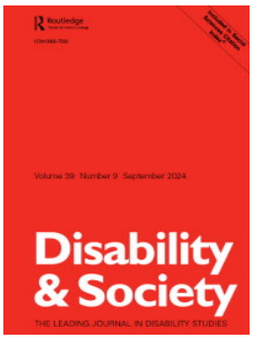

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Other lives: relationships of young disabled men on the margins of alternative provision

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on a qualitative data analysis of the experiences of a small group of so-called 'hard-to-reach' disabled young men in Alternative Provisions (APs). Supporting young people has largely focused on the use of professional interventions. We contrast the young men's experiences of professional service interventions with the complementary functions of social and psychological capital embedded in their own friendship networks. The young men rarely used the professional support offered, often finding professional practices and institutional systems unhelpful. This contrasted with the support gained in their own friendship networks which offered opportunities for enhancing well-being and agency. There are implications here for how young people facing risks associated with school exclusion and marginalisation can best be supported. We suggest that young people themselves are important agents in providing mutuality and solidarity, which can enhance various and varied life-course transitions.

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KEYWORDS
Alternative provision; masculinity; disability; friendships; psychological capital; social capital

Points of interest

- Disabled, working-class male students are increasingly placed into Alternative Provisions intended for students who would otherwise not receive suitable education.
- Supporting young people has often focused on professional interventions and the value of young people's friendship networks has received little research attention.
- This article is based on research with young disabled men on the margins of Alternative Provisions, located within a medium sized local authority. The research found that these young people are important agents in providing mutuality and solidarity. This can enhance life-course transitions.

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- Research on young disabled men rarely mentions emotion and intimacy. Our data identified instances of friendship offering young people the support necessary to endure problems related to exclusion and to collectively develop effective coping strategies.
- The article emphasises that the value of friendship networks should be acknowledged as part of work undertaken by professionals and agencies with marginalised young people.

Introduction and context

Research with young people excluded from school has (almost by default) drawn on the impact of professional interventions, such as SAFE (Support, Attend, Fulfil, Exceed) taskforces, in supporting these young people with their poor attendance and/or engagement, especially in Alternative Provisions (APs) (Department for Education, (DfE) 2022). Such specialist support is necessary and often innovative but is bound to institutional aims and outcomes that are active in powerful structures reproducing inherited institutional systems, strategies and/or practices. In limited studies of young disabled men in APs there has been little focus on friendship networks as spaces for collectively-initiated social and emotional support (Edwards et al. 2021). Our research with young disabled men explores the significance of friendships that, although having a negative presence in policy and other literatures, have considerable potential for enhancing these young people's well-being and agency (Johnston and Bradford 2019). We draw on Bourdieu's work on social capital (1986) and extend the concept of psychological capital (Bradford and Hey 2007) to provide insights into how young disabled men themselves can be agents in establishing supportive friendships that enhance life-course transitions and underpin more inclusive educational interventions.

We understand disability as a form of social difference, having discursive and material aspects. Materially, disabled young people may have physical, behavioural or psychological characteristics that mark their difference, and which may act as impairments. However, disability discourses (often intersecting with other forms of social difference, class or gender, for example) form the basis of categorising, stigmatising and excluding young people in a range of institutional settings (education, health, employment or leisure, for example), effecting multiple forms of disadvantage. As such, becoming disabled entails a relational process through which a person or category of people becomes *positioned* as somehow beyond a norm of able-ness to assume a *disabled* identity. Disabled young men are especially vulnerable to exclusion (Tomlinson 2013).

Reasons for poor school attendance, engagement and school exclusion are varied and the behaviours and cultural practices of disabled working-class

young men themselves are often solely understood by professionals, researchers and policymakers as risk factors precipitating 'deep exclusion' (Levitas et al. 2007) or pervasive negative effects into adulthood such as poor social-economic outcomes (Madia et al. 2022) and criminal victimisation (Wolf and Kupchik 2017). Working-class young men are less likely than young women to seek support for such problems (Mahalik and Dagirmanj 2019), and their deficit status offers little scope for exploring the progressive value of their friendship networks (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2012). More critical understandings of disability (especially those that emphasise its social origins and the importance of inclusion strategies) have come to inform policy and expert practices (Thomas and Loxley 2022) as well as the expansion of AP in England and Wales. However, recent policy documents, such as the SEND review (DfE, 2022) and the majority of the current literature, reinforce a reliance on professional networks and their social capitals that may not mesh with young people's own class-based and other experiences (see Malcolm 2021). Questions arise here about how young people's own understandings of need and response can be included in the work of APs. Our research suggests that young people's day-to-day experiences of AP entail the constant establishment and development of friendship networks which become important settings for positive social exchange in APs.

