

# Aspirations, Education, and Inequality in England



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## **Abstract**

The concept of aspiration is central to current policy debates about educational and social inequality in the UK. Although aspirations have long been of interest to social scientists there is still uncertainty about how much aspirations influence outcomes and the factors that shape educational and occupational aspirations. I contribute to this policy debate and area of study by examining in detail the mechanisms that shape aspirations and the meaning that young people attach to them. It is often claimed that disadvantaged young people suffer from ‘poverty of aspirations’. Contrary to such claims, my findings show that the vast majority of students hold high aspirations for pursuing further academic qualifications, including those from highly disadvantaged backgrounds. I therefore question the grounds for treating ‘poverty of aspirations’ as a major social problem that should be tackled through interventions designed to raise them.

In this mixed methods study I draw on both quantitative and qualitative sources of data. The quantitative data is from the Effective Provision Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education project (EPPSE). I examine the factors that are predictive of students holding high aspirations at the age of 14. The qualitative data I draw on is from twenty-nine semi-structured interviews with 16-18 years old from a sixth form college in East London. I contribute to the literature by showing in detail how aspirations are shaped by individual, family, school and neighbourhood level processes. In particular, I also show how important family life is in shaping aspirations and that in order to understand aspirations we should focus on the meaning young people attach to them. My findings suggest that our current models of aspirations are in need of refinement because they underestimate how high the aspirations of young people are and therefore struggle to explain how they are related to students’ social backgrounds.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Overview

Education plays a central role in determining how well a person's life will go; the qualifications we have influences our well-being, income, status and occupational attainment. Education also plays a critical role in shaping broader patterns of intergenerational mobility between social classes and income groups. We cannot understand contemporary societies unless we also understand the role education plays in shaping people's life chances. This has motivated generations of social scientists to study inequality of educational opportunity and outcomes.

We know that there is a powerful association between parents' social origins and their children's levels of educational attainment; in particular, the relationship between social class and educational attainment remains remarkably strong across a range of countries, including the UK (Becker 2003; Breen 2005; Breen and Jonsson 2005; Ermisch et al. 2012; Jackson et al. 2007; Marshall et al. 1997; Pring et al. 2009; Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). Research shows that attainment gaps between social and economic groups exist, emerge early in the life-course, and prove very difficult to narrow (Blanden et al. 2012; Bradbury et al. 2012; Kiernan and Mensah 2011; Feinstein et al. 2008). It is clear that

inequalities in educational outcomes are related to the intergenerational transmission of advantage and disadvantage.

In this thesis, I examine the educational and occupational aspirations of young people in England. For social scientists aspirations are important because they may matter for the sorts of educational choices students make, how much they invest in schooling, and therefore patterns of educational and social inequality. Students have to make decisions about what subjects to take, when to enter the labour market, whether to follow an academic or vocational pathway, and the sort of university they may want to attend. Such decisions play a central role in determining an individual's life chances and aspirations plausibly form part of the raw materials out of which they are made. Scholars interested in linking micro-level mechanisms of educational decision making to aggregate levels of inequality have examined whether aspirations, regularly defined as preferences to remain in the education system, vary by characteristics such as social class and if aspirations are of consequence for outcomes. Although the existing literature has made important contributions in this area, there is still uncertainty about how aspirations are formed, the meaning people attach to them, and the influence aspirations may have on behaviours and choices.

The empirical material I draw on is from two sources. The first source is quantitative data from the mixed methods and longitudinal Effective Provision of Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education study (EPPSE). This is a nationally representative study of 3,000 young people in England. I use this data to analyse the relationship between aspirations and students' background characteristics; I study the relative influences of individual, family, school and neighbourhood factors on whether students hold aspirations for achieving a university degree. I find that socio-economic and other background factors are predictive of students holding high aspirations at the age of 14, even when attainment is taken into account. On the basis of my quantitative findings, I show that the alleged 'poverty of aspiration' among disadvantaged groups has only weak empirical support. Instead of poverty of aspiration, I find that almost all students

maintain ambitious educational goals, even if there are non-trivial differences between students from differing backgrounds.

