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Teachers and lower attaining boys: moving beyond the binary?

Abstract

This paper focuses on the learning experiences of lower attaining boys attending Stone Acre, a

non-selective state Secondary school in England, and how these were shaped by teachers'

gendered beliefs and practices. It argues that despite changes in our theoretical understandings of gender, those found in the context of everyday practice in schools may continue to be rooted in biological understandings of masculinity that tend to reinforce rather than challenge assumptions of deficit. It argues that these interactions form part of a gender regime that also includes the lower-status learning spaces disproportionately occupied by lower attaining boys, with selective grouping practices and the curriculum both contributing to the limiting understandings of boys' educational potential that are ultimately reflected in persistently gendered patterns of attainment. The small number of boys who took part in this study clearly recognised the less favourable positioning of boys as a group. Despite this they went on to achieve beyond expectations, suggesting that they maintained some agency as learners. Teachers at Stone Acre were also under pressure to ensure achievement against performance threshold levels, suggesting that there may have been some mitigating, trickle down effects. The paper concludes that there is a continuing need for teachers to develop more inclusive understandings of masculinities and of the effects of these on everyday practices in schools.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the learning experiences of lower attaining boys attending Stone Acre, a non-selective state Secondary school in England, and how these were shaped by teachers' gendered beliefs and practices. There is a long history of research focussing on boys' lower attainment in schools in England (Willis, 1977; Corrigan, 1979; Riddell, 1989; Gorrard, Rees & Salisbury, 1999; Nayak, 2003; Francis and Skelton, 2005; Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Stahl, 2015), a concern that has also been paralleled internationally (see for example, Mills,

Martino & Lingard, 2007, Australia; McCready, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2003, 2008, the United States of America; Sokal, Katz, Chaszewski, & Wojcik, 2007, Canada; Cobbett & Younger, 2012, the Caribbean; Driessen, 2007, the Netherlands). Weaver High-Tower (2003), discussing a shift to what is termed "the boy turn" notes the tensions arising from choosing to focus attention on the lower attainment of boys in the context of social hierarchies that continue to favour masculinities. Gender cannot of course be isolated from other social factors that give meaning to it such as race, ethnicity and social class (Shields, 2008; Gillborn, 2008; Strand, 2014), and schools do not operate in a vacuum but in the context of these complex social intersections. The persistently low attainment of 'White working class boys' has been a continuing cause for concern within policy and practice (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014; UK Parliament, 2021) but as Gillborn (2008) notes, this terminology invites a racialised hierarchisation of concerns about low attaining boys, while at the same time, failing to acknowledge that the data covers only a particular fraction: those from low income households. Evidence to suggest that the low attainment of boys from low income households is a form of systemic inequality, not yet effectively mitigated by schooling, can be seen both in lower rates of progression to university (Hewitt, 2020) and over-representation in school exclusions data (DFE, 2020a). This paper sheds light on how these less favourable outcomes continue to be produced over time, within the context of a gender regime that encompasses teachers' beliefs about boys - and how these then translate into everyday practices – and school structures that include both selective grouping practices and the curriculum. While teachers in this study did not tend to recognise these intersecting elements as constraining, the small number of lower attaining boys who participated were aware of being unfavourably positioned, but nevertheless went on to succeed beyond expectations.

Limiting understandings of boys' educational potential are ultimately reflected in the persistently gendered patterns of low attainment reported on in national performance tables. These continue to adopt and enforce the categories boy/girl even though the school inspection body Ofsted, has increasingly accepted non-binary gender categories and recognised more recent theorisations of gender as fluid and shifting (Ofsted, 2015). These tables also privilege an academic curriculum with GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) performance benchmarks requiring success in English and Maths in particular, and boys always doing less well by these measures (DFE, 2020b). Other structures and practices associated with the gender regime operating in schools also reinforce a boy/girl binary. For example, boys and girls can still be taught separately, particularly for subjects such as Physical Education (P.E.), and disciplinary procedures include classroom seating whereby boys and girls are required to sit next to one another (Francis and Paechter, 2015). Vocational subjects, which continue to be undervalued in the English context, tend to be accessed predominantly by young people from low income backgrounds (Atkins and Flint, 2015) who are disproportionately boys (Paechter, 2000). It is therefore not that surprising if teachers are often found to be working with a binary boy/girl construction of gender as school practices tend to both use and re-inscribe this.