The emerging policy landscape privileges professional (and political) discourses of need that shape understandings of young people in AP. A focus on AP's institutional social capitals may neglect the significance of friendship networks in young disabled men's development (Rossetti and Keenan 2018) perhaps undermining APs supportive remit. For example, young people's freedom to choose friends or to 'trade' social capital may be frustrated by accountability measures in AP where certain forms of support become privileged above others at a delivery level. Trust and norms formed within these young men's networks are invariably construed as social capital's negative iteration, its 'dark side' (Field 2008), despite friendship's positive significance being acknowledged for other social groups (Helve and Bynner 2007). Historically, the literature has regarded 'anti-school' friendship networks as contributory factors in young men's exclusion (for example, Willis 1977; Jones 2009). These networks are often viewed as 'a repository for anti-social attitudes and attributes' (Walker & Roberts 2018, 3), settings that create 'problem learners.' Such networks are sometimes misunderstood as simply leisure-based and failing to work on questions of emotional disclosure, personal relationships and intimacy, for example (Roberts, Elliott, and Ralph 2021). Combined with disabled students' learning difficulties which are not, or cannot be, met by schools these young people can become positioned in disadvantaged and disadvantaging spaces. Similar notions of deficit are reflected in literature exploring how hegemonic masculine cultural practices use disruptive behaviour to compensate for a lack of social status. In such perspectives,

accepting 'professional help is itself a socially risky act' (Vandello and Bosson 2013, 106), whereas *rejecting* professional support is seen by young people themselves as a way of demonstrating self-reliance and agency. Being recognised by peers as *cool* is a hard-won status for young disabled men whose embodiment may symbolise marginalised masculinities in broader youth and education cultures.

Regulation of young disabled men's social spaces, learning economies, a shifting of power to professionals and their ability to control relationships may erect hidden barriers for those who wish to develop their own sense of identity as part of transition processes. In this context, AP might be a 'space of opportunity' for some, but a place of confinement for others (Bradford 2012, 45). Importantly, these spaces are neither neutral, empty nor merely physical but *sociological* and constituted contingently and discursively through social relations, for example through gendered or classed practices (Massey 1994). We move to reflect on how friendship networks may become spaces of opportunity or subjugation for young disabled men.

Theorising the friendship networks of young (disabled) men

Although much-neglected in sociology (and partially obscured by a recent focus on *social networks*), the literature on friendship consistently alludes to the promotion of social trust, intimacy, belonging and attainment (Helve and Bynner 2007). Friendships are also understood as having a protective function in uncertain late-modern worlds (Sennett 1998). Friendship and friendship networks take varying forms, existing on '*…'thick' as well as 'thin' levels*' (Delanty 2003, 144) and, reflecting an Aristotelian duality of pleasure and utility, can be understood in various expressive or instrumental terms, these not always immediately differentiated (Cotterell 2007). For young people, especially those marginalised by social difference, like disability, friendships have the capacity to alleviate isolation and loneliness (Sedgewick, Hill, and Pellicano 2019). Even in 'liquid modernity', Bauman suggests friendships are significant, expressive and elective affinities serving no '… purpose other than being mysteriously satisfying in themselves' (Bauman 1993, 184). For many young disabled people, especially post-austerity and post-COVID 19 pandemic, increased levels of poverty, taxing life-course experiences and transient personal relationships may further increase their marginalised status (Forrester-Jones et al. 2021). Spencer and Pahl's critical take (2006) on the liquidity metaphor, which they see as overly gloomy, suggests a more hopeful view. Their empirical work identifies the ubiquity and significance of contemporary personal friendship. They also identify patterns of exchange and support in friendship networks that underlie and form '*hidden solidarities*' and '*robust personal communities*' which enhance the social bond. Evidence of this hopeful view is present, we believe, in the friendship networks of

the young men in this study. Despite the activities of some youth groups being viewed negatively, configurations of interpersonal encouragement, communication and emotionally expressive and caring exchanges amongst the young disabled men in our research confirm scope for developing these networks in the interests of disabled young learners by creating forms of 'positive solidarity' (Blatterer 2022).

Friendship can be understood as practice; something young people engage in with others rather than something they have. This foregrounds young people's agency in the context of friendship which is therefore to be understood as inescapably *social*. However, friendship networks, the sets of interconnected relationships in which friendship is shaped by numbers of participants, heterogeneity, and contact frequency (van der Horst and Coffé 2012, 510), are invariably ambiguous, differently constructed in different fields and often poorly understood, especially in education settings (Leszczensky et al., 2022). This is particularly so when applied to the supposedly negative practices and cultures of working-class young people (Archer et al., 2012). The result is that existing research in this area tends to individualise issues related to school exclusion and ignores young people's *emplaced* positionings and embeddedness, the consequence of local social and cultural practices and forces. Current practice in APs often draws disproportionately from individualised therapeutic work with young people (Johnston et al. forthcoming). This has the effect of operationalising forms of capital to gain compliance and to 'rescue' (Reid 2009), and misunderstanding the impact of environmental or external factors associated with young disabled men's social network experiences. These practices emphasise deficit differences and distance between the capitals produced within networks of *problem* young men and those in some imputed mainstream. Bourdieu's theory of capital, '*a theory of privilege rather than a theory of inadequacy*…' (Morrow 1999, 760) is especially relevant to understanding young people's social experiences of APs. It resists framing young disabled men through deficit discourses or their own imputed *poor* choices, conduct or learning dispositions.