The second source is qualitative data from twenty-nine semi-structured interviews with young people living in East London. In the qualitative part of my thesis, I narrow in to explore the aspirations of this particular group of students. The data I draw on is from interviews with sixteen–eighteen year-olds from a sixth form college in the borough of Waltham Forest. Historically, the East End of London has been a predominantly working-class area and characterised by high levels of poverty but also by strong community ties and a rich cultural heritage. Due to changes over recent decades in the social, economic, and ethnic composition of the area some scholars now describe the area as ‘the new East End’ (Butler and Hamnett 2011). It is within this social milieu, which I describe more fully in subsequent chapters, that I examine the aspirations of a small number of students. The students I interviewed were an ethnically diverse group and most lived in highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the East End; a significant number were also the children of immigrants to the UK. I found, for the most part, that they maintained ambitious educational and occupational goals. I also show that their aspirations were influenced by a range of background characteristics, broader features of their social identity, values, and beliefs about the sort of people they wanted to become.

I suggest that in order to understand these students and their aspirations it is necessary to be attentive to two broader interconnected processes. First, persistent educational, social and economic inequality which continues to have far-reaching consequences for the lives people can lead. Second, it cannot be denied that there have been important changes in the structure of educational opportunity. As a result, increasing numbers of young people are remaining in the education system and progressing to undergraduate qualifications. This shift means that many young people, perhaps even a majority, now perceive university as a viable and desirable goal, in no small part because education is presented as vital for achieving social mobility and economic advancement. Part of my

task in this thesis, then, is to make sense of the particular and the general, and of continuity and social change.

The fact that I am able to draw on multiple forms of data helps with this task. My quantitative data is suited to looking at large-scale patterns and, for example, evaluating more broadly the influence of school, individual, and family factors on aspirations. The qualitative component is ideal for examining aspirations in relation to issues of culture and how they relate to students' identities. These sources of evidence are more illuminating taken together rather than separately, even if the answers they provide are not definitive and even if they cannot directly confirm or validate each other. As complementary sources of data they are useful for helping us think more clearly and deeply about aspirations, and in doing so improve our theories about how aspirations are related to young peoples' choices and outcomes.

In this thesis, I seek to make a contribution to existing public policy debates around educational inequality and social mobility. In recent years, increasing emphasis has been placed on aspirations as an explanation for these phenomena. Aspiration, or rather 'poverty of aspiration', is often cited as a significant problem and is commonly deployed as an explanation for the low educational performance of disadvantaged students and the educational choices they make. A wide range of policy documents relating to child poverty and social mobility repeatedly make reference to the deleterious effects of low aspirations (Cabinet Office 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; DfE 2010). The Coalition government has placed particular emphasis on this issue: 'Poverty is about more than income, it is about a lack of opportunity, aspiration and stability' (DfE 2011: 4). The problem, such statements allege, is not one solely or even largely of systematic inequality or injustice but the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of disadvantaged groups who end up colluding in their own downfall. The evidence I present in this thesis draws attention to how poorly supported some of these claims are. In purely descriptive terms, aspirations are generally higher among disadvantaged students than policymakers suggest. I argue that policies designed to 'raise aspirations' are misleading in how they frame the problem of educational inequality. I therefore suggest that policymakers should exercise more

caution and restraint when they make claims about the role aspirations play in the educational attainment process.

## 1.2 Research context

The diversity of theories, theorists and researchers having made important contributions to the study of aspirations is striking: the status attainment tradition (Haller et al. 1974; Sewell and Hauser 1980, 1992); Jay Macloed's famous ethnography of aspirations *Ain't no Makin' It* (2009); Bourdieu (1990) and Bourdieusian inspired research on university choice (Reay et al. 2001, 2005); variants of Rational Action Theory (RAT) (Breen 1999, 2010; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Breen and Yaish 2006); offerings from cultural sociology (Frye 2012; Swidler 1986); and a range of recent work in the UK (Croll 2009; Croll and Attwood 2011, 2013; Goodman and Gregg 2010; Schoon 2009; Schoon and Polek 2011; Strand 2011; Strand and Winston 2008). I draw upon this body of work in making sense of young people's aspirations in England while also suggesting some of its limitations.

