placed in a low set this teacher, in referring to them as 'not that able', revealed an essentialised understanding of 'ability'. Furthermore, she did not untangle the potential impact of setting on pupils' motivation. The boys' learning opportunities at Stone Acre School were therefore limited not only by

¹⁸ The new curriculum to be assessed from 2017 does not include *Foundation* and *Higher* exam papers.

being positioned in bottom sets, but teachers' understandings of 'ability' linked to the type of group they occupied further shaped the space in which the boys learned.

Part two: Selective grouping and motivation

The findings suggested there is a link between the process of selective grouping and boys' motivation once they become positioned in a low set and that some teachers' essentialist understandings of gender and 'ability' affected their expectations of the boys as learners, leading them to overlook the process of selective grouping as affecting the boys' learning experience. Previous research has shown that teachers recognise the advantages of mixed sets in social terms, offering the best opportunities for the higher achievers to attain the higher grades whilst also improving the behaviour of the lowest (Reid et al., 1982). Consistent with previous findings, Academic Teacher 4 explained that groups that consisted of pupils with a range of knowledge, skills and understanding were 'really beneficial in terms of behaviour'. She indicated that she believed that pupils were less likely to misbehave by not being placed in a low set viewing the process of selective grouping itself as a problem. She continued:

Up with the more able kids they see a purpose and they want to strive for those higher grades. (Academic Teacher 4).

Academic Teacher 4 suggested that by working in a mixed set, pupils were able to recognise success, which motivated them to attain:

When I first came here [...] you would have a mixed ability class that could consist of grade A and grade E students and the reason I liked that was because all the students had something to aspire to. (Academic Teacher 4).

She indicated that pupils in mixed sets did not feel that they were occupying a low-status space that offered little hope of success. Her view reflected the very few members of staff in Ball's (1981) study who advocated that having mixed sets was a much more open and fairer way to educate young people. Given the disproportionate number of boys in the

low sets, the comments by Academic Teacher 4 indicated that she recognised selective grouping practices as impacting negatively on the learning experiences of boys identified as ‘underachieving’.

Academic Teacher 5, whose teaching group consisted of predominantly boys, recognised the low set in English as a space interpreted by the pupils as a low-status space where they were likely to feel stigmatised and where they believed teachers’ expectations of their attainment were low:

Because they are [Year group] 10 Set 4, they interpret that as being they are the thickest in the school. And because targets grades for the students in the lower sets are more likely to be relatively low, their self-esteem is at stake - ‘I am only expected to get this grade - English isn’t my strongest subject’. They then lose their motivation. (Academic Teacher 5).

Previous findings by Hallam and Ireson (2006) reveal that pupils’ motivation is likely to be influential on how well they attain. The teacher’s reading that boys in the bottom English set ‘interpret that as being they are the thickest in the school’ is reflective of the messages communicated implicitly by the structures within which learning is experienced. Indicating that he recognised the bottom set as low-status, Academic Teacher 5 also commented that he believed the space itself defined how the pupils viewed themselves as learners, which was likely to negatively influence their learning.

I don’t think they realise their potential. A lot of the time boys are on an E grade or even a D and do have the potential to get a C but I think a lot of it is a lack of motivation and interest for the subject. (Academic Teacher 5).

By the process of selective grouping working against pupils positioned in the low set, begs the question of how we might expect teachers to respond. This teacher, for example, recognised the potential of pupils in low sets. Nevertheless, the data gathered from the boys provided little evidence of the pupils feeling unmotivated as a consequence of them

learning in a low set. For example, Gareth's desire to reach beyond a grade C in the subjects he had chosen was evident:

In other subjects you choose, like the ones I chose, [BTEC Sport, GCSE ICT and GCSE Graphic Design] I don't just want to get a C in them, I want to get a B [grade].
(Gareth).

The enjoyment expressed by Gareth around learning vocational subjects had clearly motivated him to do well and this may have increased his confidence to learn in other areas as well.

The next group of comments are consistent with previous findings which suggest that gender is constantly being produced through fixed ideas about boys' attitudes towards learning as outlined in Chapter three (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Barker, 1997; Younger and Warrington, 1996; Salisbury and Jackson, 1996). Academic Teacher 2 remarked that pupils in low sets are more difficult to motivate (Finley, 1984; Reay et al., 2010):

I think it's more challenging to teach the lower achieving classes because the pupils are not particularly motivated. (Academic Teacher 2).

Misrecognising the over-representation of boys, some of whom were disadvantaged in the group, Academic Teacher 2 spoke generally about what she assumed as pupils' lack of enthusiasm. Academic Teacher 3 explained that he thought that boys' lack of motivation was due to them being more interested in sport than learning:

Football takes up the boys' time generally and this affects their grades.
(Academic Teacher 3).

Additional Teacher 3, blamed boys' lack of motivation on them being members of a gang when not in school:

They are often part of a gang outside school and just simply not interested in what's happening in the classroom. (Additional Teacher 3).

Essentialising boys' interests, both teachers relocated the cause of their 'underachievement' outside of the schooling system. Their assumptions about boys as learners, particularly, if directly communicated, may have affected the boys' perceptions of themselves as learners including their self-concept (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005). Vocational Teacher 3, blamed boys' lack of success in learning to them not being motivated in the way in which he assumed girls to be. He stated, 'I think boys are just lazy compared to girls'. Reading gender through an essentialist lens, Vocational Teacher 3 communicated an essentialised and homogenised understanding of boys' attitudes towards learning. His comment also contradicts what the data revealed earlier about Gareth's impetus 'to get a B [grade]' in each vocational subject that he studied. Commenting that boys are easily distracted, Academic Teacher 2 remarked:

They (boys) lose concentration in lessons especially when they see their friends doing the same. (Academic Teacher 2).

This comment suggested that Academic Teacher 2 was unable to distinguish between what she understood to be boys' masculinity and their apparent lack of attention. She also presented a negative picture of boys. In sum, the low sets were recognised by some teachers as impacting negatively upon the boys. Others, in homogenising boys as a consequence of their essentialist understandings of gender and 'ability', misrecognised how, through the process of selective grouping, the boys had come to be associated with negative pursuits. Teachers lacked reflection on the way in which the boys had come to be positioned and misrecognised the disproportionate number of disadvantaged boys in the low sets. Teachers were unable to separate the boys from the space they occupied and did not recognise how these different facets come together. Some teachers' willingness to express their assumptions about boys as learners also suggested an acceptability of the boys' situation.

6.2 Section two

Curriculum process

Part one: Curriculum process as gendered

In addition to being over-represented in bottom sets, at Stone Acre School, boys also experience their learning amidst particular beliefs about subjects viewed as being masculine/feminine (Warrington and Younger, 2000; Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003; Francis and Skelton, 2005; Connolly, 2006). Boys identified as ‘underachieving’ at Stone Acre School were, for example, over-represented in subjects traditionally viewed as more orientated to the learning needs of boys (Pring et al., 2009). The following table (Table 23.) shows the subjects that were chosen for study by the boys in addition to the core subjects, English, Maths and Science:

Name of participant	Subject	Subject	Subject
Sam	BTEC Sport	DIDA	GCSE Art
Gareth	BTEC Sport	GCSE ICT	GCSE Graphic Design
Paul	GCSE P.E	DIDA	GCSE D&T
Joshua	GCSE P.E	DIDA	GCSE D&T
Robert	BTEC Sport	DIDA	GCSE Art
Tom	BTEC Sport	GCSE ICT	GCSE Art

Table 23: The subjects chosen for study by each of the six pupil participants

Interestingly those selected by Sam and Robert included two vocational subjects and one applied GCSE. This is, perhaps, unexpected given the emphasis on academic subjects in the national tables and the English Baccalaureate as a measure of schools’ performance as discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. Findings presented in the following table show the gender distribution of the vocational subjects studied by the pupil participants (see Table 24.):

Year 10	Girls	Boys	Percentage of boys
BTEC Sport	0	30	100%
GCSE P.E	2	26	92%
DIDA (Diploma in Digital Applications)	2	22	91%
GCSE ICT	3	25	88%
GCSE D&T	3	21	88%
GCSE Graphic Design	7	14	67%
GCSE Art	11	14	56%

Table 24: Number of boys compared with girls who followed vocational and applied subjects when the data were gathered

These data are consistent with previous literature that highlights that subjects which demand practical application are commonly considered to be more suitable for boys (Paechter, 2000). While GCSE P.E, GCSE D&T and GCSE ICT, were predominantly studied by boys, the BTEC Sport group consisted entirely of boys. Embedded stereotypical beliefs about subjects being more/less suited to boys was reflected in the number following, for example, BTEC Sport which demands practical application or GCSE ICT, which requires a logical approach. Traditionally, such subjects have been considered as more suitable to what has been perceived as boys' innate learning preferences.

GCSE P.E was experienced as an all male curriculum option. Vocational Teacher 2 indicated the importance of building a strong relationship with the boys during lessons:

I have built an excellent relationship with the boys, and that's important in subjects like BTEC Sport and P.E. because it helps build their confidence.
(Vocational Teacher 2).

During the observation of the BTEC Sport lesson, banter occurred between the teacher and the group. For example, towards the end of the lesson when practicing the skills of basketball, the teacher explained to the boys that their progress was due to them

possessing the kind of 'stamina' essential to sustaining a sense of competition throughout a match. He then clarified what was meant by 'stamina'. He referred to the boys having 'inherent strength' which assisted them in their determination to accomplish new skills, subsequent to which the ball was rapidly passed between the boys and the teacher. The boys performed a number of impressive moves along with exhibiting much laughter as the group dispersed. By reinforcing and thus normalising essentialist assumptions about boys' stamina, the teacher essentialised and constructed the particular form of masculinity and learner identity that he believed to be necessary for a basketball match to be played successfully.

In conclusion, boys identified as 'underachieving' at Stone Acre School encountered a gendered learning experience. Positioned in the low sets to learn English and Maths, they were given less access to an academic curriculum as evidenced by the disproportionate number of boys learning vocational subjects. This overlapped with the process of selective grouping and also had an affect on their learning opportunities. There was also evidence to suggest that the boys' learner identities were being limited as an outcome of boys' masculinities being essentialised.