Working with Connell to understand gender regimes in schools

Connell (2002) offers a theorisation of masculinities that challenges the assumption that gender differences can be explained by essential differences between males and females or culture alone. Whilst recognising the importance of the biological aspects of the body in terms of a person being identified as male/female, Connell (2002, 2005) argues that this does not explain the different forms of masculinity and femininity that might exist or the different patterns of gender practices that might be enacted amongst men and women. Neither does a biological reading adequately describe the processes by which a specific gender is taken-up. Connell

(2002, p.47) further argues that masculinity only exists in relation to femininity, with gender relations a social practice in which bodies both respond and are active, thereby forming social structures which in turn create the conditions for new practices. Connell (2002, p.47) calls this a process of "social embodiment" and from the perspective of the body "body-reflexive practice". Viewed from this perspective, teachers' practices can be seen to both embody and reconstitute gender relations inside the gendered social structures of which they are a part. Connell (2002, p.49) describes this process as a "circuit linking bodily processes and social structures". Connell (2012, p.1677) further argues that "the structure of gender relations in a given society at a given time may be called its gender order; and the structure of gender relations in a given institution may be called its gender regime".

Connell (2008, p.134) emphasises that masculinities change. In part this is because they are formed through social relations and in the intersections with other social structures, including race and class (Connell, 2005, pp.80-81). Francis (2010, p.477) warns that Connell's theory of multiple masculinities runs the risk of reducing analyses of gender "to simplistic typologies of different sorts of masculinity and femininity". A range of post-structural analyses have developed our understanding of the fluidity and complexity of gender (Butler, 1990, 1993; Halberstam, 1998; Reay, 2001; Mendick, 2006; Francis, 2008: Renold, 2009) alongside an awareness that the classification of different performances as either masculine or feminine is likely to reinforce a normative male/female binary. While Paechter (2006) argues that such approaches risk further stereotyping of gender binaries, we argue that it is still necessary to focus attention on boys as this allows us to better understand the gender regimes operating in the everyday of English Secondary schooling. Like Connell (2001 p.8), we would further argue that the focus is also likely to be insightful for thinking: "about the 'fixing' mechanisms which limit the fluidity of identities". Myhill (2002, p.341) notes that previous research tends to treat

boys and girls as though they form homogenous groups, and while we necessarily talk about both boys - and indeed teachers - in the plural in this paper, we are mindful that such terms suggest an unwarranted level of homogeneity.

Lower attaining boys

Epstein et al. (1998) argue that what is often termed the "poor boys" discourse evolved alongside the publication of GCSE attainment tables which, in revealing boys poorer performance when compared to girls, encouraged them to be positioned as victims in education (Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Mills et al. 2004), disadvantaged by both the structures of schooling and teaching practices that favoured girls (Spender, 1982; Stanworth, 1983; Howe, 1997). Solutions that have been suggested include the adoption of more "masculine" classroom practices, in some cases supported by references to biological differences (Gurian, 2002). Martino (2008) critiques such approaches for their potential to encourage male teachers to reinforce "macho" masculinities. Salisbury & Jackson (1996) contend that boys learn to expect dominant authoritarian behaviour from male teachers who give out powerful messages about how to be a boy. Mac an Ghaill (1994) found that at one level male teachers assert their masculine authority in an attempt to maintain social control amongst boys. Smith (2007) also argues that some teachers feel compelled to resort to strategies of becoming one of the "lads" in order to survive the pressures exerted by education policies that hold teachers accountable for the success of their pupils.

A number of influential studies have suggested that lower attaining boys adopt behaviours that express their alienation from formal schooling (Willis, 1977; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Epstein, 1997). Willis' (1977, p.1) seminal study, argues that it is the reproduction of the social conditions within which "working-class" boys experience their learning that leads to low

attainment concluding that they are resigned to the idea that they are born to manual labour. In contrast, Reay (2002, p.221) explores the story of Shaun, a "white working-class boy" who attempts to combine working hard in school with upholding his masculinity in front of his peers. Reay (2002) argues that this engenders tensions between the masculine self and school structures. Jackson (2003, p.37) also argues that the learning experiences of lower attaining boys are influenced at the level of the conscious, through external processes connected to attainment measures, arguing that this results in boys presenting challenging behaviours. More recently, Wilkinson (2014) has challenged the assumed linkages between masculinities and attainment in humanities subjects, arguing that when History is taught in a heuristic non-reductive manner, British Asian Muslim boys feel less alienated and are able to succeed. It might then be expected that teachers would recognise both different masculinities and different orientations to learning.

