‘Prepped for prison’? Experiences of exclusionary school practices and involvement with the justice system

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Abstract
Internationally, the link between punitive school disciplinary practices and increased risk of contact with the justice system has been chronicled via a substantial body of research on the school-to-prison pipeline. This research highlights some of the harmful effects of exclusionary school discipline for some students, including lower educational achievement, lower school completion rates and future contact with the justice system. Drawing on some of the findings from 50 in-depth interviews with former prisoners, educators, parents, and a range of key stakeholders, this paper builds on that research by identifying the informal ways that some groups of students are subjected to exclusion in schools. The findings suggest that to fully understand the factors that impact the path from school to involvement with the justice system, greater attention should be paid to the experience of informal school-based exclusionary practices.

Keywords
Justice system, school exclusion, inequity, disadvantage, informal exclusion

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Introduction

Internationally, school exclusion and low educational attainment are defining characteristics of the prison population (Acher, 2009; Mallett, 2015; McAra and McVie, 2013; Novak, 2019; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba, 2015; Wald and Losen, 2003). One way of understanding the relationship between low educational attainment and prison is the conceptual framework of the “school to prison pipeline” (STPP). Kim et al. (2010) described the STPP as a process that facilitates school disengagement through the intersection of school disciplinary policies and practices with the juvenile justice system. It depicts the many ways in which schools have become a conduit to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Crawley and Hirschfield, 2018).

In the US, the STPP is distinctly characterised by the use of formal school exclusionary and disciplinary practices and the disproportionate application of such practices along class, gender and ethnicity lines (Balfanz et al., 2015; Graham, 2014; Heitzegs, 2009; Schellenberger 2015; Skiba, 2015). Research has shown that those most frequently targeted for punishment in school have characteristics similar to those characteristics displayed by those later subjected to incarceration (Singer, 1996). In the UK, Gill et al. (2017) noted that the majority of prisoners have experienced school exclusion and the rates of school exclusion are highest amongst students who come from high poverty backgrounds. Writing from the Scottish perspective, McAra and McVie (2013) found that children living in single-parent families and those living in neighbourhoods challenged by social and economic marginalisation were more likely to be excluded from school and subsequently end up in prison later in life. Students excluded from school at the age of 12 years were over ten times more likely to end up in prison as adults. They also found disparities in school behavioural sanctions existed by social disadvantage. Some studies indicate that in some instances families can have contrasting social, behavioural and cultural expectations to those of schools. As a consequence disengagement from school may be supported by attitudes and experiences in the family and the wider community (Amstutz and Sheared, 2000; Dale, 2010; Helffield, 2001). The latter links single parenthood with ‘poor parenting and a lack of aspirations for their children as a cause of non-school completion and disciplinary issues (Amstutz and Sheared, 2000; Bloch, 1991; Burtman, 1990). In contrast, Gazeley (2012) found that parents of excluded children maintained a positive view towards education, coupled with concern for the impact of periods of disciplinary exclusion on their child’s progress. Aligning with her findings, McCluskey et al. (2016) too found that parents do not challenge these exclusions because they lack the know-how to, and/or the awareness that a school’s authority can even be challenged in this regard. In line with those findings, Lally (2012) pointed to ‘school-based issues’ as the reason why some students exit school early and have more negative life outcomes.

The central argument of treading the STPP literature is that punitive disciplinary and exclusionary practices in schools set in motion a process that eventually results in marginalised students being pushed out of education and on to the path of the justice system. Combined with already vulnerable social and economic positions, practices such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion are identified in the international literature as
facilitating entry into the STPP (Skiba, 2015; Wald and Losen, 2003). Research from both the US and UK has shown that the practice of school expulsion and suspension are not likely to change the behaviour of the students who breach school rules, nor does it deter other students from engaging in the same behaviours (Gill et al., 2017; Skiba, 2015).

In Ireland, educational inequality and early school leaving have been persistent features of the educational landscape for socially marginalised students. This is especially true for those students who have ended up in prison later in life (IPRT, 2016; Kennedy et al., 2005; Morgan and Kett, 2003; Murphy et al., 2000). Public policy in favour of addressing educational disadvantage is set in the context of the Irish Government’s National Anti-Poverty Strategies (NAPS) and Social Partnership Agreements. A central objective of those policies is to ensure that all young people leave the education system with a high-quality education and related qualifications to support their full participation in society and the economy. A further related objective is to ensure that all those who have already left school have an opportunity to address any lack of educational qualifications that impede their ability to participate fully in society and employment (DES, 1998). Several initiatives were introduced in the late 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, specifically to address educational disadvantages. These were comprised of the Disadvantage Area Scheme in 1984 (DAS), Breaking the Cycle in 1996 (BTC) and Giving Children an Even Break in 2000 (GCEB). In 2005 all of those existing schemes were merged under the auspices of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and this remains in place to the present. The frame of reference for Delivering Equality in Schools (DEIS) is set in the context of the definition of educational disadvantage as contained in the Education Act (1998, p.32). This described:

The impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantages, which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefits from education in schools.