Part two: Academic/Vocational Curricula

The findings suggested both the teachers and the boys experienced less pressure in vocational and applied subjects compared to English and Maths. Although the study suggested that the vocational learning space is essentially a male space, there are certain freedoms evident in the findings reflective of vocational and applied subjects not being compulsory and therefore less central to how schools are judged. Findings showed that the boys enjoyed their learning in these lessons considering the English and Maths curricula as more demanding. Vocational Teacher 2 considered the BTEC qualification much easier to pass:

My priority for getting the boys their result is for them to get it down on paper. But they will not necessarily be showing their understanding, as there is no exam. When we do GCSE P.E. there is an exam and they have to show their understanding then - as a teacher you have to make sure they understand it. With BTEC Sport, once it's done, it can be forgotten about. The course came about because if you passed it guaranteed four GCSEsⁱ. It's pretty easy to get a pass - it's still a guaranteed A* to C grade. (Vocational Teacher 2).

The teacher suggested that for BTEC Sport because a pupil's 'ability' is assessed on coursework, there was less pressure, as pupils did not have to sit an exam in contrast to GCSE P.E. where there is a standardised test. There is, therefore, a different kind of learning required for GCSE P.E. In addition to the curricula covering theoretical elements, the P.E. curricula retain practical components similar to applied GCSEs such as Graphic Design, and, D&T, courses followed by the Year 10 boys. Within the last three years, in order to improve the status of vocational qualifications and because schools were entering their pupils' BTEC results to improve their performance, the value of a BTEC First (Level 2) vocational qualification was reduced to the equivalence of one GCSE from the academic year 2013/2014. This teacher recognised BTEC Sport as an easier option than GCSE P.E. for pupils to attain. There was more freedom for him to demonstrate that the pupils had attained in his subject by opting to teach a subject which required more practical skills compared to the skill sets needed for academic subjects including English and Maths.

One pupil participant appeared to favour BTEC Sport finding the lessons more enjoyable than English and Maths:

If it's a Maths or English lesson you need to concentrate to get a good grade but if it's an options lesson and you are interested you will find it easier to concentrate more. I prefer and enjoy my sport. (Sam).

There appeared to be an understanding amongst Year 10 boys that the Maths and English curricula were more demanding than the programmes in other subject areas and therefore the courses commenced earlier. Tom and Gareth commented:

Tom : They [Maths and English] are more involved than in a lot of other subjects.
 Most Year 10s feel this as we are starting our GCSEs earlier [...] you need to get at least a grad C and it's difficult...
 Gareth: More difficult in Maths and English.

Practical learning, which is different from academic learning perhaps, appeared less challenging to these pupils and vocational and applied subjects were recognised by the boys and some staff as easier to pass. Given the lack of parity between academic and vocational and applied qualifications, Gareth's higher grades in his vocational and applied subjects, if attained, were unlikely to be recognised with the same merit.

Previous literature draws attention to the value to be had from transferring the skills learned in one subject to the learning in another (Doyle, 2012). Additional Teacher 2 indicated that skills that demand a practical approach can also be incorporated into the learning of English and Maths remarking, 'we like Kagan [co-operative learning strategies] because the same skills can be developed by the children in all lessons'. Interestingly, Gareth recognised the value of new skills learned in GCSE Graphics as helping his further development in academic subjects:

We are used to working together in Graphics and I think this helps when we come to discuss ideas in like, Maths and English. (Gareth).

The impression given was that when required to use similar skills of discussion in Maths and English as those practiced in Graphics, Gareth was able to approach the activity with more confidence. The skills the boys developed through their relations with their teachers and their peers when learning collaboratively and uniting with their friends, during the school day, may also have influenced the boys' learning outcomes in English and Maths. Therefore, rather than perceiving vocational subjects as less rigorous than academic subjects, the skills learned in GCSE Graphic Design, need to be viewed as complimentary.

Lesson observations of the boys learning in vocational and applied subjects indicated a very different picture to the observations of the pupil participants in English and Maths. Learning in the BTEC Sport, DIDA and GCSE Art lessons appeared to be more on the process rather than on the boys attaining their targets. For example, in a BTEC Sport lesson, in small groups, the boys practiced the skills of handling the ball when playing basketball. Facilitated by the teacher, a number of drills were exercised before the game was played. Both groups made up of ten pupils were supervised, one by the teacher, the other by a teacher trainee. The boys put the new skills they had learned during the first part of the lesson into practice during the second. However, the skills required to be tested at GCSE level reflect the difference in what is valued at the level of policy. Nonetheless, a narrowed curriculum enables pupils to be schooled so that the knowledge and skills on which they are tested can be repeated during the exam (Connell, 2013). From early in the DIDA lesson, without the pressure of preparing for an exam, the boys appeared less pressured as they worked self-sufficiently on plans for building a computer programme. The skills being developed included those, which focus on the learning process rather than the final outcome. Ten minutes before the end of the lesson pupils worked in pairs to assess their progress against the success criteria, but with the absence of a timer, the pace of the lesson appeared more relaxed and without multiple references by the teacher to pupils' target grades the boys also appeared at ease. One pupil participant remarked:

Paul: Both of us do DIDA but there is also GCSE ICT which is where we do a whole tech' (technology) day. It's where they make websites and take computers apart [...]. We make games and they make games but we use programmes and they use websites. Year 10s really enjoys this.

Joshua: We enjoy creating our own games.

Paul: Ye we do. We can choose to take ICT if we want to.

Joshua: Ye, it used to be compulsory.

Interestingly, Vocational Teacher 3 remarked:

Because they're enjoying their learning, it seems to give them more confidence.
(Vocational Teacher 3).

The fact that vocational learning is not compulsory may also have contributed to why the boys felt more at ease when studying these subjects. The boys' optimism towards vocational learning may have been due to the more practical elements or that they had made choices about which subjects they wished to follow, or that the focus in lessons was less about meeting their targets. Nonetheless, the feelings described by the boys and evidence from the lessons suggested they experienced less pressure. This may have made it easier for them to learn. Paul and Joshua similarly spoke of the keenness of Year 10 towards learning non-academic subjects:

Paul: Vocational subjects are the most popular ones. ICT and BTEC Sport are Really popular with Year 10s.

Joshua: Ye and D&T and they all are really.

Additional Teacher 2, stated that pupils were supported to follow the subjects chosen for study at GCSE level:

We honestly feel we want to offer genuine choices to our students. We value Technology and Art here and if these are the subjects our pupils wish to pursue then we encourage them to do so. (Additional Teacher 2).

However, the literature review drew attention to how the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (E-Bacc) skews pupils' education even further towards an academic learning experience. The next comment by Additional Teacher 2, suggested that he felt frustrated by the importance given to academic over vocational subjects:

Languages subjects and Humanities such as Geography may not be suitable for some pupils to follow and yet are a measure by which the school gets judged.
(Additional Teacher 2).

He suggested that the measure did not necessarily account for the range of interests and talents of the pupils. He added, 'we like to offer our pupils the opportunity to choose the subjects they wish to follow [at GCSE level]' which suggests the school embraced vocational and applied subjects and contrasts policy which favours an academic learning experience. In spite of the lack of parity between academic and vocational and applied subjects in terms of how pupils' performance is measured, the school ethos was such that the boys appeared to be encouraged to follow whichever learning pathway they chose.

Being rather less central to the attainment of pupils by the key performance measure, the teachers of vocational and applied subjects who were interviewed and observed appeared slightly less pressured than the teachers of English and Maths. The Year 10 boys also expressed more enjoyment of learning in subjects such as GCSE Graphic Design, BTEC Sport and GCSE ICT where the focus tended to be more on process than the final outcome. Transferable skills acquired through learning vocational and applied subjects were recognised by some boys as supporting their learning in English and Maths.

6.3 Section three

Recognising multiple masculinities: challenges to essentialist beliefs about boys as learners

In Chapter Three I suggested that debates on boys' 'underachievement' broadly reflect two principal trains of thought: gender is either understood as essentially innate or it is socially constructed. Previous research indicates that boys' and girls' learning preferences tend to be understood on the grounds of essentialist readings of gender, for example, the historic assumption that girls prefer to work collaboratively whereas boys prefer lessons to be teacher lead (Spender, 1982). A comment by one of the boys challenged previous assumptions that boys and girls have different learning preferences and learning styles:

Sometimes we get to discuss in groups and we like it because we all have to join in and it's more interesting. (Joshua).

The literature also highlights that historically, Sport and Construction have been characterised as masculine subjects, which require practical engagement by pupils (Paechter, 2000). However, views about boys' preferences towards hands-on learning were mixed. For example, Vocational Teacher 1, noted, 'few pupils prefer the theory elements of the course'. Vocational Teacher 2, remarked, 'most boys prefer to learn actively rather than sitting at a desk'. However, the boys' views were different:

There are two classes of sport. [...] I like theory in sport as much as the practical. (Gareth).

Paul also commented:

I like studying theory in P.E as much as the practical. (Paul).

And:

Understanding the theory helps when creating our own programmes. (Robert, who studied DIDA).

Their comments contradicted the teachers suggesting that their learning preferences were being homogenised, misrecognised or even assumed.

The literature revealed how the study of English has been considered as posing a threat to boys by being conventionally regarded as a feminine subject, (Head, 1997). Academic Teacher 3 suggested that the Year 10 boys viewed English as not masculine:

I don't think English is seen as a cool subject. Some subjects allow them to be good at it without losing any reputation points. Poetry, for example, it is seen as a feminine activity and can leave them feeling embarrassed. (Academic Teacher 3).

As a male English teacher, it appeared surprising that he reinforced the notion of English as a feminine subject. This suggests the complexities, which surround essentialist readings

of gender. These include, for example, some subjects being considered as essentially more practical and therefore more appropriate to learning by boys but also boys in low sets who some teachers assumed to lack motivation. Interestingly, when I observed Gareth and Paul in the lesson lead by Academic Teacher 3, they appeared as engaged in learning as the girls, which highlights how gendered assumptions of boys' learning preferences may have become embedded in teachers' practices as well as in individuals' perceptions of subjects as being inherently masculine or feminine.