The concept of psychological capital has grown in significance as awareness of young people's mental health has increased, with COVID-19 pandemics further aggravating an existing well-being crisis among young people (Cowie and Myers 2021). This resource is understood predominantly as being confined in the bounds of the self, a form of discursive self-confidence in the face of (inevitable) social pressures. It encompasses the resources individuals may have to hand for example, belonging, hope, optimism and resilience (Allatt 1993). Existing studies of school-age youth's psychological capital draw on human capital and Fredrickson's (2004) 'broaden-and-build' theory, which affirms an awareness or experience of positive emotions through, for example, social exchanges that promote well-being (Finch, Farrell,

and Waters 2020) and lead to encouraging others within a social network (Çavuş and Gökçen 2015). We conceptualise psychological capital here as an additional capital linked to, but not identical with, capitals already identified as part of Bourdieu's theorisation of class and power (Bourdieu 1986). Those resources intersect with other capitals and, similarly, psychological capital is differentially distributed. It denotes social capital resources residing in networks in the form of trust, security, emotional support and confidence (Field 2008; Bradford and Hey 2007). Friendship networks are vital experiential settings for offering, gaining and using support and developing social competence. In the research setting here, a focus on the forms of capitals encompassed in friendships networks provides an opportunity to reframe an understanding of the complex relations between AP, the home and local communities through recognition of the potential of '*informal learning in communities, and in the ways that skills developed in these settings can be transferred across contexts*' (Field and Tuckett 2017, 4). An understanding of the centrality of young men's 'lay' rather than others' 'professional competences' in sharing knowledge, supporting each other, and using interpersonal negotiation strategies, may transcend individualising practices and deficit discourses that surround young disabled men. By 'lay' we imply the stock of everyday cultural competence and knowledge that non-professional actors hold, and which contribute to social capital (Scourfield and Pithouse 2006). We suggest that these competences may aid development of voluntary relations that facilitate re-engagements into (alternative) education or employment. Our study addresses limitations in the existing literature and offers accounts of how young disabled men construct and enact mutual support at a pivotal point in their educational and personal lives (Miething et al. 2016). If an AP's function is to increase young people's capacity to make informed choices and to enhance their transitions, then friends and friendship must be acknowledged as contributing to this.

Research background

Our data are drawn from a study of young working-class men permanently excluded from schools, and who were enrolled in AP but not engaging with the support available to them through this or most other child service provisions, such as Children and Mental Health Services (CAHMS). The research site was located in a medium sized local authority (LA), in Southern England, which has pockets of child poverty and youth unemployment. The research was part of a small qualitative research study initiated by a Children Services Department of one LA that aimed to explore a lack of engagement with some of its services, specifically issues such as involvement in criminal activities whilst young people were absent from AP settings. The research gained Research Ethics Committee approval and the LA granted researcher access

to workers from a multidisciplinary team before commencement of the research. Access to all participants was granted by relevant managers and consent given and agreed with young people normally *via* social or youth workers. These workers acted as project safeguarding officers who held in-depth discussions with the young people to outline the purpose of the study. Access and consent were always negotiated with another adult present, with time spent building rapport and promoting trust so young people felt fully informed about the study (Rogers and Ludhra 2012).

The researcher completed semi-structured informal individual and group interviews with nine participants who been repeatedly excluded from and refused to attend AP. This article draws from these. All participants were aged 14-to-16 years, had complex histories and backgrounds and diverse corporeal, cognitive and emotional characteristics. The reasons for their exclusion from school ranged from bringing in knives to persistently disruptive behaviour. They were labelled with a learning disability, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) across four classifications, by their school and some had gained secondary labels identifying various emotional and behavioural needs. The participants were either under the care of the LA or were involved with statutory services, such as Youth Offending Teams (YOT). There was a multiplicity of relationships amongst the young men. Some knew each another from their local communities and neighbourhoods or from school, often through time spent in behavioural units or later becoming 'mates' in AP. Friendships were sometimes later reinforced through participation in the restorative elements of their referral orders, used by the youth justice system when dealing with first time offenders who plead guilty. Their lives outside of AP offer a complexity of experience that served as a foundation to identify and discuss personal experiences, struggles and achievements. These had created barriers to data collection, particularly in the case of disengagement, which made interviews untenable in APs and in the home. This required negotiating points of entry with services, such as with YOT staff, to which some of the young people were mandated to attend. Interviews were conducted after prearranged meetings with children's services staff, often outside one of the organisations' designated sites, such as in youth clubs, coffee shops or on the street. (Group) interviews were recorded with the young men's agreement and lasted up to 45 min.

Our participants' data may not be generalisable. We know, for instance, that many LAs have fragmented and diverse APs and availability of support varies. More generally, the participants conform to a wider group of so called 'hard to reach' working-class young people who typically reject school (Reay 2009), who have been sentenced for a criminal offence (both groups are over-represented in APs) and whose lives outside of or not attending AP are under-researched. Those on the margins of AP became a focus of the study for two reasons. The data suggested that a referral to AP – away from

regular school sites – also entailed being positioned outside of mainstream life and shifted the nature of the support on offer. The young men's own accounts of their experiences and relationships and the significance attributed to these were foregrounded in the data collection and analysis. A focus on capitals highlighted in data may extend to youth, disability, education and criminology studies that seek to understand the resources present among young people beyond school settings (Carvalho and Lewis, 2003).