Since the introduction of these policy instruments over the past three decades, some progress has been made in the areas of numeracy and literacy. School retention among socially disadvantaged students has improved (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018) but at a slow rate. Nonetheless, there remains a sizeable minority of students for whom the benefits of such initiatives are not evident.

Educational profile of Irish prisoners
Similar to international contexts, the Irish prison population is strikingly homogeneous and has a different profile from the wider Irish society in terms of both educational attainment levels and demographic profile. Prisoners in Ireland tend to be young males with incomplete post-primary education, who come from a small number of geographical neighbourhoods’ (Breen, 2010; IPRT, 2016). Young males between the ages of 18–24 years are disproportionately represented in the Irish prison system. In 2016/2017, persons between the ages of 18–25 years accounted for 21.5% of the overall committals to prison (IPS, 2018). In a 2018 submission to the Joint Committee on Education and
Skills on Education Inequality and Disadvantage, the Irish Prison Reform Trust (IPRT) cited an unpublished survey conducted by the Irish Prison Service over the period 2015–2017. Across three prisons these findings showed that 25.6% of prisoner participants attended no secondary school, 52% left school before their Junior Certificate and 80% left school before the Leaving Certificate (IPRT, 2018).

The IPRT also highlighted statistics taken from the ‘Oberstown Children Detention Campus’ Point in Time Statistics for January 2018. These showed that 23 of the 43 young people detained at that time were not engaged in education before their detention and it was unclear from the files whether an additional nine young people had been engaged in education before their detention (IPRT, 2018). A significant proportion of Irish prisoners have previously reported ‘having had very little involvement with the education system, even during the years of compulsory schooling’ (Morgan and Kett, 2003).

Whilst rates of fixed-term suspension and expulsion are highest among students attending designated disadvantaged (DEIS) schools in Ireland, annual rates of ‘formal school expulsions’ are relatively low (Millar, 2010). However, Gill et al. (2017) have noted that schools have developed other approaches to excluding students that fall far short of what counts as official or legal exclusions. These include days spent in isolation units, reduced timetables and managed moves out of mainstream school into alternative educational settings.

Theoretical explanations for the relationship between school and involvement with the justice system draw on several contrasting perspectives. One strand of research assumes a deficit-based perspective (Cramer et al., 2014) which locates the responsibility for problem behaviour and poor outcomes with the individual, their family or their social milieu (MacLure et al., 2012). Collins et al. (2016) argued that this approach attributes students, their families and their social environments as a source of risk and thus the cause for failure. This has resulted in little attention being paid by this perspective, to the role of schooling itself in constraining ability, producing problem behaviour and, in turn, shaping the outcomes of students (MacLure et al., 2012). It has been suggested that this has led to a problematic, yet all too common tendency, to privilege poverty explanations for such patterns within this perspective (Collins et al., 2016). On the other hand, in a departure from the traditional ideas of deficit theory, critical theorists fix their gaze firmly on institutional constraints that appear to be neutral, and the role of schooling in creating and perpetuating inequitable outcomes for marginalised groups of students (Cohen et al., 2007). Foucault, in particular, underscored the ‘power of discourse’ for the identification, and what has the appearance, of legitimate exclusion of some students. Crystallised through Foucault, are the practices that frame some students as potentially dangerous and the discrete societal benefits that can be yielded from school-based practices that replicate a prison environment for some students (Graham, 2014). Foucault (1986) showed how institutional spaces take on plural meanings for different groups of people - that is spaces that physically represent one thing, such as a school, but mirror in their operational practices another place, such as a prison. For example, the use of meticulous dividing practices based on non-educational factors, the control of activities, time, movement, examination, classification and normalising judgement, and the important role such practices play in producing social bodies
that are primed for success in a variety of different settings including a prison one (Foucault, 1991; McNicol Jardine, 2005; Ryan, 1991). In illuminating who is listened to, how they are listened to and whose voices are excluded, this perspective locates the conditional basis on which some groups of students come to be undermined, harmed, and unjustly positioned as less credible human beings in education policy and practices (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2010). This approach attributes how knowledge production and meaning-making are controlled and mediated through social status as a cause of exclusion and unequal treatment within the education system (Fricker, 2007).