Based on essentialist readings of gender, previous researchers suggest that boys and girls have different orientations towards schoolwork (Bleach, 1998; Ofsted, 1996; 2003; Gurian, 2002; 2005; Gurian and Stevens, 2006). Vocational Teacher 3 commented:

The girls are far better. This is where the A*s are. [...] The thing about ICT is that it involves communication and girls are good at this. The portfolio they produce has to have lots of context, lots of explanation of the process they went through - the review - what I think and what others think about the work and they're good at doing that bit. (Vocational Teacher 3).

Consistent with previous literature, which has identified some teachers as supposing girls to be naturally more articulated than boys, this teacher indicated that boys were essentially poor communicators lacking the skills necessary to attain the high grades. His suggestion that girls were better self-reflectors and more able to give an account of the stages undertaken to complete a piece of work is consistent with the view held by Spender (1992). Overlooking that the boys' individual learning preferences may have been quite different (Francis and Skelton, 2005), he then remarked that 'girls are creative, give attention to detail and their work looks nice'. This resonates with previous research in which teachers have been found to assume that girls are more likely to be imaginative and meticulous (Head, 1997). The next three comments also reflect teachers' essentialist views of boys' as learners:

Confidence is an issue with boys. A lot of these boys sit quietly and can avoid taking part in the lesson and some don't want to be seen to learn. (Additional Teacher 1).

And:

Boys tend not to be so open with their emotions compared to girls.
(Additional Teacher 2).

And:

Boys prefer teachers who are consistent. (Academic Teacher 5).

Gendered beliefs, such as these reflect some teachers' very simple readings of gender. Such comments should inform our understandings of how underachievement is constructed within the learning spaces occupied by boys. The data collected from the boys about their learning preferences clearly contrasted with some teachers' understandings.

Importantly, the boys who participated in this study were found to understand that they experienced teachers' gendered behaviours. For example, previous findings suggest that boys receive less praise than girls (Jones and Myhill, 2004) and the following boys saw preferential treatment for girls in teachers' practices:

Robert: Sometimes the teachers praise the girls more than the boys. This happens in Dida...

Sam: Ye, the girls get all the As and A*s while the boys get all the Cs and Bs.

Robert: And they do the work before us and sometimes it's hard for boys to get their grades but still the girls get praised more than us.

The boys recognised teachers as giving limited praise to boys compared to girls and indicated that they believed that teachers perceived girls as more likely to attain high grades. Previous research reveals that teachers believe girls present fewer behaviour problems than boys and that this has a negative impact on pupil/teacher relations

(Younger and Warrington, 1996). When asked whether the expectation by the school for pupils to succeed is different for boys than girls, the following pupil participants suggested there was an expectation amongst teachers that the boys in the class were more likely to misbehave. All six boys commented on female teachers being more aware of boys disrupting learning than girls:

Joshua: Some teachers are sexist towards you.

Paul: Yes, some teachers think boys are going to mess around more than girls, but generally it's the same. Some female teachers pick up on boys more than girls.

And:

Robert: Girls get it easier. In terms of overall punishments, female teachers are much stricter with boys than girls

Sam: I think the same.

And:

Gareth: Girls get to sit with their friends when taught by a woman and boys are always split up around the tables.

Tom: Ye, and usually it's the girls who mess around.

The boys indicated that teachers considered them to be disruptive just by being boys, particularly female teachers who they understood as being more lenient towards girls. Interviews with all six boys indicated that they recognised preferential treatment of girls by female teachers in their practices. There is, however, a sense of bias in their comments given that they spoke on behalf of Year 10 boys. Nevertheless, female teachers confirmed a tendency to have negative expectations of boys' behaviour during lessons. The next two female teachers indicated that they believed boys as likely to present teachers with challenging behaviours:

Boys can be very boisterous and can be exceedingly immature.
(Academic Teacher 1).

And:

Boys are just plain immature. (Additional Teacher 3).

The appropriateness of the teachers' accusations of boys' immaturity needs to be questioned. However, their willingness to say these things suggested that it was 'normal' for these essentialist views to be conveyed.

Male teachers were also found to have understandings of gender that affected their beliefs about boys as learners. For example, Vocational Teacher 3, who was male, indicated that boys worked better in classes lead by male teachers:

Some of the boys in this school moderate their behaviour far more for a number of male teachers than they do for female teachers. (Vocational Teacher 3).

This teacher's reference to the behaviour of boys improving when taught by a male member of staff reflected an essentialist understanding of gender which resonates with previous findings in which male teachers understand they are better positioned to assert 'masculine' authority over boys (Mac an Ghaill, 1994).

Vocational Teacher 2, who was male, remarked that boys learn better when they are not taught by a female:

Boys respond well in lessons to a strong male figure who provides support and comes across as understanding. (Vocational Teacher 2).

Additional Teacher 2, who was male, remarked that 'pupils without a father figure at home respond well to a strong male figure'. Resonating with previous research (Delamont, 1999), he indicated that boys, who are nurtured solely by a female parent/carer, were likely to benefit from being taught by a man. If Vocational Teacher 2, and/or Additional Teacher 2 communicated to the boys that they essentially recognised

males as more suitable role models for boys compared with female teachers, this may have influenced the way in which the boys recognised female teachers.

Intriguingly, Additional Teacher 3, who was female, remarked:

Boys from one-parent families often learn better when taught by a man.
(Additional Teacher 3).

Interestingly, Vocational Teacher 1, who was male, highlighted that boys rarely misbehaved for him:

There are some characters in there [refers to his Year 10 class which consists of all boys] that can be disruptive but not very often [...]. Friendly teacher/student banter is important. I've taught them a year and a half and have built a good relationship with them. (Vocational Teacher 1).

Consistent with previous findings by Mac an Ghaill (1995) and Smith (2007), this teacher indicated that he encouraged teacher/pupil 'banter' to avoid conflict between himself and the boys which may have resulted in them needing to be disciplined. The impression given was that it was rarely necessary for him to have to reprimand the boys. And, given that Vocational Teacher 1 suggested that he overlooked boys' challenging behaviours may have increased the boys' beliefs that female teachers' are stricter.

Summary

Selective grouping practices and the nature of the curriculum were both factors found to contribute to the construction of boys' 'underachievement'. Findings showed that boys identified as 'underachieving' were disproportionately represented in the low sets. This space was overlapped by the vocational curricula as evidenced by the number of boys studying vocational courses compared to girls and the finding that all six pupil participants followed vocational learning pathways - subjects traditionally viewed as more orientated towards their learning needs. The notion of boys' 'ability' was recognised by some teachers as innate and linked with the extent of which the boys were seen as motivated to

learn or immature. However, the way in which the boys had come to be disadvantaged by being positioned in a low-status space was sometimes overlooked. Even though academic subjects are prominent within the school performance tables, the ethos of the school was such that it valued the pursuit by pupils of vocational learning pathways. The boys appeared to enjoy their learning more in subjects such as ICT, GCSE Graphic Design and Sport where they experienced less pressure but nevertheless recognised the value to be had from transferring related skills learned to their learning of English and Maths.

Consistent with previous findings, teachers homogenised boys' learning preferences by suggesting, for example, that they preferred to learn practically and were poor communicators in comparison to girls. Some teachers were also discovered to essentialise boys' masculinities thereby constructing negative restricted learner identities. The understanding of the pupil participants that female teachers were more likely to expect boys to misbehave resonated with the remarks made by some female teachers, who essentialised boys as being juvenile and unruly. Some male teachers were also found to have gendered assumptions about boys responding better to learning when taught by a man. Teachers' gendered expectations and understandings of boys as learners served to shape the space in which the boys learned and informed their practices.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions

Introduction

This chapter begins by addressing the third research question:

3. What do contextualised understandings of these interactions suggest about the constructions of boys' educational 'underachievement'?

Following this discussion, I reflect upon my methodological approach including my development as a researcher during the research process and briefly discuss some of the challenges I encountered. I present what this thesis claims as a contribution to knowledge then make recommendations for policy and practice. I put my study within the context of developing theories of gender before finishing with my final reflections, which include suggesting areas for future research.

7.1 Gendered constructions of boys' 'underachievement'

In the following section, I bring together the findings from the previous two chapters. Boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning within interacting gendered structures and processes. Shaped by historical school structures, policy reflects a particular construction of 'underachievement', which is arguably extremely powerful in producing gendered effects within school contexts. This section begins by exploring how policy interacted with teachers' practices. Within the context of Stone Acre School, it then considers how the school processes of the curriculum and selective grouping also overlapped and interacted with teachers' understandings of gender.

Part one: Policy interacting with teachers' practices in the construction of boys' 'underachievement'

This study found that policy pressures were instrumental in shaping teachers' practices at Stone Acre School and the way in which the boys experienced their learning. Policy pressures shaped some teachers' practices as under pressure they self-regulated to improve the boys' GCSE performance. As explained in Chapter one, policy sets measures of pupils' attainment. The national performance tables were not set up to produce a gendered outcome. However, holding people to account for pupils' performance is a contributing factor towards boys' 'underachieving' because of the way in which people are responding to the system and processes which they are in. Policy was found to coercively manipulate teachers' 'attitudes' (Foucault, 1977, p.137) as they negotiated their accountability. The data shows, for example, how the GCSE performance measure became embedded in teachers' understandings of pupils' achievement. For example, Some teachers, particularly those of English and Maths narrowly recognised pupils' progress, fixing them at a particular grade. In spite of recognising policy which sets narrow benchmarks as defective, some teachers were also found to project the blame for boys' 'underachievement' by the benchmark on the boys themselves or onto factors outside of school.