While I recognise that existing research has made important contributions in this area, I argue that some of the most prominent sociological theories are in need of refinement if they are to do a satisfactory job of explaining how aspirations may differ between social groups. For example, they struggle to persuasively explain an empirical regularity: the majority of students, including those from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, generally hold high aspirations even though there is *some* patterning of aspirations by social background. I identify a range of ways in which we need to extend our thinking with regard to aspirations if we are to accommodate such empirical details. A good theory of aspirations should meet two criteria. First, it should be grounded on a descriptively accurate account of what young peoples' aspirations actually are and how they vary by social background. Second, it should meet the criterion of adequacy at the level of meaning.

### **1.3 Research questions**

A necessary starting point for all research projects is to take a broader area of concern and turn it into a set of specific research questions (Andrews 2003; Bryman 2008; King et al. 1994). As this thesis is a mixed methods study, I divide my research questions into three areas: overarching research questions that underpin the whole project and research questions specific to the qualitative and quantitative components of my study.

#### **The overarching research questions are:**

1. What are the key processes and factors that shape young peoples' educational and occupational aspirations?
2. How theoretically should we understand aspirations?

#### **The quantitative research questions are:**

1. Are there significant differences in educational aspirations at age 14 by socio-economic groups?
2. What factors help predict students holding 'high' aspirations at age 14?
3. Are there differences in students' aspirations after educational attainment has been controlled for?

#### **The qualitative research questions are:**

1. What are the reported educational, occupational and broader aspirations of the students I interviewed?
2. What social, cultural and economic processes appear to be important for shaping their aspirations?
3. What meaning do aspirations have for the students I interviewed?

## **1.4 Outline of chapters**

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

### **Chapter 2**

In this chapter, I critically evaluate the literature relating to the study of aspirations. This thesis is largely sociological in nature so I draw mainly from literature in the sociology of education but also pay close attention to adjacent work in education research. My overview of the literature involves evaluating what we mean by the term aspiration; what claims are made about how aspirations are shaped and develop, and what the evidence suggests about how they are related to educational outcomes. I draw out weaknesses in certain parts of the literature, suggest areas in need of further development, and explain how this provides a solid justification for my project which builds on but also extends the literature.

### **Chapter 3**

In this chapter, I give a detailed account of my research questions, research design and the methods I use. I explain why I adopt a mixed methods approach to the study of aspirations, the type of mixed methods study it is, and where my project sits in relation to the increasingly large secondary literature in this area. I do not seek to defend the claim that adopting a mixed methods research design is necessarily preferable for researchers but I do want to suggest that doing so in this case brings distinctive advantages. I describe in some detail the sources of data I use and discuss how I approach the analysis of my data.

### **Chapter 4**

This chapter has two goals. First, I establish whether and to what extent educational aspirations vary by background characteristics. Second, I examine the factors that help to predict students' holding aspirations at age 14 to achieve a university degree. I begin by presenting some basic descriptive statistics on educational aspirations showing that there are non-trivial differences in aspirations between students from differing socio-economic groups. I then present the results from a series of binary logistic regression models to

examine the effects of theoretically significant variables on the likelihood of high aspirations being held. I evaluate a range of individual, family, school and neighbourhood factors that appear to shape aspirations.

## **Chapter 5**

This chapter links the qualitative and quantitative components of my thesis. My main goal in this chapter is to introduce and summarise the qualitative data. I pay particular attention to the interviewees' aspirations and their demographic characteristics. By engaging with these sociologically salient characteristics, I provide the groundwork for more detailed analyses in subsequent chapters.

## **Chapter 6**

In Chapter 6, I focus on how parents and family life were key sources of influence on students' aspirations, plans and the opportunities available to them. I also examine how students' aspirations were shaped by the interplay between family life, neighbourhood settings, gender and ethnic identity, and their understanding of labour market opportunities.

## **Chapter 7**

In this and the following chapters, I take up a different perspective, one that is essential for making sense of my interviewees' aspirations; I focus more closely on the meaning that aspirations had for them. In Chapter 7, I make the case that the majority of students held a particular orientation to the future – I call this an 'achieving security' orientation. I show that achieving security was central to what many students wanted to achieve. They acknowledged how competitive the labour market was, particularly during a time of recession, and saw gaining qualifications, especially a university degree, as a way of achieving social mobility and managing risk.

