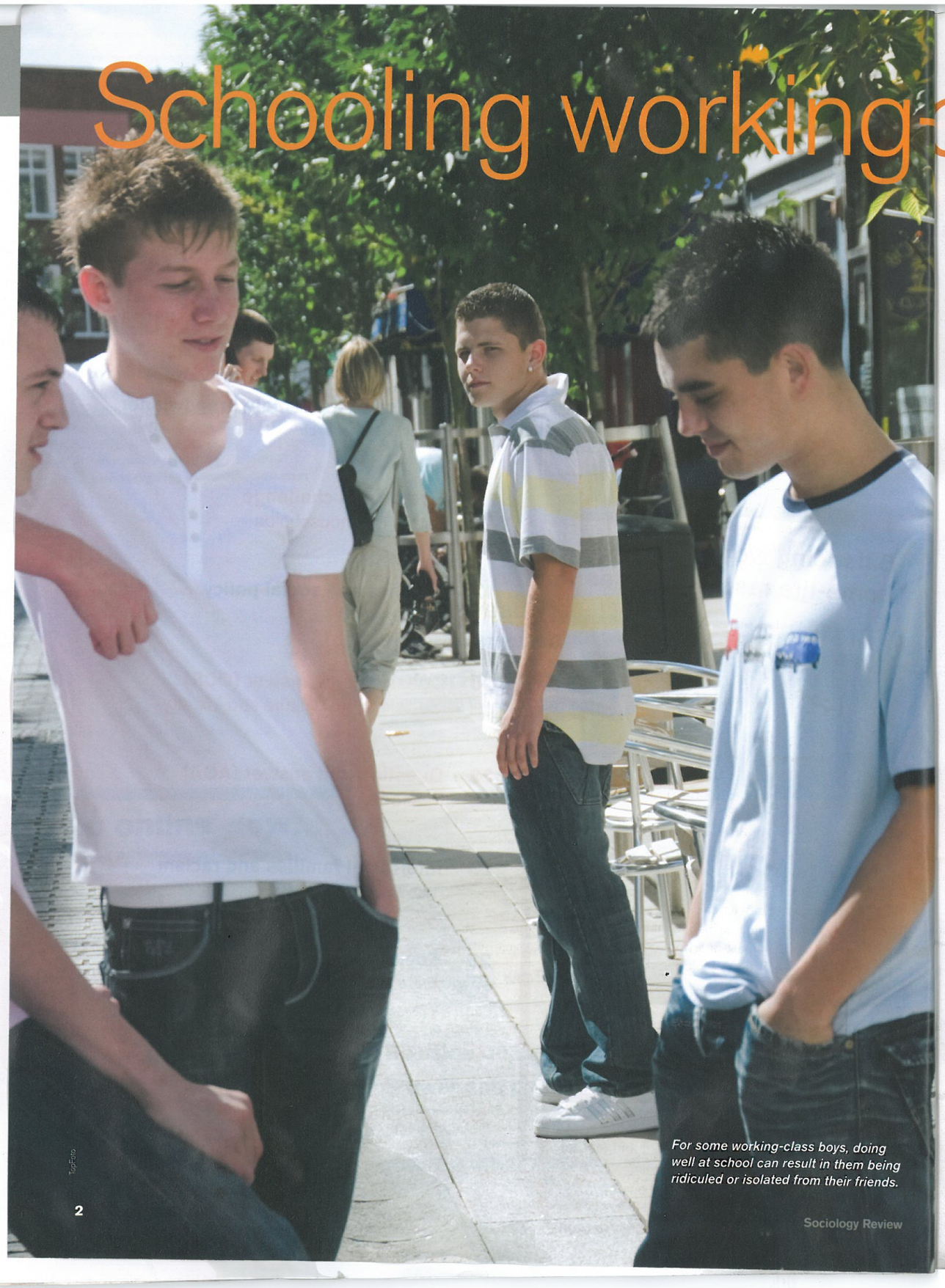
Schooling working-class boys



For some working-class boys, doing well at school can result in them being ridiculed or isolated from their friends.

Nicola Ingram

Most working-class boys don't succeed at school to the same extent as their middle-class peers. But how can the culture of a school impact on working-class male school performance?

Some sociologists (for example, Willis 1977) have argued that working-class boys effectively *choose* not to succeed at school because they do not see schooling as relevant to their future employment destinations. But in reality, success in school is not a simple choice. Working-class boys have to navigate the conflicting demands of doing well academically (which implies an element of compliance and good behaviour) and maintaining their status within their peer group. For some working-class boys, doing well in class can result in them being ridiculed or isolated from their friends or even their families.