"Truths" about boys as learners

Previous research suggests that biological ideas about both boys and girls as learners tend to be regarded as truths. Martino et al. (2004, p.451), in a study that explored 'teacher threshold knowledges about gender', in a case study school in Australia, illustrates how such terms come to be incorporated in a curriculum intentionally constructed around assumed gender differences, underpinned by beliefs about boys that included the need for more active learning opportunities, closed learning tasks and closer relationships with teachers. Barker (1997) found that teachers believed girls to be better organised than boys, believing girls to display better communication skills and to be more articulate and confident. Head (1997) found that teachers tend to view girls as self-learners and able to plan meticulously. Research conducted by Younger & Warrington (1996) suggested that while teachers considered boys to be more vocal than girls and therefore better at oral work, keenness to contribute to class discussions tended

to be labelled negatively as evidence of being boisterous (Younger & Warrington, 1996)**.** Through repetition and reiteration, such beliefs about boys as learners become understood as "truths" (Myhill, 2002, p.340). Policy responses that emphasise that boys need particular kinds of curriculum content and/or pedagogical approaches form part of this circuit and have been much critiqued (Lingard 2003; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2007; Connell, 2008).

Binary understandings of behaviour

Martino et al. (2004) note that teachers often operate within the context of simplistic and deterministic binary constructions of gender. Previous research suggests that teachers believe girls present fewer behaviour problems than boys and that this has a negative impact on pupil/teacher relations (Younger & Warrington, 1996; Glock & Kleen, 2017). For example, Younger & Warrington (1996) found that teachers tend to treat boys more harshly causing them to lose interest in learning. Mac an Ghaill (1994, p.47) found that male teachers assume that boys cause more trouble than girls and consider them to be more difficult to discipline. Salisbury & Jackson (1996) also found that teachers tend to concentrate more of their time and energy on boys in the classroom, believing them to demand more approval than girls. Previous research suggests, however, that boys receive less praise than girls and that they are aware of this from an early age (Younger & Warrington, 1996; Jones & Myhill, 2004). Younger & Warrington (1996) found that overall boys believe they receive less support and encouragement from teachers. Although there is a lot of evidence to suggest a link between binary understandings of gender and teachers' practices, teachers do not necessarily recognise that they are responding to girls and boys differently (Gray & Leith 2010). Mac an Ghaill (1994) found that the assumptions that boys can cause more trouble than girls and are more difficult to discipline informs set placement. Some teachers have also been found to associate boys brought up by a single female parent/carer with an anti-learning culture, attributing this to the

lack of a male role model (Pickering, 1997; Bleach, 1998; Martino, Lingard and Mills, 2004). A focus on masculine role models is reductive as it fails to take account of the multidimensional nature of gender regimes (Connell, 2008) and the 'blendings' between the structural and the relational (Watson, 2017).

The gendering of the Curriculum

Connell (2002, p.47) suggests that "the practices in which bodies are involved form social structures" and this can be seen in the way that aspects of schooling have become part of a gender regime that incorporates teachers' beliefs that curriculum subjects are associated with traits identified as masculine or feminine (Walkerdine, 1988; Paechter, 2000). Subjects in school which are considered to preserve a rational focus such as Maths and Science tend to be stereotypically viewed as masculine (Paechter, 2000) while subjects associated with femininity such as English and Art were identified by Head (1997) as being considered to pose a threat to boys. Given the constitutive nature of these circuits, it is not so surprising that boys have been identified as considering some subjects to be "more suited to girls" (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Warrington & Younger, 2000). Similarly, despite initiatives to encourage girls' participation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), (UNICEF, 2020), girls have been found to express preferences for subjects such as English, the Humanities and Music (Gallagher, 1997; Arnot et al. 1998; Bleach, 1998). It has also been suggested that subjects which require the learning of practical skills and the use of the body - such as P.E. and D&T (Design and Technology) - have come to be recognised as more suited to boys (Paechter, 2000). Salisbury & Jackson (1996, p.34) argue that while some boys might deliberately opt for "feminine subjects" as part of their rejection of a "masculine culture", others purposely choose to follow "masculine subjects" to avoid being bullied. The biological and the social can clearly be seen to come together in debates about the gendered nature of curriculum subjects.