One outcome of schools being positioned in competition to improve pupils' attainment was that boys' 'underachievement' was constructed at Stone Acre School by the pupil participants not being included in interventions to improve their GCSE attainment thus limiting their progress. Some teachers, particularly those of English and Maths, conceded that under pressure they offered a narrowed curriculum with the learning focus in lessons on supporting pupils to pass their exams. Because English and Maths are key GCSE performance measures, the Year 10 boys experienced more pressure to meet their targets in these subjects. The boys emphasised the importance of Year 10 boys attaining in English and Maths to secure their futures and were found to recognise their achievement in terms of grades, understanding their learning as being about passing exams, particularly

in these key areas. Messages in policy on improving pupils' attainment had become a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1972, p.47). The effect of being accountable was that a 'circuit' (Connell, 2002, p.47) formed. For example, some teachers felt at risk if they passed the responsibility for learning to the boys. Coerced, teachers struggled to balance offering the opportunity for the boys to learn independently with teaching them transmissively thereby limiting the boys' learning opportunities and therefore contributing to the construction of their 'underachievement'.

Paradoxically, the Year 10 boys at Stone Acre School were nevertheless valued by teachers within an education system which devalues pupils' potential by focussing solely on their attainment outcomes as a measure of their achievement at sixteen. At the level of the school, the teachers found ways to manage the pressures including their own interests in improving the boys' attainment. Within the limits offered by a surveillance regime and within the context of pupils being de-selected from attending grammar school, school-based approaches to teaching and learning served to mitigate the boys from some of the pressures to attain their targets and pass exams. As the data unfolded the ethos of the school revealed itself as a theme. The boys were encouraged by teachers to engage in co-operative learning opportunities, which included the organisation of extra-curricular activities such as breakfast club, where the boys were given the opportunity to develop skills outside of lessons. This fed into a school ethos of which the boys were proud to be a part. This contrasts to an anti-school culture as might be expected, previously identified by Willis' (1977) and subsequent studies to explain boys' 'underachievement' (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1999). In contrast to previous findings, which suggest boys prefer learning to be teacher lead (Noble and Bradford, 2000), the boys at Stone Acre School expressed their desire to learn collaboratively. In contrast to findings in previous research, which propose boys can be unwilling to learn (Pickering, 1997; Bleach, 1998) hegemonic masculinities contributing to their own 'underachievement' (Willis, 1977) findings in this study revealed that not to be the case. In spite of previous research suggesting that pupils in low sets are more likely to have less positive relationships with their teachers and with

one another (Hallam and Ireson, 2003), findings in this study showed that the boys and the teachers considered strong relationships, including the boys relations with peers, as important to their attainment. Teachers had created an inclusive school ethos, which mitigated some of the pressures. Paradoxically, the coercion experienced by teachers in the study had positive as well as negative effects on the boys' learning experience.

Part two: Interaction of gender, the curriculum and selective grouping in the construction of boys' 'underachievement'

Chapter six drew attention to the issues raised in the literature about the gendered effects of the curriculum on the learning of boys identified as 'underachieving'. At the level of the school, the curriculum interacted with gender in a number of different ways. Boys identified as 'underachieving' at Stone School were over-represented in subjects such as BTEC Sport, and GCSEs ICT and D&T, subjects that demand a more practical approach to learning. Paradoxically, the male Academic Teacher 3 reinforced the idea of English being an essentially feminine subject, which he believed boys wished to avoid in spite of them appearing to engage with learning in the lesson. In addition, Vocational Teacher 2 normalised essentialist assumptions about boys' masculinities during a game of basketball. Gendered understandings of the curriculum, therefore, interacted with the notion of what it means to be 'boy', contributing to the construction of boys' 'underachievement'.

The data indicates that at Stone Acre School gender also interacted with selective grouping practices. How this overlaps with disadvantage is evidenced by the disproportionate number of disadvantaged boys occupying the low sets in English and Maths. The low set in English was recognised by Academic Teacher 4 as a space, which impacted negatively on the boys because she believed they understood the space as low-status, unlike mixed sets whereby learning with pupils who performed at a higher level, it was understood that they felt inspired to learn. Academic Teacher 3 drew attention to the boys recognising the low set as where their attainment was regulated by the limited grade

they could attain, and where, according to Academic Teacher 5, the boys felt stigmatised as 'the thickest in the school'. Furthermore, gender intersected disadvantage and interacted with selective grouping practices through some teachers' low expectations of the boys occupying this space. Boys' alleged lack of 'ability' was assumed to be accompanied by a lack of commitment to learning. Misrecognising the intersection between gender and disadvantage, some teachers overlooked the over-representation of boys in the low sets. The over-layering of boys and disadvantage was not recognised and some teachers did not identify this positioning as disproportionate. Some teachers commented on what they understood as essentialist differences in boys' and girls' learning preferences and homogenised boys constructing them as 'immature and lacking in confidence'. Gender was found to be continuously in the process of construction, produced by the way in which teachers' embedded gendered understanding of boys as learners in their practices. The low set is a gendered space with a disproportionate number of boys occupying it (Cassen and Kingdon, 2012). It is also overlapped by a gendered curriculum because pupils in low sets experience low-status subjects. Disadvantaged boys were therefore further disadvantaged by teachers' essentialist understandings of what it means to be a boy. Overlooking the implication of their gendered practices, some teachers were found to reinforce gender within a 'gender regime' (Connell, 2012, p.1677) thereby actively constructing the boys' 'underachievement'.

7.2 Methodological reflections

In chapter three the methodological approach for the study was discussed. The case study method enabled me to report on some of the complexities, which framed the Year 10 boys' relationships with learning. The case, which examined boys 'underachievement' shows how this non-selective school within a selective school system in one LA was a particular point in time. Although initially, I concentrated on the boys to understand their 'underachievement', as the study developed and the data unfolded, my focus moved towards a more holistic approach, which included exploring the system and the school

processes in which the boys learned. The study has shown how the construction of 'underachievement' at the level of policy affected which school type the boys attended, which group they learned within, the curriculum they experienced, and teachers' practices. By being a teacher at Stone Acre school I was able to bring my knowledge of education systems including those, which were operating within the school to my analysis. I was able to recognise some of the anxieties and frustrations experienced by teachers of supporting Year 10 boys, in low sets, to attain. I was also aware that the Year 10 pupils in low sets often expressed feeling discouraged by the pressures on them to meet targets, particularly in English. The combined methods of interviews, lesson observations and school data enabled the findings to be compared, which added to the robustness of the interpretation. Nevertheless, there were limitations including the limited number of lessons observed and the inclusion of only six boys who were encouraged to speak to some extent on behalf of their peers. I would like to have conducted interviews with a larger number of boys and observed a wider range of subjects as this would have provided further insights into the boys' learning experiences. Although I regularly recorded reflections in my journal on the research process as it unfolded, given the time that had often lapsed between, for example, a lesson observation and the written record, I was mindful of the precision with which I remembered events. However, the recorded interviews enabled an account to be gathered of how the Year 10 boys experienced their learning and the observations helped me to interpret directly how learning was being experienced during lessons. The school level data assisted me in selecting the sample of boys in the first instance, provided information on their subject choices and offered details of the boys' attainment at the time of data gathering according to how 'ability' is recognised at the level of policy. It also gave me access to a wider picture of the gender composition of groups for each subject area.

I sought to disentangle the complex relationship between policy on improving pupils' GCSE attainment, the school processes of the curriculum and teachers' practices. I understand 'underachievement' as continuously in the process of construction as an

outcome of the gendered dynamic in play between these different layers. Boys' 'underachievement' is framed by a gendered regime which is deeply embedded within the historical structures. Although the GCSE performance threshold is not concrete, foregrounding a particular construction of 'underachievement' has a number of gendered consequences. These include positioning boys identified as 'underachieving' in low status schools like Stone Acre and locating them within low sets where they experience a low-status curriculum and where teachers have been found to have particular gendered understandings of them as learners.

A systematic approach to analysis that drew on elements of a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.23) assisted me with the analysis. Drake (2011, p.109) draws attention to writing at times being 'an inestimably emotional and sometimes painful experience'. I did find the writing process very challenging and think that part of the reason was because the key issues drawn from the analysis of the data altered the research questions I wished to ask during the course of the study. However, Flower and Hayes (1981) suggest that writing forms part of the thinking process during which the purpose of the writing develops. I learnt to recognise that re-writing guided me towards a more nuanced understanding of the issues relating to boys' 'underachievement'.

7.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis makes a contribution to knowledge in a number of different ways. It extends our understanding of boys' 'underachievement' by suggesting that boys identified as 'underachieving' are disadvantaged by not learning in a gender-neutral space. Building on the work of Ball (1981), this study shows that boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning in a particular way in non-selective schools located in a selective LA where a number of the structures are the same, but with schools' increased accountability, the pressures are different. As an outcome of not passing the 11+ test, the boys in the study were de-selected from the grammar system. The number of disadvantaged boys at Stone Acre School was also higher.

In particular, the study extends our understanding of boys' 'underachievement' as a social construction in which the understandings and practices of teachers are important. Like Ball (1981), I discovered some teachers to believe that pupils positioned in low sets lack 'ability'. More recently, Boaler (1997) who also adopts the case study method, found teachers of pupils positioned in low sets to homogenise their learning needs in Maths. The boys in the study learned within a space that did not always provide them with the best opportunities. Attainment grades, which are a social construction serve to fix pupils and are often read by teachers in ways that limit their potential. To some extent messages on improving attainment have therefore become 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1977, p.47).

Findings from this study emphasise the separation of English and Maths through the way in which pupils' attainment is recognised by the GCSE performance measure as evidenced by teachers' practices. Practicing within a pressured space and unable to remove themselves from their accountability, some teachers, particularly those of English and Maths narrowed the curricula with lesson aims shaped around what was required for the boys to pass their exams. In contrast, the type of learning experienced by the boys in vocational and applied subjects was focussed more on their learning development. This space was an important space in which the boys enjoyed learning. Given that the teachers of vocational subjects were less coerced they were more able to resist the regulatory system. Previous findings that suggest there is a benefit to be gained of transferring the skills learned in vocational subjects to the learning of academic subjects (Doyle, 2012) were strengthened. For example, the boys transferred discussion skills developed in lessons where vocational and applied subjects were taught to the learning of English and Maths.