Previous Irish studies relating to the education of prisoners have tended to be quantitative in nature (Morgan and Kett, 2003; McCrystal, Higgins and Percy, 2006, 2007; McKowen and Fitzgerald, 2007; O’Mahony, 1993, 1997). Whilst these studies provide important statistical patterns of knowledge, the voices of prisoners have been reduced to shared statistical traits. As a consequence, little is known about their formal educational experiences and the practices that shaped them during the time in which they were in the formal education system. To comprehend the actions and choices that both students and schools are making in this regard, there is a need to understand the practices and circumstances in which these actions and choices are occurring.

**Methodology**

Located within a wide critical sociology of education framework, to understand the experiences, perceptions and perspectives of the trajectory from school to involvement with the Irish criminal justice system, the data presented in this paper is drawn from the findings of a qualitative doctoral thesis. The principle at the heart of this research was a commitment to listening to voices and bringing into play subjugated knowledges. Because qualitative methodologies are fundamentally anchored in a concern for developing a depth of understanding, both of a particular phenomenon and the construction of meaning that individuals attribute to their experiences (Jones, 2002) they were appropriate for this study since a central objective was to develop an understanding of the formal educational experiences of a cohort of students who ended up on the route from school to involvement with the justice system. It is not claimed that the results are indicative or indeed representative of all students who have ended up on the route from school to involvement with the Irish justice system but they do teach us something important.

A focus of the research was its framing through the lens and perspectives of my position as a working-class student, practitioner and researcher. As established in the literature, such positioning can enhance as appose to being a threat to the production of knowledge (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Such experiences, I believe, filled what José Medina calls a hermeneutical gap that may otherwise have existed had it not been for such diverse personal and professional experiences. They equally safeguarded me from being unable to see and hear certain things arising from social forms of blindness and deafness that preclude a genuine understanding of the experiences and situations of members of certain social groups. To this end, my personal and professional experiences served me well in being able to hear and listen to all of the participant’s accounts fairly. As Medina (2010) argued, ‘hearers cannot listen to a speaker fairly if there is a
hermeneutical gap that prevents them from understanding and interpreting that speaker’. However, it is also acknowledged that being a researcher with a personal history of education bearing a discrediting label (Gerber et al., 1996) also carried risk. It carried the risk that participants may have said things that they thought that I might have wanted to hear or acted in ways that they may have thought I wanted them to (McGrath, 2000). Having more than one person involved in the research process provided critical oversight in this regard. It ensured that my analysis and interpretations could be assessed, checked and questioned by multiple people who were outside of the bounds of the exposure that I had experienced with the participants. They were able to offer detached assessments and critiques of my interpretation of the data, reassurance and validation.

Data was collected through 50 in-depth, one-to-one semi-structured interviews with former students who experienced school exclusion and contact with the criminal justice sector (n14), teachers and Principals (n14) and multiple stakeholders (n22), eight of whom were parents of excluded children and 14 with professionals across the Youth, Community and Justice Sectors.

The former student sample consisted of 14 in-depth one-to-one interviews. 12 of which were males and 2 females. A clear sex imbalance can be seen in the participation among the former student participants. However, this reflects national trends in statistics which consistently show that males come into contact with the justice system at a much higher rate than females. Involvement with the criminal justice system for this sample was defined as arrest, police caution and/or time spent in juvenile and adult prisons. Interviews with this sample focused on four themes. These included community background and childhood experiences; experiences of school, crime/experiences the justice system and perceptions of the impact of experiences of schooling on their subsequent pathways.

On average, the former students’ formal education ceased between the 1st year and 3rd year of Post Primary school. Some of the participants did not transition from Primary to Post Primary school but were later accommodated in alternative and/or special schools. The age profile of the former students’ ranged from 18 to 42 years old. Most of them experienced school expulsion (informal and formal) and all of them experienced suspensions. The stages at which they were excluded from school varied slightly though not significantly between the younger and older participants. There was some variance between family structures among the participants with some coming from one-parent households and others coming from two-parent families. Strong similarities existed between both cohorts’ younger and older participants) experiences of accessing a secondary school place, experiences of school exclusion and the type of educational facilities that they were placed in. One participant had a history of a diagnosed learning difficulty and some, but not all, had a history of behavioural problems, though these were categorised as minor infractions of school rules. None of the participants had been positively engaged with school at the time their education ceased. All of the former students’ came from communities of social and economic disadvantage.

The education sample consisted of 14 one-to-one in-depth interviews with teachers’ across Limerick City and County. The sample included teachers’ and principals’ from DEIS and non-DEIS schools and also included interviews with those who had experience
teaching in non-mainstream (high support schools, special schools, Youthreach centres) and private school settings. In addition, the sample also had diverse experience in teaching in other Counties throughout Ireland and in the UK. It is important to note that the educators’ who partook in this research were not necessarily the teachers or Principals of the former students in this research. Instead, educators were talking about their past students’ who went on to become involved with the justice system and about those students whom they identified throughout the course of their interviews as possessing the risk markers for ending up involved in the justice system.