Despite the general trend towards underachievement and the difficulties associated with doing well at school, not all working-class boys underperform. Some achieve adequately or even very highly. Often this performance is influenced by the culture of the school they attend. A school's culture can be seen as its shared values, attitudes and practices. These are often accepted as the norm by those within the institution, and may therefore go unquestioned.

Recent research by Reay et al (2010) points to the impact of different institutional cultures on attitudes and achievement. I want to examine the impact of school culture on working-class boys by exploring the experiences of boys from the same neighbourhood who attend different schools.

My research took place in two post-primary boys' schools situated within the same working-class area in Belfast in Northern Ireland. The schools are near each other and have the same catchment area, but they differ in terms of their selection procedures. One of the schools is a grammar school and selects the highest-achieving pupils from its applicants. The other school is a secondary school, which does not have the luxury of operating any sort of selective procedures as it is struggling to maintain its numbers. (See Box 1 for more information on the research methods used.)

The secondary school

This school is characterised by the informal relationships between the staff (including the principal) and the pupils. Indeed, when talking about pupil–staff relationships the pupils express admiration for teachers who speak to them in familiar ways even when disciplining them. For example, Mr Flaherty, a senior member of staff, is considered by many of the boys to be a 'sound' teacher. The boys recount with admiration a story in which this teacher intervened in a playground snowball fight.

According to the boys, one of their mates, 'big ginger Jim', hadn't heard Mr Flaherty tell everyone to stop the snowball throwing and get to class. When Jim lifted his arm to throw another snowball Mr Flaherty yelled across the playground, 'Jim, you big ginger bastard, I can spot you a mile off! Now put that down and get inside!' This apparently got the approving attention of the whole schoolyard — silence fell and order was restored.

We can see through this small example how the school's culture can impact on gendered and classed identities. In this case the laddish behaviour of teachers reinforces and

Signposts

Nicola Ingram explores the ways in which the different cultures and ethos within a selective and a non-selective school impact on boys from working-class backgrounds. Of considerable interest is the innovative and unusual method of asking the boys in the study to use plasticine models to illustrate 'who they are' both within and outside of school. These models were then used as the starting point for discussions. Students who find this topic interesting might visit their school or college library to look at earlier studies exploring the same broad theme. Of particular relevance are Hargreaves, D. (1967) *Social Relations in a Secondary School*, and Lacey, C. (1970) *Hightown Grammar*. While of obvious importance to students taking the 'Education' topic, this article also raises interesting questions about culture and identity.

Box 1 Research methods

The research involved 14–16-year-old boys from various classes in both schools. I spent four to five months in each school and used a broadly ethnographic approach that included the use of art-based activities, classroom observation, focus groups and one-to-one interviews.

During the focus groups the boys were asked to create two models of their identity using plasticine. One model was to represent who they thought they were within school, and the other who they were beyond the school gates. Using model-making proved to be a very worthwhile research activity. It was, for a start, fun and so helped to engender a relaxed atmosphere, which in turn encouraged a flow in conversation. Also, as each model took about 15 to 20 minutes to make, the process actually allowed time for reflection on what was being asked — 'Who are you inside school?' and 'Who are you beyond the gate?' Gauntlett (2007, p. 185) has argued in relation to his own research, where participants created identity models with Lego, that 'Research participants need reflective time to construct knowledge.' Allowing participants time to think about the questions and their response led to a more considered and nuanced engagement with the research.

Teachers in both schools were also interviewed.

In terms of ethics, before undertaking the research it was necessary for the researcher to provide the school with proof of CRB checks and also to gain written consent from parents. All participation was voluntary and the pupils were free to withdraw from the research at any time.

supports a working-class masculine identity. Behaviour that would seem culturally inappropriate in other (more middle-class) educational settings is validated within this school.

The benefits of a 'laddish' school culture: Henry's story

In this school, a laddish culture pervades in which working-class boys can feel accepted without having to modify their identity. This is important because research has shown that schools can often seem to 'give up' on working-class boys on the basis of them not having the 'right' culture. This mismatch in cultures can also contribute to working-class boys' resistance to schooling.

In some ways, working-class pupils may benefit from the cultural alignment within the school — as it does not clash with their background culture they can feel like a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Henry, for example, says of his teachers: 'They don't try to put you down or treat you like you are nothing. They treat you the way you should be treated.'

In interviews Henry talks about being very conscious of negative stereotypes of the people who live in his council estate, and he makes a great effort to refute this by talking about what the place and the people are *really* like. It is important to him that he is not treated as inferior in school, and also that he can be 'himself'. He develops this theme through discusson of his model of his identity within school.

Henry's plasticine 'identity' model represents his interest in breakdancing, but the different colours of the model also take on their own meaning. He says, 'I'm not just one type of person, like, there's all these different sides, different colours.' Henry says that he can express all his different sides both inside school and outside. 'I won't put on a show in school to make people think "Aye, he's Jack the lad", and then outside school be completely different, like…I am who I am. Inside or outside.'