Being a non-selective school in a selective local authority affects the type of learner in the school because, as discussed, the type of school pupils attend rests upon the understanding of intelligence as fixed. This also creates a sense of a non-selective school as being 'second-best'. As an outcome of the focus in policy on improving pupils'

performance the teachers at Stone Acre had previously experienced practicing in an 'underachieving' school with 'underachieving' pupils when in 2009 the school was put into the category 'Special Measures' (Ofsted 2015a, p.4). Paradoxically, the pressures experienced by them also had positive as well as negative effects on their practices. The teachers found ways to manage the pressures in their interest of improving the boys' attainment. As the data unfolded the ethos of the school revealed itself as a theme. In a sense, the enjoyment with which the boys experienced learning collaboratively suggested they viewed this as key to re-establishing themselves as skilled. Part of the teachers' relationship with policy included engaging in 'creative social action' (Ball, 1993, p.12) through school-based approaches to teaching and learning, which included a number of co-operative learning strategies which served to ease some of the pressures. Findings from the interviews with the participants and from the lesson observations indicated that teachers had built strong relationships with the boys. The boys appeared to feel valued and were found to engage optimistically in the lessons observed.

The thesis contributes insights into boys' 'underachievement' by showing that gender interacted with the process of selective grouping, which in spite of the many changes in education have endured and is a further layer in the construction of boys' 'underachievement'. Teachers' lack of reference to the disproportionate number of boys in the space and nominal recognition of the structures which position boys identified as 'underachieving' in the low sets, a proportion of whom are disadvantaged, helped to maintain and normalise the education conditions in which the boys experienced their learning. This thesis also shows that there are links between essentialist understandings and the construction of restricted masculine learner identities. There was dominance amongst teachers of essentialist understandings of both gender and 'ability'. Some teachers homogenised boys essentialising their learning preferences, misrecognising that their own gendered understandings of boys as learners were powerful towards shaping the space in which the boys learned. Some teachers overlooked how the boys had become positioned in low sets. The boys in the low sets were also not recognised by some

teachers as disadvantaged by coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. It is important to recognise this intersection because it is a further factor in the construction of boys' 'underachievement'.

Importantly the findings from this study contrast with those found in a number of previous studies, which suggest that anti-school behaviours can cause boys from low socio-economic backgrounds to 'underachieve' (Willis, 1977). The boys' responses challenge the simple notion of low attaining, white working-class boys as being disengaged with learning and therefore problematic because the boys in this study displayed rational and responsible masculinities in response to the pressures they felt under to achieve their target grades and pass exams, particularly in English and Maths. Importantly, Sam, Paul, Robert and Tom went on to achieve grade C in both English and Maths (despite not being predicted to do so), Gareth achieved grade C in Maths and grade D in English, and Joshua achieved grade D in English and grade C in Maths. The notion of 'ability' as fixed and predictable is, therefore, flawed and unreflective of a clear idea of 'underachievement' because, in this case, these boys did attain. This raises the question of the extent to which this links to the processes operating within a school and/or to teachers' practices and the extent to which the boys' attainment is an outcome of the boys surviving the pressures.

7.4 Recommendations for policy and practice

The problem of Boys' 'underachievement' was identified more than fifty years ago. In spite of continuous recommendations in policy (DFE, 2007; National Literacy Trust, 2012; House of Commons, 2014) to improve boys' 'underachievement', there is little recognition at policy level of the different ways in which boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning and how this varies across schools and within them.

Heightened awareness amongst policy makers of the consequences of an academic hierarchy in the curriculum and selective grouping practices on boys would improve the

positioning of boys identified as ‘underachieving’ and help teachers to better understand the way in which, learning is being experienced.

Perhaps policymakers should initiate systems such as in Finland where in the absence of national school performance tables, accountability measures and selective grouping, pupils maintain better than average attainment outcomes compared with schools internationally (Sahlberg, 2007).

Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) draw attention to how research itself produces particular values and beliefs about different education processes, privileging particular ideas over others. Time set aside in whole school training sessions would enable teachers to examine and reflect upon their own nuanced understandings of gender including becoming more sensitised to how their actions and/or interactions might serve to shape the already gendered and classed space in which boys identified as ‘underachieving’ experience their learning. Teachers should also be encouraged to reflect upon the value of different types of learning and explore opportunities for cross-curricular links, for example, through whole school enrichment days.¹⁹

Within the area of teacher education, sessions planned within the programme to explore previous issues and experiences relating to teaching disadvantaged boys including offering practical strategies for including equitable practices in the classroom would further benefit pupils with their learning including those positioned in low sets. The inclusion of different situations through the use of drama and/or film would enable student teachers to take a practical approach to developing/further improving their understandings of gender, understandings of disadvantage and how these intersect whilst advancing their own awareness of how drama and media might be included in their practices. Such activities would also serve to assist with reflecting on their own beliefs and assumptions

¹⁹ School enrichment days are included as part of the whole school’s yearly academic programme and provide an opportunity for pupils the work together across year groups and subject areas.

alongside others' of the issues related to the teaching and learning of boys identified as 'underachieving'.

7.5 Education in a changing context

Introduction

In this section I reflect back on the value of a study that engages with boys and their attainment. My aim is to put my study within the context of emerging theories of gender. There is still value in exploring boys' 'underachievement' from the perspective of a male/female binary because in spite of more recent research on boys' and girls' schooling which takes the perspective that gender is fluid and shifting, a number of inconsistencies endure. Importantly, the school performance tables continue to adopt and enforce the categories boy/girl and the binary approach to learning persists in schools, where, for example, boys and girls are sometimes taught separately and where their termly progress is routinely recorded according to gender. In this way school systems further embed the binary. This section is divided into three. Drawing on relevant literature section one presents developments in theories of gender since Connell's work. In section two the debate on boys' 'underachievement' is re-visited. I reflect on where research has moved to since Willis' seminal study (1977) and consider current concerns in policy on 'underachievement' where currently there is a heightened focus on improving the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Section three considers why the Year 10 boys in my study might have 'bucked the trend' in terms of their attainment and concludes by considering the implications for professional practice and further research in light of recent developments in policy and research. I begin by considering examples from the literature that illustrate how recent studies identify the existence of more complex relationships between hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities amongst school boys (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2012).

Section one: New theories of gender

Multiple masculinities

Contemporary research (Stoudt, 2006; Swain, 2006; Farrell, 2014) argues for more complex readings of the relationship between hegemonic masculinities and other masculinities. A number of researchers have identified more intricate interactions between hegemonic masculinities and other types of masculine behaviours. For example, Stoudt (2006), who interviewed boys who attended a single-sex school in the US, found that boys being exposed to hegemonic masculinity in the form of violence can potentially lead to friendships and raise pupils' social status. Furthermore, in response to boys' 'underachievement', previous research by Farrell (2014, p.650) who investigates Year 11 boys' relationships to Religious Education reveals that some boys express reformist masculinities counter to hegemonic values whilst still retaining their masculine subjectivities. Skelton and Francis (2012, p.441) conceptualise the kind of boy from whom 'softer' masculinities emerge as the "Renaissance Child". Swain (2006) raises the question as to whether subordinate forms of masculinity always need to be constructed from hegemonic masculinity suggesting that the concept may not be broad enough to encompass the different relationships that boys might have with it. Swain (2006) uses the term 'personalised masculinities' as an alternative label for boys who might consider themselves as different rather than necessarily subordinated. Alternative explanations of how boys might construct themselves as 'male' subvert established versions of masculinity.

Multiple femininities

Feminist research on girls' schooling experiences also reveals girls' femininities to be blurred. Jackson (2006) identifies a number of Year 8 (aged 13 to 14 years) girls constructing 'ladette' femininities by way of behaviours, which include:

acting hard, smoking, swearing, fighting occasionally, drinking, disrupting lessons, being cheeky and/or rude to teachers, being open about (heterosexual) sex, and being loud (Jackson, 2006, p.353).

She suggests that 'ladettes' are breaking gender boundaries and entering space that is traditionally recognised as masculine. Some of the girls in her sample were found to adopt 'potentially problematic 'laddish' attitudes' (Jackson, 2006, p.341) that included challenging hardworking femininity. These girls preferred to see themselves presented as popular with and attractive to boys. She suggests that 'ladettes' regulate their masculine behaviours to avoid being seen as male thereby reconciling their own femininities. The binary girl/boy, which operates in school performance tables ignores different types of femininities amongst girls and therefore the differences in attainment amongst different groups of girls. By the tables homogenising girls, teachers are not encouraged to recognise differences amongst girls' femininities that might impact on their learning. And even if some teachers do recognise a blurring of femininities amongst girls and adjust their practices, all kinds of 'girl' come under the same gender category in the school performance tables.

Multiple masculinities and femininities

More recently, researchers have examined the intersection between sexuality and gender. For example, the ways in which some girls negotiate and resist heterosexual femininities by taking up the subject position, tomboy are explored. In a study to explore how Year 3 (age 7) girls 'do' tomboy, Reay (2001, p.163) found that a number of tomboys reinforced boys' dominance at the expense of girls. One female participant was found to reinforce masculine power by rejecting things feminine as a consequence of appearing ashamed of her gender and as a way of improving her social status. Halberstam (1998, p.9) drawing on the work of Butler (1990; 1993), who understands sex and gender as discursively performative, studies the production of masculinity in bodies socially assigned female performing 'Drag Kings' and therefore masculinities – what she terms as 'female masculinity'. This concept has been applied to education by researchers to explore female performances of masculinity in the primary and secondary school context (Mendick, 2006; Francis, 2008; Renold, 2009). For example, in an ethnographic study of pupils, aged ten to eleven, in two UK primary schools, Renold (2009) problematises discourses that

homogenise and naturalise school-based masculinities by showing how some girls embrace hegemonic practices. This contrasts with Jackson's (2006) argument that the outcome of the importance to the 'ladette' of retaining her heterosexuality is that the power relations between masculinity and femininity are upheld. Renold (2009, p.237) examines how gender and sexuality operate to include an exploration of 'the 'seduction of masculinity (e.g. "boys are better")' She argues:

A queer analytic framework will also bring into focus the ways in which tomboyism has the potential to offer girls within an increasingly heterosexualised girlhood an escape route from compulsory heterosexuality and the male heterosexual gaze (Renold, 2009, p.237).