The stakeholder sample consisted of 22 in-depth one-to-one interviews with key stakeholders, 8 of whom were parents and 14 of whom were professionals. The parent sample was not the parents of the former students’ who engaged in this study but instead were parents whose children had been permanently excluded from school and/or who later came to the attention of the justice system. Professionals interviewed were experienced stakeholders working with disenfranchised youth, juvenile offenders and former prisoners across the legal, probation, law enforcement, family support, child protection and welfare, youth justice and the community and voluntary sectors.

Gatekeepers were used to identify participants’ who fitted the criteria for participation. In applying the semi-structured and interview guides approach to interviewing as the primary method of generating data, it allowed for rich descriptions not accessible using quantitative methods (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). It also enabled people to be heard who might otherwise have remained silent (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998) or whose voices may have been silenced, censored, trivialized, ghettoized or subjected to other forms of discounting in the past (DeVault, 1999). Through the use of gatekeepers, the ethical principle of justice was operationalised through the process of allowing the participants’ to self-select their participation in the research. This ensured that the choice to participate in the research was that of each of the participants’. Whilst this protected potential participants from any undue persuasion to participate in the research (Woods, 2020), it is also acknowledged that the participant’s decision to take part in the research may reflect some inherent bias of the participants (Sharma, 2017).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and was approached using theoretical and methodological frameworks that drew on the writings of Foucault and the literature on epistemic injustice. Theories of disciplinary power/knowledge and testimonial and hermeneutical injustice were used as points of reference to identify the conceptual categories into which data was grouped (Creswell, 2014). The accumulation of thematic reports was generated using the responses provided by the participants, a strand of which, are presented below.

**Findings**

**Restricted access to school and learning**

One of the most striking, if not common features characterising the teaching and learning experiences of the former students’ was the amount of time spent in school not doing any schoolwork. The majority of former students’ recounted experiences of not being
engaged academically or challenged to progress beyond a certain level. These included educational experiences that never gave them access or exposure to the type of academic material that appropriately reflected or tested their academic level or experience, and the absence of teaching strategies to adequately prepare them to progress to the next academic level. In her study with former British prisoners, Graham (2014) found that the quantity and quality of educational content received by the former students while in school was poor. Neglect of educational needs within classrooms coupled with being placed in lower ability classes, where academic achievement was not a priority, were reported as common practices experienced by the prisoners in that study. Such practices resonate with those of the former students in this research. As John (18–24 years) recalled: “I was kept in a room outside of the classroom with no work to do on my own….came in [to school] and sat around and did nothing basically that’s what they [school] had me doing”. Robert (25+) also recalled similar experiences “like we didn’t even do tests in the same way as the other students. “Like they were still doing long division in 3rd year with us”.

The former students described being bored for much of the time they were in school due to the low volume of academic work that they were given. Tommy described this as “like I was lost cause” (Tommy 18–24 years). This was compounded by descriptions of what happened when they did receive academic work. They felt that the level of work assigned to them was, for the most part, below their academic ability. Vincent (25+) recalled that “there was an element of teaching us as if we were thick or stupid”.

Smyth et al. (2015) stated that the expectational climate of schools and judgements relating to behavioural and special educational needs are influenced by the social composition of a school. This was confirmed by many of the educators in this research, for example;

There is an unspoken or unwritten rule, you might say, that if you’re going to be a teacher in a DEIS (disadvantaged school) school that first of all that the standards are going to be much lower, and it’s just a given that the IQ or the expectation level for them to achieve academically is going to be lesser than if you were teaching in a more middle-class school (Teacher-Mainstream School).

The former students recounted how they were not pushed to do anything academically or expected to achieve anything by their schools. They described a poverty of aspirations and expectations on the part of their schools, even to the extent of not seeing them as able to achieve their secondary education. Tony captured this below;

The expectation when you came in the door was, you’re going to go to prison or you’re going to die young. You’re just going to be a bum, a waste of space, just collecting taxpayers’ money and spending it then in the off-license, you know (Tony18–24 years).

The former students’ attributed the lack of positive expectations on the part of their schools as contributing to them being unprepared academically for the transition from Primary to Post Primary school. They highlighted how they always appeared to be
kept at a certain academic level which meant that they were always behind other students. This reflected the UK experience of Taylor (2015) who found that in-school learning opportunities for disadvantaged children were diminished as a result of significant differences between the curriculum taught to poor children and that to their wealthier counterparts.