We believe that the data analysis presented here identifies exemplars (Flyvbjerg 2001, 74) that offer the possibility of theorising the positive potential of friendship in the lives of these and other young people. Such analysis can lead to generalisation and may indicate possibilities for extending young people's agency in shaping provisions, important in the democratisation of services (Nortvedt, Olsen, and Sjølie 2022). Interview data were transcribed and analysed thematically through close reading. Social orders are located within '… *durable dispositions such as mental structures*' (Bourdieu 1993, 18), and these are real and *structuring* in the sense that they both constrain and enable agency, in turn contributing to their reproduction as habitus. Evidence of such structures (in and through which 'the social' is constituted) are discernible in individuals' talk. Interview data capture these and their analysis can facilitate understanding of the social worlds from which they derive. Coding of data was broadly organised through our theoretical interest in friendship as a component of psychological and social capital. Analysis of data identified and reconstructed themes, resulting in changes to codes where necessary. From the process of coding and analysis, narratives of friendship and capital were identified that seemed to explain the characteristics and events that shaped the activities of the young people in this study. We consider three themes that emerged through analysis: 'constructions of school-based support', 'value in friendship networks,' and 'reputation: significant others.'

Constructions of school-based support

> Sam: '*I was fuckin' sick of that place* (his previous school). *After being kicked out, I was done… fuck 'em, I'm betta' out here sellin"* (interview).

Sam is 15 years' old, and should be in his second year in AP, but rarely attends. He was excluded for bringing a knife into school but feels victimised as, '*everyone did it… an' I was ok (in school), I mean I was passing* (exams)'. Sam was subsequently referred to, not offered, AP six months after his exclusion. During time away from school, he seemed to have lost faith in professional support, in part, as '*no-one from my school phoned…they didn't give a shit*'. Sam said he just, '*hangs in my yard* (house) *with mates… an' do work with my cousin*'. Sam, like many of the young men in this article, rejected

the various AP providers in his local area, much to the dismay of (foster) parents, social worker(s) and despite the many, persistent efforts of the AP staff. He points out, '*they're always bugging me an' chatting to my mum*'. Sam's rejection of formal support seems to derive from a sense of wanting to take responsibility over his own existence and construct an identity that was not readily on offer to him in APs that, to Sam, looked '*like jail…. they've fuckin' cameras everywhere!*'

Working-class boys' rejection of support (in AP, for example) might reinforce the idea that their chosen individual identities are revoked or reconstructed in the context of disciplinary and individualising regimes. AP can be understood in this way, and the young men's involvement traversed and re-traversed the complex boundaries and liminal spaces between resistance and acceptance. They responded to their exclusions in different ways. Many were quick to link their APs' apparent restrictive social and physical environment with an unlikely supportive setting, while others remained open to the efforts of AP staff to re-engage them in alternative educational provision. Curtis (14 years), said, '*Some* (AP staff) *were cool*'. Curtis later rejected this support after re-engaging with the provision, in part, to try to emulate the patterns of behaviour of predominantly male-dominated APs, or as Curtis said to '*fit in*' or '*be cool with*' his new peer group. What emerges from our data is not an unequivocal picture of rejection or resistance but an ambiguous representation in which young men move between positions at times pragmatically, intermittently impulsively and sometimes resignedly. It was not always easy to understand an underlying rationale in specific circumstances. Rejection was, however, invariably predicated on an overriding logic derived from the restrictive and sometimes contradictory conditions imposed from previous or extant support and, of trying to conform simultaneously with peer group and institutional demands including the disclosure of personal information. Such disclosure of activities out of school had, for example, led Mason (15 years) to gain further unwanted statutory interventions:

> *I went with mates to a* (anti-immigration) *march for a laugh – some other people* (from the AP) *said they were doing it, an' not going* (to school). *Teachers heard us chatting… then we all got a knock on the fuckin' door from the FEDS* (police). (interview)

Inevitably, for these young men all of this posed difficult strategic and tactical questions around achieving convincing 'identity performances' (Goffman 1959). Managing and negotiating the often-contradictory demands these *front-stage* routines entailed was evidently challenging.

It was clear these young men were not participating (or no longer wanted involvement) in statutory processes, such as their Education, Health, and Care plan (EHCP) reviews. Some said they had been referred to local Health

services and CAHMS, but in group interviews most spoke of '*writing off*' such additional service interventions apparently preferring the, not always obvious, benefits gained from conflict:

> Tyler: '*I always got told I would get help if I went to them (meetings)…they were always about things I done wrong…*' (group interview)

> Mason: (cutting off Tyler) *'…what's the fuckin point* (with meetings) … *they don't help. I mean, I only ended up getting kicked out* (of school) *anyway'*.