He conveys strongly in this comment that his home and school identities are aligned.

The problems of a 'laddish' school culture: Cal's story

However, for some working-class pupils the comfort of being a 'fish in water' provides the impetus to express an extreme version of working-class masculinity. While this behaviour may overstep the school's boundaries of acceptable working-class identity, it is paradoxically *supported* by the overall culture of the school. This situation can lead to difficulties for some of the pupils as the sense of security felt by being accepted can promote complacency in terms of behaviour and attitude to school.

Cal, for example, embodies a macho working-class identity. He has a 'number one back and sides, trimmed short on top' hairstyle, which is fashionable for the school. He talks with a broad Belfast accent and his favourite topic of conversation is cars and motorbikes. Cal has been in trouble with the police for stealing a motorbike, and also hints at being involved in drug-dealing. Yet

Henry's 'Different sides, different colours'.

in the model he makes of his identity he presents himself as being both a 'bad boy' and a 'good boy'.

Cal says that he is a good boy in school because he keeps his head down in class. However, he admits that he does not really engage with school. Instead, he works minimally, then chats with his friends until the teacher comes round, when he does a bit more work and then chats some more. This pattern goes unchallenged, and because of this Cal feels he's being good, even though the amount of progress he makes in class is actually very limited. Cal comes to school (in his own words) 'to get it over with'.

In contrast to Henry — who is from the same sort of background — Cal is neither engaged with school nor does he stand out as a problem pupil.

Cal's 'Bad boy, good boy'.

The grammar school

This school has a long tradition of academic achievement and it operates with a high degree of formality (at least in comparison with the secondary school). The pupils are largely well behaved in the corridors, and in the classroom the teachers have high standards of behaviour. It is expected that pupils will remain silent in class unless communicating something in relation to their schoolwork.

Pupils who engage in whispering in class are spoken to sternly, and repeat offences usually result in punishment. The approach to teaching is generally very traditional and the relationship between teachers and pupils is formal. Teachers talk and pupils passively receive, albeit with opportunities for asking and answering questions by raising hands.

The benefits of an 'academic' culture: Mick's story

The pervading culture is academic, and this, at times, challenges the boys' working-class identity, even when they appear to fit well with the school culture. For example, Mick,

Mick's 'Two sides'.

who does not appear to be a stereotypical working-class boy, creates an interesting plasticine model representing tensions in his identity.

On the one hand, Mick has long hair, listens to 'indie' music, is a singer-songwriter in a band and is doing very well in school. Teachers speak highly of him and he fits well with the academic culture of the school. However, Mick is from a working-class background and he lives in a working-class neighbourhood. He has difficulties in reconciling his home and school identities.

Mick's model of his identity represents the tension caused by these anomalies. He explains the green (smaller) side as representing his working-class background and the blue side as representing his 'music side' — the part of his identity that he values more and 'puts more into'. In describing how these different parts of him operate in everyday life and how he negotiates potential conflict, Mick uses the metaphor of a curtain being drawn over him:

> If I see people on the street that I know from when I was younger I can instantly feel something being drawn over me, like a curtain. Like you're not going to show this right now [blue side] you're going to show this [green side].