Restricting access to instruction time, specific subjects and subject levels were identified as a consistent and accepted part of learning practices for students with low socio-economic backgrounds because there was a view that ‘academic progress isn’t a priority (for schools) for these particular children (Teacher-Mainstream School).

Sometimes there are other guises de facto where students are being put out [of school] but are not being told that they are being put out. So I’m talking…You’re going to do these subjects and you’re not going to these subjects, you know, I’m taking you out of maths, I’m taking you out of this, I’m taking you out of that (Teacher- Mainstream School).

This communicated to former students’ that an academic education was not a right that applied equally to all students. Instead, it was perceived to be a privilege to be won or lost based on several extrinsic conditions unrelated to behaviour, ability or potential. Central to this restricted access to education was control over the amount and type of academic work they were taught and the lack of effort on the part of teachers to explain to them how to do the work that had been prescribed. This reflected what Archer et al. (2018) termed ‘symbolic violence’, whereby the former students become trapped in educational spaces characterised by lower academic and social status. Such experiences further contextualised how the practices of educational streaming and ability grouping are understood more broadly within this group. For these former students’, such practices did not necessarily reflect their academic ability but rather were influenced by non-educational factors. As Robert recalled;

I got into one of the top classes in there so the second highest… And I was getting all B’s and C’s so when I went into 2nd year then they put us into a class…X and X was everyone from my area in there (Robert 25+ years).

The former students’ descriptions of their educational experiences tended to focus on interventions to fix ‘supposed cultural deficiencies, the implication of which, appeared to be an education that solely consisted of ‘teaching students how to look at the teacher, dress right, and act and speak accordingly’ (Alonso et al., 2001).

Fullan (2001) underscored how in education, it is relationships that make the difference. Relationships with teachers were described as particularly negative even if broadly reflective of the negative academic environments that the former students’ reported experiencing throughout their schooling. Relationships with their teachers were characterised by what they felt was a lack of respect and dignity for them as individuals, for their families and for the communities from which they came. These relationships were perceived by the former students’ to be fraught with discrimination and bias, leaving them with feelings of being abused emotionally and educationally. They
described teachers as ‘practically institutionalised’ into viewing them in a negative light. The outcome of those relationships with teachers left them with feelings of being stupid, unwanted and not valued.

It was like I was stupid, and I was made to feel like that (Tommy 18–24 years).

The way you were treated was like a second class citizen. They didn’t show an interest… They didn’t care you were just left to your own devices, kind of a thing, you know, you’re kind of exiled and treated differently (Robert 25+ years).

Isolation and segregation

The former students’ described the educational spaces they were placed in as obviously segregated ones that acted as a dividing ground for who belonged where who was worthy of education and who was not and who would need education and who would not. A common experience of learning among the former students was being clustered into classes with students who came from similar neighbourhoods to them. They perceived such practices of grouping and streaming as not so much reflective of ability but believed that their addresses were being used to enable the system to more easily identify them, and negatively label and discriminate against them.

We were all in the one class. So they kept us all from that area in the one class (Robert 25+ years).

Being isolated from the wider school population virtually from the moment of entering school was an experience also shared by the former students’. This happened, they said, before any improprieties or behavioural misdemeanours that they described having engaged in later on down the line. They spoke of experiences of being relegated to the back of the classroom, left to their own devices, without any help from or engagement with their teachers.

I used to just have to sit in the back of the class (Tommy 18+ 24 years).

I’ll be honest now we were always put at the fucking back, I don’t know why like, but for some reason, we were always put at the back (James 25+ years).

Others described being kept outside their classrooms, isolated from both their class and other students in the school, without any academic work to do, sometimes for weeks and months on end.

I was kept in a room outside of the classroom with no work to do on my own…And this was going on for weeks now (John18–24 years).

Some educators and stakeholders confirmed the use of such practices.
Their punishment is that they are isolated away from their own friends and class (Principal-Mainstream School).

We would have students come into us [Alternative school] saying that they were left alone in a room [in mainstream school] listening to whale music for an hour and then they’d go to another lesson, and then home at noon (Teacher-Alternative School).

Reflecting on the evidence that highlights how policy initiatives (Caslin, 2014) can have a damaging impact in practice. Many educators described these practices as happening in the context of the policy of school designation and the concentration of additional support in schools' based on geographical areas. This was perceived by educators as inducing segregation, reinforcing negative class stereotypes and exacerbating problematic behaviours as well as a reliance on informal disciplinary practices. The findings suggested that designated schools, despite their best efforts, were struggling to provide the types of educational conditions that are reflective of the principles of equality of conditions, inclusion and diversity, partly because of the challenges that often come with experiences of poverty and deprivation were not being shared out equally among schools.