Some of the young men were involved in relatively low-level but potentially risky activities outside of school. Tyler (15 years), for example, spent time meeting '*mates 'n' smokin'* (weed). However, the circumstances in which they found themselves and the support targeted at the home seemed to them designed only to encourage compliance. As Kane (15) said,

> *I don't want to go home all-day because they* (workers) *are always there, looking for me… they just talk to my mum anyway'* (directing conversations and support toward a parent). (Interview)

The available support was characterised by Kane as family engagement with statutory services. It was regarded as problematic in that it appeared to constrain their already restricted range of socially 'valued' activities. Discussions with these young men revealed how their lives were spatialised in the form of clearly identifiable and boundaried places (Foley & Leverett 2011). For example, 'hanging around the streets' or 'visiting mates' (houses) were primary activities outside of other regulated spaces like the APs in which they could establish and sustain friendship network memberships. The street was a, sometimes, safe place where home-targeted interventions from professionals (social workers, for example) could be avoided. The sometimes-dangerous street or their own 'estate' was influential in shaping their everyday lives and subjectivities, with talk of local violence, crime, and drug-use consuming our group discussions as well as their 'friendship talk'. Wayne (15), for example, said '*They're* (services) *always at my house. Makes me want to stay out (*on the street*), but you're a bit lost then. There's fights and druggies an' shit'.*

A depressing sense of apathy towards professional support was pervasive. The young men believed that their voices were not valued, or the support was 'pointless', or 'hopeless'. In contrast, close friends had a persuasive influence on belonging, offering protection from bullying by outsiders. Trust and in-group loyalty were similarly constant, in part for protection against, as Wayne said, 'fights and druggies' on their estates. This reinforced the established notion that young men do not seek help for themselves or involve professionals in the resolution of problems in their lives, citing a preference for self or peer help or simple avoidance of difficulties. Their friendship networks were crucial here.

Value within friendship networks

Superficially, the data about the young men's friendships were uncomplicated and the types of support that emerged were shaped by peer pressures, particularly those delineating a normative masculinity. Tom (14 years), for example, suggested AP peer groups meant there were strong expectations to conform by deploying emotional defences and monitoring the boundaries that marked out acceptable masculine conduct. Friendships were spatially demarcated with clear boundaries marking what was expected within and around the AP. Yet, there was also an imperative to being 'honest' and 'myself' around new AP friends. As Tom put it, '*They* – (friends from AP*) can be dicks… you have to be careful what you say. When it comes down to it, you do not want them to say something that makes you look weak*'. This is the imperative of toughness, a tensile strength denying or shrouding the appearance of weakness and carefully policed by membership of the friendship network. The young men's abilities to offer or gain support for their predicaments seemed to encourage them to endure or remain silent about troubling experiences until things, as Sam said, '*get better*'. This hints at Sam's hopes and desire to escape from or endure immediate circumstances. Resilience in the face of difficult life experiences as well as transitions as in '*getting on*' or '*making money'* was a dominant theme in the interviews.

> *It will get better once I get a job an' that. I just got to deal with it…I think, most* (of his friends) *see it like that. Sam* (interview)

Although the examples of resilience and a lack of space to be 'myself' reinforce a limiting idea of working-class masculinity driven by previous experiences and conditions, this did not mean the young men were unable to express emotion about their lives. For example, some of them recollected that being enrolled in an AP had heightened an awareness of their disability to others. Tom, for example, said he had '*problems [making friends] in the school (*AP*)'*, especially when he was told to sit at 'the front' or in one-to-one support where his disability became prominent and apparent. What Tom was really like, as an individual or potential friend, was difficult to manifest to his peers.

> *I got to be different there* (in the AP). *I don't want people in class thinking' I'm stupid, init, because I'm stuck-up front* (of the class) *or* (always alone) *with a teacher*.
>
> Interviewer: *So, how do you deal with that?*
>
> *I play along* (be loud and behave a certain way) *to fit in…* (pause) t*hat's not me. I just don't want to be there doing that. If you don't, you get picked on.*

Tom's openness was evident in relation to the increased peer pressure that existed within his AP, in comparison to his school, something that had caused further distress.

…you might be too (absent) *if you were stuck there all day. What have I got to be so happy about feeling like a fuckin' retard an' end up doing nothing?*

These young men's 'disabled identities' were experienced as hazardous, attracting unwanted attention and stigmatisation. Those experiences and sharing the emotions associated with them had brought young men like Tom and Kevin (15 years) closer together. This friendship had been a source of concern for AP staff as they often missed school together. Kevin said, '*teachers kept us apart'* but their mutuality was a source of solidarity and loyalty enabling discussion of worries about ongoing threats of violence (or bullying) and dealing with social isolation.

Interviewer: '*Did you know Kevin before* (the AP)?'

Tom: '*He was a year above. We were kind of alright (friendly) with each other an' that…'*

Interviewer: '*So, Kevin, you became friends with each other in the AP?*'

Kevin: *'it was just us there* (the AP) *mostly, no-one bothered* (turning up to class), *so, we started hanging out* (outside the AP)' *just chatting 'cos it's not easy there, I mean it's 'safer' if it's just us …'*

Interviewer: *'What do you mean 'safer'*?'

Tom: '*It's just loud and people act tough all day…it's better to just keep things between us… I mean, try to avoid some people* (bullies)*…hang out, away from there* (the AP)'.