Gendered lower-status learning spaces

Previous research suggests that in England the learning experiences of low attaining boys are also negatively impacted by selective grouping practices (Muijs & Dunne, 2010), in part because teachers believe that young people in lower sets are more likely to have negative attitudes towards school, to be difficult to motivate and to be disruptive (Finley, 1984; Reay et al. 2010). Such stigmatising "truths" are of longstanding with Ball (1981, p.47) noting in his seminal study *Beachside comprehensive* that young people occupying high sets were more likely to be viewed by teachers as hard working and those in low "sets" as lacking in "ability". Teachers' assessments of "ability" incorporate both the biological and the social, although it tends to be thought of as something fixed and measurable (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Younger & Warrington 1996; Boaler et al. 2000,) rather than as something continually in production, with more positive teacher affirmations opening up new pathways to success (Gazeley, 2018). Indeed, Boaler (2000) argues that in Maths lessons young people are created as successes or failures depending on the set in which they are placed. Factors considered in set placement include subjective judgements around behaviour and motivation but also prior attainment (Muijs & Dunne, 2010, p.405). However, there may be only limited understanding of how this incorporates underachievement embedded over time (Gazeley, 2018). Unsurprisingly, previous research suggests that young people experience low sets as being low status. Muijs & Reynolds (2005) draw attention to the possible harm to the self-concept of young people taught in these sets because of teachers' lower expectations. Hallam and Ireson (2003) further add that because teachers find it more difficult to engage young people in low sets this undermines their own sense of efficacy. While not intentional, the impact is greatest on boys from low income backgrounds (Muijs & Dunne, 2010).

In summary, the existing literature in the field evidences how teachers' understandings of gender influence their beliefs and practices and shape lower attaining boys' experiences of schooling. Previous literature further suggests that biological and social assumptions about boys as learners continue to be predominantly negative and often approached through a boy/girl binary. Close attention to the structures within which learning takes place therefore continues to be important for understanding the everyday gender regimes of schooling and their unequal effects.

Research design

This research was conducted in a single secondary school in the South East of England, located in a commercial and commuter area of comparatively high unemployment. Since the 1990s the local economy has changed from being largely based on industry to services. The Local Authority in which Stone Acre is located has retained academically selective grammar schools, based on the passing of the 11+ examination. Those young people who do not pass go on to lower-status, non-selective schools such as Stone Acre. At the time of the research, GCSE attainment at Stone Acre was similar to the national average and on an upward trajectory, with lower attaining pupils making the most progress. Stone Acre's positioning in the local education market had contributed to a school ethos that emphasised the value of collaborative learning practices and an inclusive learning environment. Stone Acre was slightly smaller than the average English secondary school having an intake of just over 1000 young people. Just above three-quarters were from a White British background and just below a quarter were classified as "disadvantaged"[i] which is slightly above the national average. There were also markedly more boys than girls on roll.

Data were collected over the course of the 2013-14 academic year, using a case study approach designed to provide diverse perspectives on the learning experiences of lower attaining boys in the school. The research involved a purposively selected group of teachers (n=11) and a smaller number of Year 10 boys (aged approximately 15, n=6) identified as performing below the national GCSE performance benchmark. The professional experience of teacher participants covered both academic and Vocational subjects but also areas of pastoral and management expertise, with one also being a member of the senior leadership team. Data were gathered in five phases using mixed methods. Stages one and five involved semi-structured interviews with senior teachers, including the department heads for English and Maths, that explored their views on the learning experiences of boys in the school. Stages two and four involved paired interviews with the boys, designed to elicit insights into their perspectives on boys' learning experiences at the school and included the discussion of images that they had been invited to take to represent these. Stage three involved lesson observations (n=7), with at least one of the six boys being present on each occasion. Observations included a follow up interview with the class teacher that explored their views on the teaching and learning experiences of the boys in the lesson observed as well as their perspectives on boys as learners more generally. We recognise that this approach perhaps encouraged teachers to talk in ways that tended to homogenise rather than to recognise and discuss multiple masculinities, but this was not of course precluded.