**Punishment and exclusion**

In Ireland, education is compulsory for children from the ages of 6 to 16 or until a child has completed 3 years of Post Primary school. The Education Welfare Act 2000 repealed the 1926 Legislation on school attendance. It provides a framework within which issues relating to the educational welfare of children, including the causes and effects of non-attendance at school, can be addressed effectively. Section 21 of the Act mandates that a school maintain a record of daily attendance and non-attendance of all students registered at that school. Section 21 (6) of the Act further requires schools to submit accurate records of all school attendance and absences to the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA). This includes the notification of fixed-term suspension, expulsion and absences other than through means of formal expulsion. Rolling suspensions are not allowed. Schools can exclude a student where there is a serious breach of the school code of behaviour. However, any proposal to exclude a student, through suspension or permanent expulsion, is deemed a serious step, warranted only by very serious misconduct where strict procedures and protocols must be adhered to (NEWB, 2008).

All of the former students reported receiving in-school detention and regular suspension that resulted in their absence from school from three days to two weeks at a time, and, for some, up to 6 months. Others reported being on rolling suspensions, suspensions that did not have a specific end date, during which they received no schoolwork to do. The behaviours that led to detentions and suspensions were not, according to them, for major infractions of school rules. Their actions and behaviours did not, they felt, warrant such a prolonged absence from school.

One day I was inside the class and the teacher said something to me, and I said “Jesus Christ” and I got suspended for 3 days for that, like, they told me that I was cursing (Jane 25+ years).
I got suspended just for talking in class (Tony 18–24 years).

In addition to experiencing suspensions and in-school detentions, the majority of the former students reported having been expelled from school. However, this did not reflect what could be considered as meeting the legal threshold of a formal process. They described being told that they were no longer allowed to come back to their schools, almost exclusively upon reaching the compulsory school age. The former students described processes where Principals told them that it would be better for them not to have a formal expulsion on their records. This was described by teachers as “officially they haven’t got rid of the child but in all intents and purposes, they have” (Teacher-mainstream school). The former students’ highlighted how this left them in a situation whereby they did not decide to leave school early but were in the position where they no longer had a school place to go back to, nor had they been formally expelled from the system.

Basically, he (Principal) said don’t come back for 5th year. I just finished my junior cert and they were like don’t come back… They made it out as if they were doing me a favour, but basically, they were saying that we don’t want to go through the hassle of that, we don’t want you to come back, you know, but I don’t want to fill out paperwork. Just go, you know (Tony 18–24 years).

Some educators identified being part of what was termed as ‘constructive expulsions’.

I have been part of what we call ‘constructive expulsions’ in secondary schools where it is flagged in advance that a certain child might not be suitable for the school in which they are to be placed. We would have students here who would fall into that category… whose fate I would argue was decided long before they reached the door of the secondary school. Obviously, it’s not a formal strategy. It’s done very informally, in a clandestine, coded way, but those messages are received loud and clear in the staffroom that they won’t be staying (Principal).

The former students identified what they described as sanctions for who they were and what they represented. They recounted experiences of being punished for the types of haircuts that they had, the type of clothes they wore, and the type of footwear they came to school in.

My haircut I got a V, you know bald on the sides and hair on top, and I came in (to school)… and he (principal) was like, he said, “Look this haircut is not going to go with this school so I need you gone for two weeks until it comes back and when your hair goes back, you can come back” (Tony 18–24 years).

I’d come to school with tackies on (runners) and then when I got to the door, they’d throw me out. You can’t wear tackies…They’d constantly throw me out (Andy 18–24 years).
Parsons (2005) chronicled the presence of a ‘will to punish’ that is embedded in policies, practices and responses (or lack thereof) to school exclusion, particularly when social and economic disadvantage is at play. Throughout the interviews the former students’ described how the behaviours that they were punished for did NOT warrant the severity of the sanctions, expressing the view that their schools ‘took it too far in excluding them and that the punishments that they received were disproportionate to the kinds of behaviours that they had engaged in. This view was shared by some of the educators who stated;

To be frank, the biggest problem with rules is the people who practice them and that’s where you run into problems (Principal).

Research has identified the over-representation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in school exclusion processes as a less well-recognised manifestation of a more widely recognised form of systemic inequality (Gazeley, 2012). This resonated with the former students’ who described the behaviours they were persistently suspended for and in particular, the behaviours that led to their expulsion from school, as ‘silly stuff’ rather than for major infractions of school rules. They strikingly illustrated in their descriptions the importance of understanding the reasons for their behaviour and the experiences underscoring it, saying it was not because they were academically unable or uninterested in school or learning. Instead, they described how it resulted from what they perceived to be the presence of relentless penalties owing to ‘stereotypes about their social status’ (Fricker, 2007).