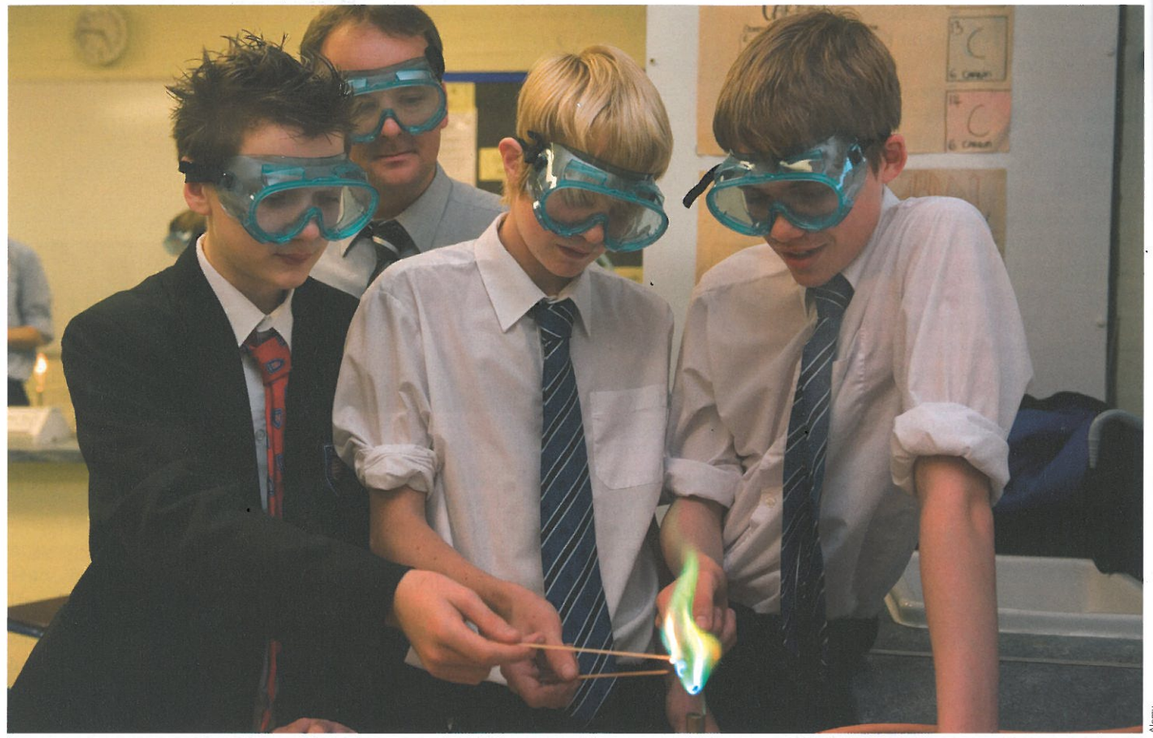
Mick demonstrates that he is conscious of having different sides of his character and also talks about behaving in different ways depending on the environment he is in. While life in school appears smooth and uncomplicated, he also discusses his difficulty in reconciling this aspect of his identity with his working-class background. In particular he discusses difficulties that he has in being understood by his father who is on Mick's 'green side'.

The problems of an 'academic' culture: John's story

Other boys within the grammar school embody a more conventional working-class identity in terms of appearance, accent and manner. These boys have much more difficulty in fitting in with the school's academic culture. For example, John (who is described by teachers as very intelligent) uses his plasticine model to convey an especially strong message about his identity within school, which he describes quite succinctly as: 'School is shit and I'm treated like shit in school.'

John has a tendency to get into trouble, claiming that often this is for silly reasons such as talking. He feels that the teachers are too strict and the punishment is disproportionate: 'It's just like if you're talking and stuff like they take it too far and give you a *detention* for talking! It just makes you angry.' This causes arguments with teachers, the situation spirals out of control, and he often ends up in even more trouble.

John's model of his problems in the grammar school.



Alamy

Boys' working-class identities are either maintained or challenged by their school's culture.

Talking about John and his behaviour his form teacher says:

> He takes up an amazing amount of my time…He's actually going along the way he needs to go if he's looking to get thrown out, which is a pity because he's very very bright…I don't think there is enough support here for John.

Despite his academic ability, John's culture and that of the school do not appear to be a good match. In relation to teachers he comments: 'They are stuck up and just talk different,' and 'If I don't like them I'll mess about in their class and be cheeky to them.' He also has difficulty with the school's academic culture, as he aspires to be a joiner when he leaves school and 'the school expects us all to be doctors'.

Conclusion

All four of these case studies are based on working-class boys from the same local area. Despite sharing similar backgrounds the boys experience the education system in very different ways. Their experiences are mediated through two different types of institutions, and it is through each school's culture that the boys' working-class identities are challenged or maintained.

In the case of the secondary school the culture supports core aspects of a working-class male identity. Through its informal and lad-friendly culture the school recognises the validity of the boys' cultural background. However, this culture also allows the hyper-masculine and disengaged pupils to slip under the radar.

The grammar school promotes social mobility and encourages the emergence of socially acceptable identities based on middle-class norms. Working-class boys, like Mick, who submit to cultural change fare better than those who do not — they avoid clashing with the school and they receive greater validation from their teachers. But the grammar school culture does not recognise, or sometimes misrecognises, working-class culture, and so also promotes acculturation (Ingram 2009).

Yet for these acculturated boys there are potential problems in terms of divided loyalties between home and school cultures. For those who feel disconnected from the school culture (like John) the school perhaps needs to do more to accommodate their cultural backgrounds and avoid clashes, rather than expecting the boys to comply to an alien — and alienating — educational culture.

References

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (2nd edition), Sage.

Ganntlett, D. (2007) *Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences*, Routledge.

Ingram, N. (2009) 'Working-Class Boys, Educational Success and the Misrecognition of Working-Class Culture', in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 421–34.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) '"Fitting in" or "standing out": working-class students in UK higher education', *in British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 107–4.

Willis, P. E. (1977) *Learning to Labour: How working-class kids get working-class jobs*, Saxon House.

Nicola Ingram is a doctoral researcher in the School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast. She has an interest in working-class identity and educational achievement and is working towards a PhD in this area.