The six boys were randomly selected from an available sample of 30 identified as currently performing below their target grades in GCSE English and/or Maths, the key subjects against which young people's attainment and school performance in England are measured. Three of the six would be categorised as "disadvantaged" as they were in receipt of Free School Meals. All six case study boys were in bottom sets for English and Maths which is also where the take-

up of vocational subjects at Stone Acre is greatest. All six boys were therefore also following three vocational curriculum subjects, drawn from the following options: Art, DIDA (Diploma in Digital Applications), Graphic Design, ICT, PE and/or Sport.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Sussex. Written consent was gained from all participants and additional consent was gained from the parents/ carers of the boys in the study. It was explained that the aim was to improve Year 10 boys' opportunities for learning. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants the name of each boy has been substituted with a pseudonym and staff participants have simply been divided into the following groups: "Academic", "Vocational" and "Additional".

The research was conducted within the framework of a case study and the aim was therefore to present participants' thoughts about their everyday experiences within the context within which they found themselves (Robson, 2002). This approach enables the blending of "a description of events with the analysis of them" (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995, p.322). Data were initially analysed via a process of constant comparison, enabling the identification of key themes from which meanings could be drawn (Thomas, 2009 p.198). Interpretations centred on teachers' practices and on bringing gendered learning outcomes to the surface. The data **led** us to Connell, therefore, we used her theory to frame the presentation of the data.

Discussion of findings

For Connell (2002) bodies are both objects of and agents in social practice. This next section presents a discussion of the data, providing specific insights into how teachers' understandings and practices, shape the learning experiences of lower attaining boys at Stone Acre. It illustrates how teachers' "body-reflexive practice" contributes to the already gendered structures of which they are a part. It begins with a discussion of teachers' deficit constructions of boys as learners,

their unfavourable comparisons of boys with girls and how these translate into gendered teaching practices. A discussion of teachers' gendering of the curriculum and of gendered set placements follows. It concludes with a discussion of the case study boys' awareness of teachers' gendered views and their "success" against the odds.

1. Teachers' restricted understandings of masculinities

This section illustrates how the biological and social come together in teachers' constructions of boys as learners, reflecting highly restricted and homogenising understandings of masculinity (Martino et al, 2004). Although the teachers interviewed emphasised different aspects of boys' behaviours and learning, all appeared to be working with biological constructions of boys that were predominantly negative, giving the sense that when it comes to the classroom boys are regarded as both problematic and inferior. For example, one female teacher describing boys' behaviour as undesirable linked this specifically to perceived biological characteristics: "Boys can be very boisterous and can be exceedingly immature". (Academic Teacher 1). The term "boisterous" is interesting in that it reflects the teacher's understanding of masculinity as socially negative whereas ideas of maturity, despite being equally subjective, are more clearly biological. Additional Teacher 3 commented on a lack of engagement, noting that: "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". This view is consistent with previous literature that suggests that it is difficult for boys to be seen to be visibly engaged in learning (Epstein, 1997; Reay 2005). Academic Teacher 2 similarly commented unfavourably on boys as learners: "[Boys] lose concentration in lessons especially when they see their friends doing the same". The suggestion that boys are more easily distracted, conflates what she understood to be an individual aspect of masculinity with an assumed deficit in the wider peer group. Academic Teacher 3 similarly focused on a perceived

lack of motivation, suggesting that this was because boys were more interested in sport than learning: "Football takes up the boys' time generally and this affects their grades". Additional Teacher 3 emphasised the detrimental influence of external, social factors: "They are often part of a gang outside school and just simply not interested in what's happening in the classroom". Gendered beliefs such as these reflect configurations of masculinity as uniform rather than multiple and they are clearly being used to explain young people's behaviours in the classroom. Teachers' willingness to talk in this way suggested that it was "normal" for these biological views to be conveyed. This is important because such assumptions about boys as learners, whether communicated directly or indirectly, can affect boys' perceptions of themselves as learners, negatively influencing their self-concept and feed into low attainment and disaffection.