Friendships act not only as 'back-up' and this kind of emotional understanding seems to act as a protective buffer in the face of real or perceived instances of disability discrimination by others. Emotion and intimacy were sparingly shared openly in group interviews, but they were present, sometimes indirectly through talk of their various interactions over social media messaging platforms, the talk itself becoming the fabric of friendship. These alternative spaces were important sites for bonding, enhancing the young men's capacity to 'open up' by offering some versatility and fluidity in the types of emotional rapport and conduct that they were able to offer one another either in groups or as individuals. There was evidence of the young men making mutually supportive, optimistic and caring statements. Reflecting on these as pointers for change, Kevin described how

After we got bullied, I chatted about everything (to Tom), *'cos he dealt with it too.*

Further responses in WhatsApp messages that were sent directly to the young men by friends, which were openly discussed within individual interviews, demonstrated a similar reflexivity.

You are smart, you can do something with yourself (message sent to Sam)

You spend more time trying to prove to us you're not smart (message sent to Mason).

One of the boys said that outside of AP he could tell friends about a problem and 'leave it there', rather than sharing concerns with workers in the AP, where it would cause 'hassle'. Again, this suggests how accessible opportunity (in this case, sharing of personal matters) is contained in clear boundaries, in this instance between AP and 'not-AP'. Particular spaces become avoided, accessed and used in very precise ways, and the boys' shared information and advice about safe spaces and places in which to meet and to avoid '*gangs*'. Seemingly, the boys have come to value a taken for granted aspect of their friendship which has developed from forms of imposed marginality rather than from ascribed anti-social behaviours or desires. Material space (the street, the park or home) was augmented by the physical distance afforded by the virtual spaces of social media, both providing settings in which friendship networks could flourish. Social media appeared to offer safe and more comfortable spaces in which to engage emotionally and construct mutual support and hope in the face of risks or crises encountered outside of AP: 'dodging people', 'bullying', 'being bored' or isolated. The supportive forms of psychological capital, such as a sense of hope and optimism entailed here, differ between but bridge virtual and material worlds. These interactions display, we argue, the boys' resilience towards some ambiguities of social conflict created by school exclusion. Similarly, access to reputational networks enabled reflexive shifts in self-perception, such as a sense of belonging, and some structural opportunities for change and for supporting positive transitions, for example into formal or informal labour market opportunities.

Reputation: significant others

Trust and reputation were crucial to the young men, and they often compared professionals and friendship network members. Reputation can be understood as a 'device' for establishing trust in another person and as such, reputation is a form of social capital. Reputation, often diffused through friendship networks also enables social uncertainties to be mitigated by creating reliability in deciding who is trustworthy. Outside of their friendship networks, the young men described individuals from whom they would be willing to accept advice or information. Their reputations in the young men's informal networks were substantively built on trust. Reputation was sometimes linked to those professionals, like youth workers, who were seen as 'useful' and to members of their own or overlapping friends and family networks who could be trusted for advice or guidance. The latter were often those who they '*done time with*'. Aaron (15 years) said that '*reputation is everything. I mean, we (*friends*) talk about who is (*workers*) useful*'. For Aaron,

a key form of emotional and practical support was often offered by parents of friends, seen as trusted intermediaries.

> *When I got kicked out* (excluded) *the last time it stressed my mum out, I didn't want to go back* (home). *I just stayed at my mates …it was his mum, I mean, she'd chat to my social worker an' that, an' try to get it all sorted'.* (Interview).

Aaron also spoke of how members of his own family had, themselves, been excluded from school. This may have reinforced a particular view of AP, but also created opportunities to offer encouragement and hope in managing life course transitions. Aaron described helpful conversations with his uncle, who he saw as a friend and who he now works with. This suggests overlaps between family members and other friends and the strength of the ties involved.

> *He was excluded for fighting, I think. He told me it was probably not my fault. Don't worry but if you are done* (with school) *what are you doing with your life'? So, I started to think because he went through it* (exclusion)… *He shares lots of things…He made it so I could talk to him about anything. I knew I could trust him.*

Aaron went on to say that his uncle was:

> *a friend, you can have a laugh with, but he still bosses me about* (at work). *I mean, I am doing something different now… I don't have to think about it* (exclusion). *I mean, look at my uncle. He makes lots of money.*

Outside of immediate family, those who had previously invested significant time at different points in the young men's lives were acknowledged. These connections ranged from football coaches or youth workers who, again, were regarded by the young men as friends, and who Tyler (15) said '*never gave up on me…kept in touch* (after school exclusion); and those who, Sam said, '*know the deal*'. Sam's comment suggests a manner of engagement (ways of talking, acting, and thinking without being judged) that seemed to offer practical help and hope for a better future.

In dealing with an incident where the police had arrived at his door, Mason said

> *My social worker was nagging me about meeting the FEDS* (Police). *One of my mates was working with Rob,* (a youth worker). *He (Rob) said he could get them to the youth club* (for a meeting). *So, I was like 'Fuck it', we* (with friends) *all went an' talked to them …I think he's* (Rob) *useful because my mates trust him … he talks straight.*

This worker's trusted reputation and social distance from the AP appear to help initiate Mason's involvement with an agency whose function is primarily disciplinary. In short, Rob is what Schudson (1996) calls a '*spark plug*', people who broaden learning without exercising forms of oppressive power. This can create new spaces, new possibilities and meanings, and crucial networking opportunities for some of the young men to socialise and to

explore ideas related to alternative identities through alternative activities. The boys cited voluntary, youth focused events, such overnight fishing trips, within the local area.