The notion of normative masculinities and the implicit relationship between masculinities and heterosexuality is 'queered' by some girls performing 'tomboy'. Renold (2009) suggests that by some girls assuming feminine masculinities produces a transgressive space within which divergent relationships between masculinities might occur. For example, some girls positioning themselves and being positioned by others as 'one of the boys', for Renold, signifies a rejection of that which is considered feminine and appears to protect them from normative heterosexual processes such as romantic encounters with boys and/or boys' sexual innuendo towards them. She claims that some girls' embodiment of hegemonic masculinities by doing tomboy, 'negotiates the ascription of 'heterosexualised femininities' (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2012). However, in a study of tomboy identities, Paechter (2012) found that the more tomboy girls adopt masculine attributes, the more precarious their position within the social group they occupy. She warns researchers that in examining the formations of power and identity, although female bodies might perform masculine traits, these are at most transgressive rather than hegemonic.

Connell (1995, 2002) has been critiqued by a number of gender theorists (Francis, 2002; Warin, 2006) for reducing analyses of gender 'to simplistic typologies of different sorts of masculinity and femininity' (Francis, 2010, p.477). Furthermore, Francis (2010) argues that although post-structural analyses of the discursive position of boys and girls have

developed understandings of the fluidity and complexity of gender through the idea of gender being performed, classifying different performances as masculine or feminine is also likely to reinforce the male/female binary and as Paechter (2006) argues, also risks stereotyping gender binaries. Francis (2010) suggests that if the concept of 'gender' is to be preserved as a plausible phenomenon for analysis and essentialism is to be avoided in this endeavour, it is important to find ways in which gender can be understood beyond the body. Francis (2010, P.479) understands the binary notion of gender within education as 'monoglossic'. This is a word used by Bakhtin (1981) whereby language is understood in terms of power relations, the term referring to dominant forms of language, which represents the interests of dominant groups. In her application of monoglossia to gender Francis (2010, p.470) argues that masculinities and femininities linked to the sexed body as either male or females are:

a system of categories that have gained hegemony in our socio-historic moment, and which are commonly understood and agreed as a 'true', uncontested account' (Francis, 2010, p.479).

The broad arrangements of gender therefore endure and encompass the dominant understandings of masculinity as 'rational, strong, active; and femininity as emotional, weak, passive' (Francis, 2010, p.479). Francis (2010, p.479) applies the concept of 'heteroglossia', which refers to the micro-level interactions, which are masked by dominant understandings of gender amongst society, to examine the complexity of the fluidity and shifting nature of gender amongst Year 8 (12 to 13 years) girls. Arguing for more sensitive readings, which avoid gender categories, Francis (2010, p.479) states:

It is this attunedness to heteroglossia that offers potential for disruption and the avoidance of reification of gender norms, and the exposure of gender as discursively produced rather than inherent (Francis, 2010, p.479).

By applying heteroglossia, examples from the data include girls' performance of gender to balance preserving their popularity with their peers and achieving academically (Francis et. al., 2009). Some girls behaving 'ditzzy' and performing as 'flirtatious' enabled them to accomplish their identity involving traditionally masculine attributes whilst deflecting their

production of high achievement (Francis et. al., 2009. p.326). Through their performance they were able to reconcile high achievement and femininity. Such findings illustrate the fluidity of gender amongst the gender performance of girls.

Ofsted's evaluation of children as learners including their learning progress includes the categories 'boys/men' and 'girls/women' and in addition 'lesbian, gay and bisexual children and learners' and 'transgender children' (Ofsted, 2015b, p7) form two further separate classifications. However, gender stratification within the inspection guidance overlooks potential gender fluidity amongst young people and the possibility of the movement of some pupils between gender categories. Advice by the government to schools on protecting pupils against discrimination includes advancing equity of opportunity to all pupils some of whom might be undergoing 'gender reassignment' (DFE, 2014c, p. 5). However, school systems and processes are influential in contributing to the binary whereby boys and girls can be seen to be taught separately, particularly for P.E. Further, Boys' and girls' uniforms are commonly discrete and disciplinary procedures which include classroom seating plans where boys and girls are seated next to one another all reinforce the boy/girl binary (Francis and Paechter, 2015). This suggests that reporting mechanisms are lagging behind rather than keeping pace with recent understandings of gender as fluid and shifting. These different approaches (in school) are therefore not being joined up.

Intersectional approach to 'underachievement'

School performance tables take for granted the categories 'boy' and 'girl' (Skelton and Francis, 2009) and they are powerful in shaping teachers' practices. Policy performance tables, which interpret pupils' GCSE attainment outcomes, treat boys and girls as two homogeneous and separate groups (Skelton, 2001). The next example from the literature shows that the differences in attainment between groups of boys and girls are more complex than this simple binary when social factors such as ethnicity and social class are

taken into account. Examining the intersection between disadvantage²⁰, gender and ethnicity, Strand, (2014) offers a complex analysis of the differences in pupils' educational attainment in England. Chapter two highlighted that it is not all boys who underachieve at GCSE. Of those pupils performing below the government benchmark indicator a disproportionate number are disadvantaged by receiving free school meals. Strand (2014) also points to the attainment of white British disadvantaged girls presenting a similar picture to disadvantaged boys. In addition, in contrast to previous findings, which suggest social class has a similar impact on pupils' attainment in spite of ethnic difference (Rothson, 2007), Strand (2014) reports substantial interactions between ethnicity and disadvantage on pupils' achievement aged 16. For example, in an analysis by gender and ethnicity Black Caribbean boys 'underachieve' relative to their White British non-FSM peers (Strand, 2014) in contrast to Black Caribbean girls who achieve higher relative to their White British peers (Strand, 2014). However, as previously noted, the gap between Black Caribbean and White British disadvantaged boys is broadly similar (Strand, 2014). Therefore, contrary to the government's homogenisation of disadvantaged boys as 'underachievers' of these there are ethnic differences. These findings suggest that a range of both factors within and outside of the education system may be influencing these differences in attainment. Strand's (2014) intersectional approach helps to open up more nuanced understandings of the differences in boys'/girls' attainment. School's systems for recording data pertaining to pupils' attainment cannot practically accommodate the possibility of pupils moving between genders. Although under equalities legislation (DFE, 2014c), teachers are likely to be working with increasingly more understanding of the reality of different groups of pupils, performance tables mark time.

Summary

Although school performance tables in which the male/female binary is embedded trail behind recent developments in understandings of gender as fluid and shifting, teachers

²⁰ Strand employs the term 'low SES' when referring to FSM pupils (2014, p.131). I adopt the term 'disadvantaged' throughout the thesis when referring to FSM pupils because this is the term used in education policy to refer to pupils from low-income families.

generally still practice with boys and/or girls and the division is embedded within school systems and practices. Other ways of understanding gender are valuable and importantly emphasise that the notion of gender is complex. Research that works with the binary boy/girl is, however, still useful in enabling understandings of particular groups of boys identified as 'underachieving'. Disregarding the term 'boy' overlooks the importance of previous explanations for boys' 'underachievement'. Irrespective of the development in theorisations of gender in academic research and Ofsted's (2015b) increasing acceptance of non-binary gender categories, the school performance tables remain the same. Of course the school performance tables also position some girls as 'underachieving'. However, girls have had far less attention in the 'underachievement' literature. In retrospect, research that explores the learning experiences of 'disadvantaged' girls identified as 'underachieving' is also needed.

Section two: Gender and attainment: contemporary debates

There has been a history of celebrated studies of boys' 'underachievement' since Willis (1977, p.1) and the debate continues with young people learning at a time when school practices are increasingly driven by pupils' performance in high stakes subjects including English and Maths. More recent research on the ways in which disadvantaged boys experience learning include studies which examine a number of different interacting social factors (Hodgetts, 2010; Stahl, 2015). Stahl (2015), for example, employs an intersectional approach to examine the relationship between working-class boys formations of their learner identities and schooling. His study examines the interaction between class, ethnicity and gender to explore 23 white working-class boys' aspirations and engagement with learning. His longitudinal, qualitative study conducted at a secondary school in South London shows how the working class boys in the study embodied neoliberal demands on them to take responsibility for their own future employment. The boys seek strategies for aspiring towards employment, whilst remaining loyal to their class backgrounds including their peers. Stahl (2015) illustrates how, in contrast to Willis' boys these boys negotiate their learner identities, challenging the enduring tradition of working-class boys

indifference towards learning, their supposed lack of ambition and inability. The boys do not conform to hegemonic masculinities and reject overt laddish behaviours. On the one hand, the boys embody the demands of neoliberalism to take responsibility for their own success or failure, while on the other hand, they do not aspire to the upward mobility demanded of them by such an ideology. As an outcome of their understanding of what it means to be 'middle-class' which includes having an 'appreciation of the psychic costs of negotiating access to and experience of higher education' (Roberts, 2016, p.263), the boys remain close to their 'cultural origins' (Stahl, 2015, p.95) 'dis-incentivised from a lifestyle that is largely beyond their reach' (Stahl, 2015, p.96). Stahl's findings, in part, show that boys from disadvantaged backgrounds do aspire. It is, therefore, important to continue focusing on boys' 'underachievement' because in spite of men continuing to generate most wealth for the country, it is important that all boys as well as all girls including those from disadvantaged backgrounds are provided with the same learning opportunities.