## **Chapter 8**

In the final empirical chapter, I continue to explore the expressive function of aspirations. A central theme of my analysis is how students drew on moral concepts and language when talking about their aspirations and evaluating the actions of others. In this

chapter, I bring this to the fore, as it is essential for understanding how students thought about themselves and the future. I argue that normative beliefs and ideas were central to how they framed their aspirations - students regularly drew on concepts of duty, responsibility, obligation and respect when talking about the future.

## **Chapter 9**

Although I draw on theoretical ideas, arguments and concepts in all of these chapters, I wait until Chapter 9 to engage in a more sustained reflection on my findings and the implications they have for the literature in this area. A key focus is on how my various sources of data are linked. In particular, I focus on what my results suggest about the limitations of existing research, important areas of overlap, and the potential benefits of adopting a different perspective on aspirations. I therefore engage in a limited form of theory construction.

## **Chapter 10**

In this chapter, I summarise my results, suggest some limitations of my research and suggest directions for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature review

#### 2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I claimed that the relatively recent focus on aspirations is connected to broader debates about educational and social inequality in the UK. I begin this chapter by further developing this claim. I then provide a brief conceptual discussion of the term aspiration. In the central sections of the chapter, I discuss the theories and evidence that have been marshalled to study aspirations. As this thesis is sociological in nature I focus on research in this discipline although cognate areas are also drawn upon. I end by summarising outstanding issues in the literature which provides the motivation for my own project.

#### 2.2 Aspirations, education and inequality

This thesis is about the aspirations of young people at the start of the twenty-first century. A time, we are told, when education is essential to the project of maintaining the UK's economic competitiveness in a globalised world and is a prerequisite for achieving social advancement (Ball 2008; Brown and Lauder 2011; Lauder et al. 2006); a time when income inequality has continued its worrying upward trend, when the UK has recently

experienced a major recession and when austerity measures have led to major changes in the provision of public goods, including education. It is important to situate these events in a broader historical context, particularly with regard to education. Over the course of the twentieth century, the UK has expanded and restructured its education system. First, universal primary education was introduced, and then, following the 1944 Education Act, secondary education was extended and made available to children from all social backgrounds, including working-class children (Brown et al. 1997; Coffey 2001; Halsey et al. 1980; Jones 2002; Simon 1994). It was hoped by politicians and policymakers that the expansion of education would contribute to the building of a more egalitarian, meritocratic society where ability and hard work would come to matter more than a person's social origins. This expansion has seen increasing numbers of young people successfully completing secondary education. As I noted in Chapter 1, a mass system of higher education has also emerged and currently around 50% of young people will now go on to some form of degree-level course (Boliver 2011; Heath et al. 2013). This represents a substantial increase in participation over the last half a century.

However, research has consistently shown that educational outcomes continue to be strongly shaped by social background, as a result, large 'attainment gaps' exist between social and economic groups (Jackson 2013a, 2013b; Sullivan et al. 2013; Strand 2012, 2014a, 2014b). A significant body of scholarship has documented that social class, income, parental qualifications and the home learning environment all have powerful influences on children's levels of cognitive development and educational outcomes (Blanden et al. 2012; Hills 2010; Sammons et al. 2002, 2008a, 2012a; Siraj-Blatchford 2010a; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2011). We also now understand how critical the early childhood period is in shaping young people's life chances (Heckman 2013; Sammons et al. 2004; Sylva et al. 2008, 2010). It is for this reason that increasing emphasis has been and is being placed on reforming and improving the provision of pre-school and early-years education. Furthermore, inequality of outcomes and opportunity is found at all stages of education. As Reay et al. (2009: 1) note with regard to higher education, 'statistics from the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) show 24.72% of those accepted to university were from the four lowest socio-economic

groups in 2005'. The goal for generations of politicians from across the political spectrum has been to break, or at least significantly weaken, the association between social origins and educational outcomes. As yet, this remains an unrealised ambition.