Their behaviours were described as happening from persistent boredom due to a lack of academic stimulation, and from being constantly asked “Why are you here? Why don’t you go down to X (DEIS) secondary school?”. They felt “exiled” and “treated like second class” citizens, told “we don’t want you”, and reminded of the number of different ways that they did “not fit the school profile”. They felt this was due to their appearance: not having the right haircut, the right pants, the right shoes, or the right colour socks. In short, the former students’ described their behaviours as a direct response to what they felt were continuous experiences of rejection and punishment for who they were, rather than for what they did. Exemplifying this further, the former students’ described the reasons for their punishment and expulsions as being for ‘silly things’ that did not pose a threat or cause harm to either their fellow students or their teachers.

I wouldn’t have hit anyone like or caused anyone any harm like (John 18–24+).

Gazeley (2012) has previously noted how the outcomes of exclusionary processes are often influenced by the values and assumptions that professionals hold about parental gender and social class. She found that middle-class parents were more favourably positioned by professionals in school exclusionary processes and this enabled them to exert more influence in achieving better outcomes for their children. This was in comparison to low-income families, who were headed by mothers. For that cohort of parents, the tendency was to associate the difficulties experienced by their children with ‘family
deficit’ or ‘dysfunction’. The parents in this study reported feeling blamed, dismissed and powerless in situations of exclusion with their children’s schools. Parents also described their lack of voice in their interactions with their children’s schools, feeling unheard, negatively judged and looked down upon when they approached their children’s schools to talk to teachers and principals about their concerns about the difficulties that their children were experiencing. They particularly emphasised that they were not sufficiently included or heard in the processes that led to their children’s exclusion from school. These findings highlight the limitations inherent in relying on the single/two-parent dichotomy as a proxy for cause and effect when it comes to school exclusion, and educational outcomes more broadly. Whilst schools tended to deal with the mother in all cases, exclusion outcomes for the former students’ were the same irrespective of their family structure. In this regard, there was evidence that some parents had to contend with a ‘respectability struggle’ within the education system, originating from the traditional division of the working-classes into ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’ (Vincent et al., 2010). In this vein, the findings chimed with those of Gazeley who illuminated the socially classed nature of school exclusion processes. She found that it was a parental disadvantage, not deficit, that was most influential in exclusion outcomes. This disadvantage arose from the lack of ‘system knowledge’ that the parents had of how the education system works, which in turn allowed exclusionary practices and judgements that failed to meet the legal standards to pass without scrutiny or question (Gazeley, 2012).

**Loss of structure and delinquent behaviour**

Throughout their interviews, the former students’ recounted many critical junctures in their lives: the first time that they were arrested; the first time that they went to prison; the first time that they were introduced to drugs and alcohol, but for the majority of the former students’, being excluded from school was highlighted as a particularly significant critical moment in their lives. They described two dimensions to this: 1. the premature termination of their formal schooling and what that meant for them; and 2. the circumstances in which the termination of their formal school place occurred which were given as much prominence as the exclusion from the school itself. They described how the sense of unfairness and injustice of being excluded from school led to feelings of anger, hurt, a sense of sadness and confusion that led to moral disengagement and onto a path of self-destructive behaviours.

> It made me angry and deeply saddened as well, like, that they just kind of turfed me out there like you know… Like I thought the world hated me. I really thought the world hated me and I thought that everyone was out to get me (Andy 18–24 years).

The former students’ described such negative feelings as not being new to them and mentioned experiencing them quite frequently throughout their schooling but what was underlined as critical at this juncture was the loss of routine, structure, and the mental stimulation that went with having a school place. Although stimulation at school was mostly negative in an educative sense, there was mental stimulation connected to
having to try and constantly avoid being punished and sanctioned. Therefore, while the
former students consistently highlighted the lack of academic learning received through-
out their schooling, there was an important process of learning happening in the school
that required a level of mental and cognitive stimulation; a pattern of learning that con-
sisted of how to escape, how to lie low, how to keep out of trouble, how to avoid certain
people.

There was only one way in and one way out of the school and he (principal) would be at the
front door like waiting for us all to come in like you know what I mean? But there was a way
into the yard so a few of us went into the yard like and we climbed over the roof, not to do
detention, like (James 25+ years).