Section three: Boys and 'underachievement' – bucking the trend

The boys in my study, who were identified as 'underachieving' at the start of the study bucked the trend in terms of their attainment at GCSE in the subjects English and Maths. The boys also surprised me in terms of their attainment. There were also a number of differences in the findings of my study compared to the 'norm' of white British FSM boys who, in a number of previous studies have been found to reject schoolwork (Willis, 1977; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Salisbury and Jackson, 1996; Younger and Warrington, 2005; Smith, 2007; Martino, 2008). Although I saw the boys as a category constructed by the performance tables the findings did not manifest in the way that I thought they would. In contrast to the findings in a number of previous studies, the boys in my study were mature responsible learners. It is possible perhaps that the Year 10 boys in my study went on to attain their GCSE target grades as an outcome of the performance culture which puts both teachers and pupils under pressure. However, the pupil participants at Stone Acre School did not, for example, get access to the same interventions as pupils attaining just below the GCSE performance benchmark. More probable is the explanation

that Stone Acre's inclusive school ethos, which, included opportunities for pupils to learn collaboratively, appeared to have a positive impact on their learning including their self-confidence. An inclusive community within which the boys felt valued and the commitment of staff towards developing positive relationships with the pupils echoes some of the conclusions drawn in the previous study in which Gazeley et al., (2013, p.5) sought to identify 'characteristics of good practice in addressing inequalities in school exclusions'. Under pressure to improve pupils' performance outcomes, some teachers taught the boys to pass their exams, which perhaps influenced their attainment. Education has, however, increasingly become a matter of schools meeting policy demands, which includes them remaining competitive.

Understandings of gender have developed since Willis' (1977) seminal study but a gender-blind approach to exploring boys schooling overlooks that the boy/girl binary remains in how pupils' attainment is measured and within school processes. The literature reveals stereotypical understandings of boys' behaviours while in school and people bring to research different approaches to understanding gender. The boys in my study may have embodied different masculinities but I did not recognise the boys in this way. Connell's (2002) theory on gender has been helpful in exploring how the boys' learning experience was continuously produced by and through education policies, which have gendered outcomes. School performance tables construct them as 'underachieving' and teachers' understandings of gender further shape their learning experience. The fact that the boys did attain shows that there is something far more complex occurring than hegemonic masculinities being played out amongst them and this challenged my own expectations. An intersectional approach is helpful in identifying that disadvantaged boys are over-represented within the category of boys identified as 'underachieving' and provided the opportunity to explore some of the ways in which gendered school processes served to further disadvantage them. Some teachers, for example, were found to view the boys in terms of the category they occupied. Some teachers homogenised the boys not recognising gender as fluid. There is therefore a gap between research approaches,

education policy and teachers' practices.

Further research is needed which examines the different ways that a school's ethos might positively or negatively impact upon the learning experience of disadvantaged pupils identified as 'underachieving'. This should also explore how the new measures of attainment set by the government affects teachers' practices. Heteroglossic readings of gender (the micro-level interactions) amongst boys following subjects socially constructed as feminine such as, Music, Dance and Drama (monoglossic) would provide insights into the fluidity of gender through boys gendered performances when learning these subjects. Such readings should not, however, overlook how gendered structures impact on pupils or how selective grouping practices interact with and become embedded in teachers' practices. In spite of schools like Stone Acre being socially disadvantaged - challenged by comprising pupils who were unsuccessful in the 11+ test and where teachers' practices are increasingly scrutinised, they are still surviving. This is a unique case as boys like these in a different setting may well have not made such performance gains. The teachers' positive approaches to learning, which included not telling the boys they were 'underachieving' was perhaps an important factor of the boys' success.

7.6 Final reflections

I have drawn attention to findings, which show accountability as having negative effects on pupils' learning, pressures causing them to feel considerable anxiety. Recently, the media highlighted the pressures experienced by children of following a highly academic curriculum (Heywood, 2015). Additional research is needed that focuses on examining the different methods by which schools' systems and practices can positively and negatively influence the learning of young people. Boys' 'underachievement' is a reoccurring theme at Government level (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). As this thesis has argued, it is not that schools are trying to offer boys identified as 'underachieving' an impoverished learning experience but rather the outcome of a system which does little to challenge their disproportionate positioning but rather positions them in a particular kind of restricted learning space.

This study explored the case of boys' 'underachievement' in one non-selective school in one selective LA in England. However, boys' 'underachievement' has been of international concern for a number of years in countries including Australia, Canada and the USA (Martino, 2008; Rowan et al., 2002). While, internationally, there is an abundance of solutions to support boys with their learning, these tend to be based on boys as a homogenous group and focus on school-level interventions (Martino, 2008). Any attempt to address some of the problems of boys' 'underachievement' should carefully examine how the gendered and classed structures and processes position some boys, which includes those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, within the education system and how these shape learning.

In this thesis, drawing on the work of Foucault (1972; 1977), Ball (1993) and Connell (2002; 2005; 2012) I have problematised boys' 'underachievement'. I have argued that a regulatory system within which, white disadvantaged boys are typically over-represented, has consequences for the way in which they experience their learning. The boys affected are those identified as 'underachieving' by the GCSE performance measure, five A* to C grades including English and Maths. By taking a critical perspective I have brought to the surface aspects of an inequality, which there is a continuing need to address. The Government has arguably moved against pupils' learning vocational subjects and therefore a curriculum, which permits more freedom and enjoyment that provides the opportunity for pupils to transfer skills from one subject to another. The focus in policy on academic learning continues to intensify. 'Attainment 8' and 'Progress 8' (DFE, 2015b, p.5) are further constructions of the GCSE benchmark. These new measures, which are not inclusive or holistic, position some pupils as 'underachievers' and raise the question of the extent to which they will affect teachers' practices.

The decision by Theresa May, the current Prime Minister, to re-establish grammar schools in England will arguably further limit the opportunity for children from low socio-

economic backgrounds to experience a grammar school education. The idea that the most 'able' will gain access to a grammar school place misrecognises the range of young peoples' potential. This new development will also have limited benefits to schools like Stone Acre, the inclusive ethos of which currently contributes to a significant proportion of disadvantaged pupils' who attend the school having very positive learning outcomes.

Since conducting this study I have felt a responsibility to encourage trainee teachers during their Initial Teacher Education (ITE), to sensitise themselves to their own understandings of what it means to be a 'boy' so that, as Francis and Skelton (2005) highlight, they are able to recognise pupils' individual learning preferences rather than assuming that there are essential differences between males and females. This thesis has argued that it is important to look beyond the boys towards the system within which boys identified as 'underachieving' experience their learning to understand that more structural readings of gender are needed to recognise the complex, shifting and contextualised nature of the factors involved in the construction of boys' 'underachievement'.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Example of a Participant Information Sheet

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Appendix 1: Example of a Participant Information Sheet

A research study by Ms. T. Collins: to explore aspects of English schooling.

You are one of a small group of 6 boys that I would like to take part in a study that I am doing for my university course which explores how Year 10 see themselves as learners.

As part of the study, I would like you to be present during 5 observed lessons. You will also be invited to take part in 2 interviews. Each will last no longer than 30 minutes and will provide the opportunity for you to express your views on your learning.

I have purchased three disposable cameras which I wish to lend to you so that, in pairs, you can take a selection of photographs around the school which best represent a typical Year 10 experience of the school. You will have permission to use the cameras before and after school and during break and lunch times only. You will be asked to select 6 photographs for discussion during the first interview.

In order to better understand how your experiences at school are shaped by how we organise teaching and learning, I will also be talking to a small number of your teachers and referring to your attainment and progress records.

If you decide to take part in the study you will be free to withdraw at any time. You will also be able to withdraw any data that is linked to you in the study. Any data collected about you and the school will remain confidential and for the purpose of any written material your name together with the name of the school and any further participants involved will remain fictitious. The photos will be used for the project only.

This research project will have no bearing whatsoever on your attainment including your grades or future studies.

I have written a letter to your parents/carers asking that they give their permission for me to ask you to take part in the study. Even if their permission is given for you to be asked to take part this does not mean that you have to participate.

If you are happy to take part in the study, can you please complete the consent form attached, and return it to your form tutor in the envelope provided. He/she will return the envelope to me.

Appendix 2: Example of a Participant Consent Form

Name.....

1. I confirm that I have received the letter giving details of the research project. I understand what the project is about. I have also had the opportunity to ask any questions which relate to the study.
2. I understand that the process will include the interviewer making audio recordings and that photographs of areas around the school, which may also include both students and staff will be taken by my son while in school.
3. I understand that I can request that my son withdraws from taking part in the project at any time and that I can withdraw any data that is linked to him.
4. I also understand that any data collected will remain confidential and handled in accordance with the Child Protection Act 1988 and that once the data recorded has been transcribed that all audio recordings will be destroyed.
5. I consent to my son's school records being accessed for the purpose of this study.
6. I consent to my child be asked to participate in this study.
7. I understand that my son may choose not to participate in the study.

Signed.....

Date.....

Appendix 3: Pupil participant pairings

Pair One	Sam	Robert
Pair Two	Paul	Joshua
Pair Three	Gareth	Tom

Appendix 4: Indicative pupil interview questions for use at Stage 2

1. Would you like to tell me about the photographs you have chosen which best represent a typical Year 10 experience of school?
2. What do you think pupils in Year 10 enjoy most about school?
3. Which subjects do you think boys in Year 10 enjoy the most?
4. How do you think pupils in Year 10 feel about the pressures on them to do well in school?
5. Which exams do you think most boys in Year 10 would say are the most important to pass to be successful after leaving school?
6. How important is passing exams to pupils generally?
7. Do you think the expectation by the school for pupils to succeed is different for boys than girls?
8. Who has the most influence on pupils in terms of future goals?
9. How important would you say is the role of friends in pupils' learning?
10. To what extent do you think teachers influence learning?

Appendix 5: Indicative pupil interview questions for use at Stage 4

1. Which lessons would you say boys in your year group enjoy the most?
2. What do you think boys in your year group enjoy most about the lessons?
3. How well do you think boys in Year 10 work in lessons?
4. To what extent do you think boys are challenged in lessons?
6. What do you think boys benefit from most in lessons?
7. Do you think that gender (the differences between boys and girls) affects teachers' classroom practices?
5. What kinds of activities get boys engaged in lessons?

Appendix 6: Head of Department – Indicative open interview questions as stimulus for discussion

1. How are pupils grouped in Year 10 in your subject?
2. I am interested in C/D threshold students. Which groups/classes do you suggest I observe to capture this?
3. How do the challenges to classroom teachers differ when they are presented with different 'ability' groups?
4. What is your view on current pressures on teachers by the government to ensure that their classes achieve grade C or above at GCSE?
5. In what ways do you think pressures to achieve grade C affect the pupils?