2. Working with a boy/girl binary

Normative, binary constructions of gender led to girls being positioned as "better" learners, with boys commonly identified as lacking in areas stereotypically associated with femininity. For example, Additional Teacher 2 observed that: "Boys tend not to be so open with their emotions compared to girls". At times teachers' assumptions that girls were also intrinsically better learners were made explicit. For example, reading gender through a biological lens, Vocational Teacher 3 stated: "I think boys are just lazy compared to girls". Vocational Teacher 3 also considered boys to lack the skills necessary to attain the highest grades:

> The girls are far better. This is where the A*s are. 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).

By raising girls' status as learners and linking the tasks to skills deemed "feminine", this teacher positioned boys as always less capable on the basis of assumed deficits in biological and social characteristics. However, when Gareth and Paul, two of the case study boys were observed in the lesson led by a different teacher, they appeared to be just as conscientiously engaged as the girls. This suggests a circuit in which stereotypical assumptions inform expectations and can become so embedded that the markedly similar engagement of individual boys and girls can simply be overlooked.

3. Beliefs about teachers and masculinity

The following data suggests that teachers see close connections between the perceived learning needs of boys and the teacher and their pedagogical approach. This suggests a complex "blending" between the teachers' embodied practices, biological and social beliefs, and the tendency to homogenise, as suggested by Academic Teacher 5 when noting that: "Boys prefer teachers, who are consistent". Two (male) Vocational Teachers suggested that boys worked better in classes taught by male teachers, both linking this directly to issues of behaviour: "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). And: "Boys respond well in lessons to a strong male figure who provides support and comes across as understanding". (Vocational Teacher 2). This resonates with previous findings in which male teachers consider themselves to be better positioned to assert "masculine" authority over boys (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). It also exemplifies the endurance of understandings of masculinity as representing such things as strength (Francis, 2010). Similar emphases can be seen in the belief expressed by Additional Teacher 2 (male) that boys, who are nurtured solely by a female parent/carer, are likely to benefit from being taught by a man: "Young people without a father figure at home respond well to a strong male figure". Additional Teacher 3 (female) went further in suggesting

that the teacher's gender can compensate for a perceived deficit in family structure when it comes to learning: "Boys from one-parent families often learn better when taught by a man". These data highlight the circuit operating between biological assumptions about boys as learners and beliefs about hegemonic forms of teacher masculinity - beliefs that can be held irrespective of the teacher's gender and that translate into particular forms of relational and bodily practices. For example, Vocational Teacher 1 (male), suggested that boys rarely misbehaved for him as he encouraged teacher/pupil "banter" to avoid conflict between himself and the boys which may have resulted in them needing to be disciplined:

> There are some characters in there [Year 10 class, all boys] that can be disruptive but not very often …. Friendly teacher/student banter is important. I've taught them for a year and a half and have built a good relationship with them.

Comparable to findings by Martino (2008), this male teacher appeared to believe that "banter" was necessary to preserve his positive relationship with the boys - the teacher thereby actively creating the social structures of which he was a part. In working with this particular understanding of masculinity, this male teacher was actively engaged in producing the gender regime within which the boys were learning. Interestingly, these data reverse the tendency to construct masculinity from a deficit perspective. In containing both strong biological and social components – ones that associate masculinity with strength – it enables particular kinds of femininities – including both those of teachers and mothers – to be constructed as in deficit instead.

4. The curriculum as a gendered structure

Previous research suggests that boys' experiences of the curriculum are shaped not only by teachers' gendered beliefs about boys' subject preferences but also the assumption that curriculum subjects are in some way masculine or feminine (Warrington & Younger, 2000;

Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Connolly, 2006). The data suggested that boys at Stone Acre school did indeed experience a curriculum informed by these kinds of gendered beliefs. For example, Academic Teacher 3 explained that English is in many ways not a "masculine" subject:

> 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.

As a male English teacher, it was surprising and contradictory that he reinforced the notion of English – and poetry in particular - as a feminine subject, especially as many poets are men, including George the Poet, who is much admired by young men in England for speaking to young people about current social and political issues through the medium of rap. Indeed, the boys were observed in a GCSE poetry lesson in which they appeared to be enjoying their learning.