Interviewer: 'So, how did you get involved with the fishing trips?'

Mason: '*It was after he helped us out.* (Rob said) *'How about doing this, do overnight fishing trips an' that.' That sounded cool… I mean, it is better than doing nothing'.*

The time generated through and on the fishing-trips seemed to open spaces where Mason and Tyler could share their hopes, worries and fears with Rob and with other members of the network.

Interviewer: *'What did you talk about on the trips, it seems to be a long time just sitting?'*

Mason: *'…we talk about fishing…Tyler is mostly on his phone, but we chat too…. That is good, I think…I started to get worried all the time about being out of school, not chatting to people. Doing this…* (talking to friends on fishing trips) *helps me think straight. I mean, knowing people on a different level…not that I* was weird or anything, I think I just try to handle it all (the experiences after exclusion) on my own'.

In this discussion, there are suggestions of the benefits acquired from various forms of capital lodged in friendship. We can also see the borderlines between expressive and instrumental dimensions of friendship that are revealed as potential rewards gained from individuals who are well placed in the boys' field of interest, and those that develop from knowledge of and conversations with others. The friendship networks provide spaces of freedom to talk, offering a sense of acceptance, belonging and identity. In this, their existence confirms the value of lay knowledge and cultural competence through which these young men, as knowledgeable actors, collectively understand and interpret their experiences and those of friends and peers.

Discussion

This study began by exploring the experiences of support and identity work of a group of young disabled men excluded from school. They refused much of the professional support on offer through the AP. Though school exclusion is a complex phenomenon, those who have distanced themselves from various forms of education have done so to some extent by choice, with the view that school no longer serves their needs or priorities. Our initial data were dominated by the consequences of these choices. These young men had, for example, built-up peer networks that had become vehicles for the construction of support where reciprocity and relations of trust and cooperation go some way to mitigating the exclusion and powerlessness they experienced in their lives especially that deriving from disability. Their sense of a disabled identity emerged throughout, and they were acutely

aware that being regarded by others as disabled was itself potentially disabl*ing*. Their profoundly 'lived' understanding of disability was very clear yet they sought often to understate its significance, almost to the extent of deploying 'passing' as identity management (Goffman 1963). Professional and lay discourses variously undermined such attempts, arguably weakening their attempts to exercise agency.

School exclusion plays a significant role in the absence of trust the young men hold towards the education system (Johnston 2020). Though formal support was rejected their friendships confirmed an important sense of protected identity beyond the school gates. As Sam said, '*I got a better sense of myself after I got kicked out. Like who's got your back…I mean, mates are it, init*'. There was much evidence in our data of the young men's micro-level '*personal communities*' and the '*hidden solidarities*' in which social integration and cohesion is embodied. Expressive and instrumental motives converge through the sometimes intimate and supportive forms of psychological capital that friendships embody, characterised by exchange and an underlying reciprocity that strengthens the '… *inner bond between people*' (Simmel 2011, 187). Trust is the essential basis to this (Misztal 1996). Friendships are a '… *safety-valve enabling people to relax and cope with the pressures of contemporary life*' (Spencer and Pahl 2006, 210). We suggest that educational professionals frequently ignore the positive significance of friendship in scaffolding the links that young disabled men can be helped to make between 'everyday' cultural and other forms of knowledge transmitted through education practices. This facilitates a view of young disabled men which is not rooted in crime, anti-social behaviours and conflict.

The absence of trust is depressingly evident in the young men's views of the support on offer, an understanding of professional interventions creating an array of threats both in terms of reactions from others and subsequent feelings about self. Predictably, they sought ways of proving their social worth outside the AP. Resistant behaviour is considered by professionals to be problematic and largely counterproductive for young disabled men. The data suggest that this is not always the case. Several factors seemed to mitigate threats and uncertain conditions, including the young men's experiences of talking to peers, anticipating more stability by gaining paid work (legal or illegal; formal or informal), and achieving a sense of relative independence or autonomy in their local communities. These activities affirmed the young men's questioning of essentialised notions of their own disabled identities through a self-imposed exclusion from amplified and targeted support, mainly aimed toward the home. This is likely to be amplified with the anticipated introduction of punitive attendance policies (DfE, 2022). The assumed role of AP professionals as carers for and protectors of young disabled people renders the amplification of home-based interventions rational (Page 2023). The SEN perspective emerges where discourses of

child-as-danger (violent boys who threaten their communities) converge with discourses of *child-in-danger* (in dysfunctional families and neighbourhoods). Young disabled men thus become identifiable as victims of their own problematic communities and at risk of a litany of problems supposedly arising from school exclusions. Repeated professional interventions were highlighted, pushing these young men away from home, and encouraging a belief that institutional routes to support were unavailable to them. This left many looking for alternative ways to build respect and achieve status in their own communities.