In the absence of what the former students’ described as appropriate academic stimu-
lation, they extracted a sense of achievement or satisfaction from those times when they
got through a day of school without being sanctioned. The structure of the school was
seen as a protective factor, even if the types of criminal behaviour outside of school
required the skillset that the former students were acquiring in school:

The principal always would be at the desk (front desk of school) in the mornings and if you
were in trouble or whatever there would be three chairs and he’d say sit down there and
you’d have to sit down until school started so every time I’d walk past I’d walk past like
that (head looking away and his hand covering his face) cos there would always be some-
thing that he would make me sit down for so I tried to cover my haircut, like (Tony 18–
24 years).

Some research identifies the onset of offending behaviour before experiencing exclu-
sion from school (Berridge et al., 2001). However, the former students’ in this research
described the loss of structure that school provided them with as a particularly critical
moment in their lives in terms of the onset of their offending.

Basically, that’s when it all started going wrong after that (school expulsion). It started
getting serious. I had nothing to do, fuck all to do, and I was there then with the older
fellas on my own, do you get me?, drinking and doing things that I shouldn’t have been
doing at that age (David 25+ years).

However, in line with the findings of MacDonald and Shildrick (2007), one of the
biggest problems the former students had to contend with was what to do with their
time once they were excluded from school. In the absence of structure that came with
being out of school, the former students highlighted the lack of opportunities for
mental stimulation that came with that as being equally impactful in terms of the negative
lifestyle choices that ensued, to break the monotony of sudden ‘nothingness’ that they
found themselves contending with after being excluded from school. They started to
use illegal stimulants such as weed and also alcohol to fill the void left by the absence
of structure and the elimination of their familiar outlet for mental stimulation.
We just ended up staying around at the corners, you know, smoking joints, lighting fires (Vincent 25+ years).

I just hung around with the boys smoked weed, drank naggins and go rob cars (Tony 18–24 years).

They reflected on the cumulative routine of hanging around with the ‘lads’ who were older than them and also out of school, and having nothing to do and using drugs, as leading them onto a cycle of crime to acquire the money necessary to obtain the drugs that they had come to be reliant on to pass their day.

Then you’re off out looking for hash and you’d rob a shed or something to get money to buy hash, so a cycle began out of boredom, like, because you had nothing else to do, like (Robert 25+ years).

The former students described engaging in behaviours that reflected the skillset that they knew intimately well, the same skillset that they described acquiring throughout their experiences of schooling. This time, however, rather than such strategies being adopted to avoid being caught and punished by their teachers and principals, the former students’ described their criminal activities, and the people whom they were now having to avoid punishment from were the Gardaí (Police). Punishments by the Gardaí were described as not new experiences for the former students. They highlighted the same experiences of being maltreated, being segregated from the general population, being isolated on their own and being confined together with similar people to them, in spaces with little positive stimulation. Detention centres and prisons, where they served time, were perceived as replicating their school experiences and Gardaí and prison officers assumed the role that their teachers and principals once occupied.

School, prison, is exactly the same, you know what I mean? The only difference is in the school, lads, you could come home from school to your family…In prison, it was still like school cause at the end of the day, he (prison officer) is called your class officer and I mean everything had to be run by them. It was like you were at school (Martin 25+)

**Conclusion**

It has been argued that unless data relating to the outcomes experienced by specific groups within school systems are analysed with an understanding of the inequalities embedded within them, they can render these inequalities invisible (Gazeley et al., 2015). The findings of this research reinforced this point and identified the presence of a set of disciplinary and exclusionary experiences for a cohort of students that began in school and ended with involvement with the justice system. This extended beyond the sanction of being excluded from school, although this was identified as a critical moment in the lives of the participants. Whilst the findings indicated that the onset of
offending behaviour, following exclusion from school was influenced by wider factors such as material poverty, the absence of structure that came with being out of school and the peer groups that were now available to form friendships with, the educational experiences and conditions that preceded the former students’ exclusion from school were equally, if not more, important in this regard. The pattern described in their offending behaviour outside of school and their subsequent involvement with the justice system reflected experiences and practices that the former students had encountered throughout their schooling. Enduring the boredom of being confined together, in restricted spaces, with their movements tightly regulated, segregated from their mainstream peers, for the long periods, with minimum positive mental and cognitive stimulation, in their detention centres and prisons was not a new experience for the affected students. By the time they arrived at their police stations, detention centres and adult prison destinations, the former students had already acquired years of experience characterised by the very features to enable them to cope with, and function in such environments. However, the participants did not see prison as an inevitable destination for them. Instead, they saw it as a destination that might have been alterable through changes in educational conditions and practices because they felt that too often schools treated them as if they were already criminals or who were ‘prison-bound’ upon their entry into the education system. As a result, greater attention needs to be paid to the effect of day-to-day in-school experiences, practices and interactions and the role that these may play in making post-school offending a more likely outcome for some groups of students than others.

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