As previously noted, vocational subjects which demand practical application are commonly considered to be more suitable for boys (Paechter, 2000), with lower attaining boys tending to be over-represented in these subjects as they are assumed to be more orientated to their specific learning needs and preferences. At Stone Acre, the BTEC[ii] (British and Technical Education Council) Sport group consisted entirely of boys as did the GCSE, P.E. curriculum option. Vocational Teacher 2 indicated the importance of building a strong relationship with boys during practical lessons of this type "because it helps build their confidence". During an observation of one lesson, the "banter" that occurred between the teacher (male) and the group towards the end of the lesson when practising the skills of basketball included the teacher explaining 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", referring to the boys having "inherent strength", 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. From the viewpoint of "body-reflexive practice" (Connell, 2002, p47), by normalising essentialist assumptions about boys' "stamina", the teacher reinforced a biological construction of both masculinity and learner identity.

Martino et al. (2004) note a connection between teachers' constructs of boys as learners and the pedagogical approaches they encounter. Teachers interviewed for this study similarly emphasised boys' preferences for active learning. For example, Vocational Teacher 2, remarked: "most boys prefer to learn actively rather than sitting at a desk". However, data collected from the boys contradicted the simplistic assumption that all boys have similar learning preferences and learning styles: "There are two classes of sport. […] I like theory in sport as much as the practical". (Gareth). Overall, the data suggested that teachers' practices incorporate gendered assumptions about boys' learning preferences that are also linked to their perceptions of subjects as being inherently masculine or feminine, and that this is not necessarily a conscious process. Of course, such beliefs also add to the perception that boys are simply less well suited to an academic curriculum when this is clearly not the case as many go on to be highly academically successful, and some of course go on to teach.

 5. *Set placement as part of the gender regime*

At Stone Acre School a disproportionate number of boys in Year 10 were located in bottom sets in the subjects of English and Maths and just over half were also identified as disadvantaged by the Free School Meal (FSM) indicator in contrast to just under a quarter for the school as a whole. It is therefore not sufficient to consider gender alone but to recognise

how this intersects with low household income to position particular groups of boys in the lower status learning spaces that form part of the gender regime operating in schools. Instead of questioning this disproportionality, Academic Teacher 2 seemed to accept it as simply to be expected: "Those in the low sets are not that able and they struggle with English and then they're not always engaged". Rather than acknowledging the potential of setting to impact directly on motivation (Finley 1984; Reay et al. 2010), Academic Teacher 2 further reflected that young people in low sets tend to lack enthusiasm, noting that this creates additional difficulty for the teacher: "I think it's more challenging to teach the lower achieving classes because the young people are not particularly motivated". In contrast, Academic Teacher 5, whose low set teaching group consisted predominantly of boys, recognised this as a space that the boys identified as low status:

> Because they are [Year 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".

Although this teacher recognised that the messages communicated by the structures within which learning is experienced are important, he nevertheless attributed this to something intrinsically lacking in boys:

> 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).

Interestingly, one of the case study boys, Joshua, was observed during a bottom set Maths lesson engaged in solving questions. Contrary to what might be expected, Joshua did not express a loss of motivation linked to his location in this set, explaining rather that he was in fact keen to use this as an opportunity to improve his chances of attaining the threshold level

of grade C in Maths: "I was in a higher set for Maths last year and went down so that I could get more help to achieve". Firstly, it should be noted that Joshua's diligence is contradictory to accounts highlighting this as a "feminine" quality. Joshua's explanation also indicates the extent to which the pressure on teachers to meet national performance benchmarks has also become part of the everyday learning experiences of young people (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2014). In a Maths lesson, a teacher was observed drawing the attention of the class 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, the added sound of a short alarm, seeming to create a sense of panic amongst the 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. This suggested that the pressures exerted on teachers at policy level can inform pedagogical approaches quite directly. In a context where teachers are incentivised to maximise the numbers of young people passing national assessments there may nevertheless be some advantages for lower attaining boys in lower sets still identified as being in reach of national performance thresholds.

6. The boys' awareness of masculinity as inferior and their "success" against the odds

The six case study boys clearly recognised that gender influenced teachers' practices, suggesting that gendered perceptions of them as learners were reflected not only in preferential treatment of girls but reduced recognition of their own efforts:

    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 indicated that teachers considered them to be disruptive just by being boys, particularly female teachers who they understood as being more lenient towards 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.