This alerts us to the importance of these young men's lives as *spatialised,* in material or virtual spaces that become significant for them: APs, the street, or an online platform, for example. The practices of power, in this instance embedded in professional interventions, have the effect of calibrating and structuring spatial boundaries in specific ways, enabling some activities, or disabling others. As Simmel (1997, 141) argues, social relations actively constitute space by creating symbolic boundaries that include, exclude, enclose, or prohibit. So, in this example, professional intervention marked out space in a way that disabled or disallowed the boys' presence at home. As we have shown through the article, the boys' understood different locations in different ways, space and place being understood contingently as '… *always under construction*' (Massey 2005, 11). This processual notion of space has real implications for the work of APs and their professionals in understanding how spaces of opportunity, rather than exclusion, might be created. Where professionals render APs prohibitive, it is unsurprising that other settings are sought by these young men. Friendship networks (virtual or material) inevitably become intrinsic to their self-identity and sense of belonging. These networks offered access to trusted and helpful individuals and instrumental reward in the form of support and knowledge of support, or 'hot' information about formal and informal labour markets, for example. There is clearly tension here as friendship networks entail potentially both negative and positive consequences. However, the networks evidently provided expressive forms of intimacy, solidarity and mutuality that contributed to strengthened resilience, self-belief, and agency. In that sense, they are constitutive of psychological capitals that intersect with social capitals that emerge in Bourdieu's theorisation of social power.

For these young men exposure to a range of conflicts (for example, with professionals, family, community members or peers) is part of the post-school exclusion experience. Indeed, our data were littered with references to peers as agents in disengagement. Some boys disengage from formal support through closer interaction with peers who are themselves disengaged. Placing young men in APs inevitably links them with others, highlighting the peers' position in producing and regulating attitudes in relation to rejecting support and gaining status. Peer impact may, of course, be either negative or positive.

Yet, most of the experiences presented here suggest that these young men's friendship networks have the potential to diminish some threats such as from gangs or social isolation. Data offered instances when these young men found in friends the support necessary to endure problems related to exclusion because of disability and to collectively develop effective coping strategies, in both material and virtual spaces. We also collected data in which young men identified their friends' positive impact on reducing the stigma of disability. Indeed, sometimes it was only friends who knew of the young men's stressful circumstances and emotional difficulties. When facing difficult post-exclusion events, many of the young men sought support from friends rather than from professionals. This is important. Research on marginally schooled and young disabled men rarely mentions emotion and intimacy, in part as young men often conceal or control their vulnerabilities to maintain power or status in the eyes of their peers (Rogers and Tuckwell 2016).

Whilst previous research has highlighted social capital's 'dark side', there is evidence to suggest that emotional and practical support processes in friendship networks are utilised to reduce perceived risks in the community. The young men who spoke about the problems they experienced generally did so in terms of a continuing fear of isolation, their lack of trust in the education system and an apparent readiness to endure difficult circumstances rather than share their fears with professionals. An absence of trust and minimal AP attendance combined with a fear of isolation raises serious concerns about exclusionary policies that may differentially target young disabled men because of their embodied and discursive visibility. Policies such as school exclusion may be counterproductive by cutting young disabled men's pro-social bonds and thus reducing their potential educational attainment (Siennick, Widdowson, and Ragan 2017). This can be detrimental to those previously excluded who may have little trust in formal support structures. Despite the creation of APs as safety nets, there is more to do in weaving threads of social and other capitals into patterns of relationship and behaviour that can contribute to a greater sense of agency and choice in these young disabled men's lives. This would entail recognising and examining the impact of the value and convergence of non-professional (the disabled young men) and professional (AP professionals) actors' knowledge and competence.

Conclusion

As yet, the research literature on AP has not identified aspects of APs imposing conformity, downward levelling pressures and even creating the conditions for further anti-social activity. It is possible that although APs can assist re-engagement, their interventions may also lead to the exclusion and isolation of others, such as the young men, by linking disadvantaged men together and effectively removing them from wider social resources and

opportunities. Paradoxically, APs may themselves undermine the development of effective support. The literature has, so far, not been conclusive in identifying specific interventions to promote support among young disabled men. When reviewing AP for this target group, friendship networks should be acknowledged as offering a focus of work to be undertaken by a range of agencies. In this respect, friendship networks accomplish functions that, in our small sample, professional support struggled to offer. It may be worth looking at informal programmes and interventions with APs in more detail. Professionals who can better understand and respect the value of friendship networks may be able to initiate possibilities for strengthening individual and collective well-being, as well as demystifying and reimagining professional support. The acknowledgment of peers and friends in these processes seems vital to the development of inclusive and non-stigmatising services for young people. While discourses of inclusive practice are advocated in other parts of the UK and Europe (for example, Education Scotland, 2019), youth-friendly services in England have faced unprecedented financial cuts and, in some instances virtual decimation, threatening the development of inclusive practices with reputable agents and agencies beyond the school gates (Bradford and Cullen 2014). Given young people's own acknowledgement of the value of youth workers and other informal practitioners who are able to *capitalise* on young people's friendship networks, this undermines the capacity of AP to offer tangible support to young people's transitions and developing sense of agency.

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