Appendix 7: Example of indicative interview questions to use in Stage 5 - Teachers

1. To what extent do you think education policy gets interpreted in ways, which puts pressure on teachers to ensure that pupil meet their targets?
2. How do you think teaching practices are affected by pressures on teachers to help pupils attain their target grades?
3. What are your views on the ways in which boys might see themselves as learners in the space just outside of the C/D threshold?

Appendix 8: Extracts from lesson observation records

Subject: Maths Date: 19 th December 2012	Names of pupil participants: All 6
<p>Lesson Objective: to learn about formulas for finding the circumference, radius and diameter of a circle. The teacher explains the lesson aims to the class. The class is reminded of the importance of achieving grade C: All 'aiming for grade C'.</p> <p>Lesson beginning The class work in pairs and are given 30 seconds to write the formula used to find the radius of a circle on individual whiteboards. These are then held in the air. A further 30 seconds is given for the class to write the formula for finding the diameter and lastly, the circumference. Fast pace to the lesson from the start. All 6 boys appear to engage in the activity. After praising the whole class for completing the starter, the teacher explains that they are 'getting ready for the test' so they 'all need to be able to work independently'. The boys appear to listen passively while the teacher uses a mini interactive whiteboard to model (at speed) how a maths problem given in the examination might be approached. The class is quickly reorganised to answer a number of questions at speed in which they are required to put the formulas into practice. The teacher points to an electric timer (red), on the whiteboard at the front. The class are given one minute to answer each question after which time an alarm sounds to signal the class to move to the next question. There is silence for approximately 15 minutes. The boys show expressions of panic, frowning, sighing, appear rushed. The teacher appears pressured to move the lesson forward swiftly.</p>	

<p>Subject: BTEC Sport Date: 15th January 2012 (Morning)</p>	<p>Names of boys present: Gareth, Robert, Tom</p>
<p>Details of the lesson</p> <p>Lesson Objective: to develop the skills of basketball.</p> <p>Twenty minutes into the lesson</p> <p>The class begins playing the second of two games. The teacher explains that the game will be played for 7 minutes. There are two groups - One group is lead by the trainee teacher; the other by the head of BTEC Sport/P.E. The boys put their new skills into practice from earlier in the lesson. There appears to be teamwork amongst both groups. Both teachers move amongst the boys in their own group facilitating the learning. The teachers assist the group offering ideas for how they might improve further. The pupil participants appear to be relaxed and enjoying the lesson. Tom appears to lack a little in self-confidence. He seems a little languid as if overwhelmed by the game. For about half a minute, The head of BTEC Sport energetically moves parallel with Tom, guiding him with bouncing the ball around his opponent subsequent to which Tom plays more keenly (as if wanting to impress). Ten minutes before the end of the lesson, Gareth, Robert and Tom appear keen to self-evaluate against the criteria for achieving a pass/merit distinction. Targets are set and for how their skills might be further developed.</p>	

<p>Subject: English Date: 15th January 2012</p>	<p>Names of boys present: Robert, Tom, Joshua</p>
<p>Learning Objective to understand how the poet conveys meaning in the poem, <i>Battle of the Somme</i>.</p> <p>Ten minutes into the lesson The class is asked to stand up, walk around the room and greet their peers. When teacher raises right hand the class stand still and raise theirs. Robert, Tom, Joshua pair up with pupils' nearest and sit at tables. Robert and Tom are in the same group, Joshua works with three other pupils. Use of Kagan seems to engage their interest towards learning (kinaesthetic approach). Sitting in groups of four, the boys are given a number: one to four. Groups then work as a 'Round Robin': each pupil takes turns to speak. Robert, Tom and Joshua appear keen to infer meaning from the posters (conveying war images from WWI onwards). Joshua (pupil 4) is also given the task of recording the group's ideas. He appears pleased that he has been allocated the role. When pupil number 4 is asked to move to the next group, Joshua shares the interpretations made by the pupils in his group enthusiastically.</p>	

Appendix 9: Head teacher Letter

Dear XXXX

I began working towards a Doctorate in Education in September 2008. During this period I have conducted research on teaching and learning in the secondary school. Recent projects have included an action research study focussing on the lesson observation form as a teaching tool and a further evaluative study of a group of boys in Year 9 which explored some of the ways in which they constructed their learner identities while in school.

For the final stage of the programme, I wish to carry out a small-scale qualitative study which seeks to explore how boys are constructing their learner identities. It is hoped that the study will inform some of the ways in which we, as classroom practitioners, approach the teaching of boys who find themselves in the space just outside of the grade C/D threshold. The study itself will be framed within the wider discourse of boys as 'underachieving'.

I plan to begin collecting data from November 2012 (Term 2) and conclude the data collection phase in February 2013 (Term 3). The study will involve me conducting five lesson observations, five interviews with teaching staff and two separate interviews with six boys from Year 10. The timetables of both staff and students will remain unaffected. While I hope to conduct interviews during the school day these will not take place during lesson times and only with the permission of those involved.

I would be delighted to meet with you at a convenient time to discuss the detail of my research proposal before seeking your permission to commence my project.

I have recently applied to the University of Sussex for ethical approval of my current study and once agreed, would be delighted to submit a copy of my completed application for your perusal.

In the meantime, I look forward to hearing from you with confirmation of an appointment.

Yours sincerely

Tina Collins

Appendix 10: Preliminary research questions

1. How are the boys in Year 10 who fall short of the GCSE grade C/D threshold in English and/or Maths constructing their learner identities in relation to the current policy and practice focus on 'underachievement'?
2. How do those involved in the progress of these pupils at school contribute to the boys' constructions of themselves?

Appendix 11: Conceptual labels

(Note: Conceptual labels are in bold print.)

Extract from a teacher interview

Question 1. To what extent do you think education policy gets interpreted in ways which puts pressure on teachers to ensure that students meet their targets?

There's a lot of pressure (**pressure**) put on students to meet their targets (**importance of target grades**). It's also about surpassing them. In form time there's no time to gather your thoughts (**pressure, lack of time**). Form time should be about coming together (**community, ethos**). (Additional Teacher 1)

Extract from a pupil interview

Question 5. What is the expectation of the school for students to achieve Grade C in English and Maths?

Gareth: BTEC Sport is the most popular (**Vocational, most popular amongst Year 10 boys**) but you need to have Maths and English. (**lack of parity between vocational subjects and English and Maths**)

Tom: Ye, they will help you more in life than my BTEC Sport. (**lack of parity**)

Gareth English and Maths are more pressured (**boys coerced to achieve**) as you need to get a C in them to get a job. (**message transmitted about the importance of English and Maths for future jobs**)

Tom: They [Maths and English] are more involved than in a lot of other subjects (**appear more demanding**). Most Year 10s feel this as we are starting our GCSEs earlier [...] (**requiring more time**) you need to get at least get a Grade C and it's difficult... **Grade C to pass**)

Gareth: More difficult (**recognises more challenge**) in Maths and English.

Tom: Ye, definitely.

Gareth: In other subjects you choose like the ones I chose **(idea of choice)** [BTEC Sport, GCSE ICT and GCSE Graphic Design], I don't just want to get a C in them I want to get a B **(options subjects appear easier to pass)**. We are constantly told we must get a C to pass our English and Maths exams **(lack of parity of vocational subjects)**.

Question 6. How important, would you say, is the role of friends on students' learning?

Tom: Very important **(friends)**.

Gareth: Ye

Tom: I think it plays one of the biggest parts in learning **(important influence on boys' learning experience)**.

Gareth: You need friends in lessons, not just to talk to but help as well **(friends for support to learn)**.

Extract from a lesson observation

Subject: Maths Date: 19 th December 2012	Names of pupil participants: All 6
<p>Lesson Objective: to learn about formulas for finding the circumference, radius and diameter of a circle. The teacher explains the lesson aims to the class. The class is reminded of the importance of achieving grade C: All 'aiming for grade C'.</p> <p>Lesson beginning The class work in pairs and are given 30 seconds to write the formula used to find the radius of a circle on individual whiteboards. These are then held in the air. A further 30 seconds is given for the class to write the formula for finding the diameter and lastly, the circumference. Fast pace to the lesson from the start. All 6 boys appear to engage in the activity. After praising the whole class for completing the starter, the teacher explains that they are 'getting ready for the test' so they 'all need to be able to work independently'. The boys appear to listen passively while the teacher uses a mini interactive whiteboard to model (at speed) how a maths problem given in the examination might be approached. The class is quickly reorganised to answer a number of questions at speed in which they are required to put the formulas into practice. The teacher points to an electric timer (red), on the whiteboard at the front. The class are given one minute to answer each question after which time an alarm sounds to signal the class to move to the next question. There is silence for approximately 15 minutes. The boys show expressions of panic, frowning, sighing, appear rushed. The teacher appears pressured to move the lesson forward swiftly.</p>	

Appendix 12: Example of a single word analysis:

There are so many different ways you've got to teach individual pupils to help them meet grade C. Sometimes it's hard to give the help to those who need it most. Unless you have a good TA [teaching assistant] with you it can be very demanding. When a group sucks everything out of you it's hard to give those individuals who you know need help most and you can be seen, are seen, as a **failing** teacher. (Additional Teacher 1).

Words associated with 'failing' are inadequate, incompetent and lacking. A person who falls short of achieving what they set out to do might feel they are part of a hopeless situation - they may feel useless. Some teachers might only be 'failing' in terms of the way in which the achievement of young people is recognised in education policy, but this appeared to have a negative affect on Additional Teacher 1.

Appendix: 13 Additional examples of codified categories

Category: Ethos

Concepts Collaborative teaching/learning practices

Kagan

Friends

Pupils/teacher relations

Valued within the school community

Category: Multiple masculinities

Concepts: Subjects viewed as masculine/feminine

Boys' subject preferences

Teachers' views about boys' preferred subjects

Boys' learning preferences

Teacher's views about boys' as learner

Teachers' gendered behaviours