The boys suggested that teachers' responses did not accurately reflect the true nature of classroom disruption and that this also led to other unfair practices:

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.

It was clear from the boys' comments that negative gender stereotypes had the potential to magnify teacher responses to boys' behaviour:

Robert: Girls get it easier. In terms of overall punishments, female teachers are

much stricter with boys than girls.

Sam: I think the same.

Watson (2017) notes that it is simplistic to equate boys who express a preference for a male teacher with needing a role model. All of the comments here point instead to issues relating to perceptions of unfair treatment and perhaps relational dynamics that encourage female teachers to be seen as in some respects harsher. Notwithstanding the limiting and gendered constructions that they encountered, the Year 10 boys who contributed to the study were clearly able to resist and survive as they all went on to attain the nationally required threshold levels in GCSE English and Maths despite having been performing "below expectations" at the start of the

research. In part, this might be explained by their attitudes as learners – attitudes that challenged the pervasive negative constructions of boys as a group as disengaged and as lacking in the necessary academic skills: *"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 fact that the boys did attain also shows that they retained agency over their learning despite this occurring within structures that accept and perpetuate limiting, normative understandings of masculinities.

Moving beyond the binary?

The focus of this paper has been on teachers' beliefs and gendered practices *and* the gendered structures as these are key to understanding the everyday of gender regimes *inside schools*. While previous literature suggests that our findings are in some ways not all that remarkable, we would argue that this is a key finding of itself as it highlights a level of persistence that calls for a shift in approach. Rather than framing concerns around the low attainment/low-income/gender nexus as in some way in competition with concerns about the over-representation of middle-class boys in high-status professional roles, it is important to recognise these as related forms of inequality, in which schools are highly implicated. Connell (2008) emphasises that gender regimes are not static and improved guidance for schools (Ofsted 2015) might already be raising awareness and acceptance of non-binary gender categories, which, might in turn perhaps help to reduce an over-reliance on biological understandings of gender that helps to position boys and girls as in opposition to each other - and low attaining boys in particular as inferior learners. These less favourable constructions were clearly recognised by the boys who agreed to take part in this study, suggesting the importance of simple steps, such as teachers taking time to understand how young people experience the gender regimes they encounter. More important however is to shift the focus from assumed deficits inside boys to the effects of wider structures.

As Connell (2002, p.51) states, "the social world is never simply reproduced. It is always reconstituted by practice". Although our conclusion that it is important to continue finding space within teacher education to build understandings of gender regimes within schools is again not that remarkable, we again feel that this is an important point to make. Firstly, it seems important because teachers like the boys in this study have agency and there is nothing deterministic about what has been presented here. Secondly, we saw little evidence in the data of an understanding of the links between multiple masculinities and social structures, or of beliefs being shaped by newer theoretical approaches to gender or indeed, acknowledgement of the changes in gender relations that have occurred over time *outside schools* (Connell, 2008). Connell (2002, p.47) suggests that there is a "circuit, linking bodily processes and social structures". Time set aside in Initial Teacher Education programmes and Continuing Professional Development sessions would enable teachers of all genders to gain an understanding of this circuit. It could begin with teachers identifying and reflecting upon their own understandings of gender, to support them in becoming sensitised to how their interactions might serve to shape – and further limit – learning spaces that are too often both gendered and classed. Beginning teachers asking for advice about such things as how they should approach teaching boys specific topics can quite naturally be invited to consider such questions as whether they believe boys are innately drawn towards particular content or methods, with the caveat that such questions perhaps include teacher perceptions of boys as learners and how - if these are communicated to boys - they might reconstitute gender stereotypes, which, in turn, will impact on how boys see themselves as learners and subsequently their attainment. Space for the development of such understandings is important as teachers may otherwise continue to believe that lower attaining boys are simply learning in the spaces they deserve to occupy. Policies that reinforce these "truths" would also more likely be adopted rather than

interrogated. This is particularly important in the English context where there is an increased

focus at policy level on issues of identity but also heightened contestation.

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[i] Includes those eligible for Free School Meals in the last six years, looked after by the state or with a parent in the armed forces.
[ii] BTEC qualifications are designed for young people who are interested in pursuing a career in a particular industry.