It is clear that in recent decades education has increasingly become *the* policy lever of choice for politicians hoping to bring about social change. A focus on education reform was particularly noticeable under the New Labour governments headed by Tony Blair who famously stated that his three priorities were 'Education, education, education'. It is perhaps unsurprising then that such widespread and numerous educational reforms were introduced, among the most prominent being: City Academies, or more simply Academies; the Education Maintenance Allowance (which has now been scrapped); Education Action Zones; Excellence in Cities; and Sure Start (Heath et al. 2013; Lupton 2006; Lupton et al. 2009). A particular feature of the policy discourse during this period was the focus on how disadvantage was spatially concentrated and that certain communities and neighbourhoods faced uniquely challenging economic and social circumstances. Partly this was because research suggested striking stability in patterns of disadvantage at the area level (Smith et al. 2007). This concern with 'place' was reflected in *Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy* which claimed, 'No-one should be disadvantaged by where they live' (Cabinet Office 2001: 8). Relatedly, a further important part of the policy discourse around poverty and education under New Labour was the concept of 'social exclusion'.

What we have seen in the last decade is a shift towards an emphasis on aspirations and away from a more sustained focus on neighbourhood disadvantage and social exclusion. 'Poverty of aspiration', is often cited as a significant problem and commonly deployed as an explanation for the low educational performance of disadvantaged students and the educational choices they make. St Clair and Benjamin draw attention to the pervasiveness of 'aspirations talk':

The emphasis on aspirations shows no signs of abating—in 2009 the UK government set out plans for public reform intending to lift the aspirations of 2.4 million children. (St Clair and Benjamin 2011: 501)

A wide range of policy documents related to child poverty and social mobility repeatedly make reference to the deleterious effects of low aspirations (Cabinet Office 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; DfE 2010, 2011; HM Treasury 2013). The 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* states that, ‘In far too many communities there is a deeply embedded culture of low aspiration that is strongly tied to long-term unemployment’ (DfE 2010: 4). There appears to be a general assumption among policymakers and politicians that disadvantaged young people in the UK have low aspirations which contribute substantially to the entrenchment of educational and social inequality. St Clair and Benjamin are therefore correct in arguing that:

Aspirations have become a key educational policy driver in the UK and are seen as one of the critical levers for improving educational attainment and raising skills. Increasing aspirations is at the heart of educational policy. (2011: 88)

In addition to framing aspirations as a social problem, policymakers have suggested that educational inequality can be tackled by raising aspirations. The hope is that attainment gaps could be reduced if disadvantaged students adopted more ambitious educational and occupational goals.

### **2.3 Aspirations as a concept**

What are aspirations? A standard dictionary definition of aspirations is ‘a strong desire to achieve something’. This definition draws attention to two distinct aspects of aspirations. First, desire implies a preference for a particular type of outcome – I prefer x over not x, and also prefer x over y. Second, the need to ‘achieve something’ introduces the condition that aspirations relate to wanting to bring about a state of affairs that does not currently exist. For example, when I finish secondary school I want to go to university. There is also a temporality to such definitions: aspirations are future oriented. Social scientists have offered more complex definitions. For example, aspirations have been defined as ‘the ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals’ (Quaglia and Cobb 1996: 89). This is a more expansive definition; it includes not only preferences for a particular goal, but also

includes beliefs and motivation as being constitutive of aspirations. Economists have also defined aspirations in terms of an amalgamation of desires, beliefs and opportunities. Aspirations ‘combine or summarise the preferences held, the expectations and beliefs formed, and the constraints acknowledged by an individual with respect to the future’ (Ray 2006: 473). This definition assumes that when individuals think about what they want they are also aware of the barriers preventing their preferences from being realised.

Taking into account a range of definitions, some core characteristics can be identified: preferences for an outcome, aspirations as being forward looking, requiring effort to be realised, and characterised by a strength and intensity – aspirations are not mundane desires. As a *starting point* in this thesis, I adopt the broad definition of educational aspirations offered by Schoon (2009) who defines aspirations as ‘expressions of young people’s goals for the future’ and which reflect ‘their subjective assessment of how far in the educational system they would like to go’ (Schoon 2009: 14). The advantage of this definition is its simplicity and that it captures how most researchers conceptualise aspirations in empirical research. Occupational aspirations can be thought of as young people’s expression of the occupation in which they would like to be employed. I should also point out that in the quantitative part of my thesis aspirations are defined by the survey questions available to me.

## **2.4 The status attainment tradition and aspirations**

The study of aspirations has ebbed and flowed but has been a consistent presence in sociological and educational research. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, researchers working in what would become known as the status attainment model of educational attainment, began to look at the role aspirations played in conditioning the engagement of young people in schooling. Rather than *solely* focusing on more standard structural variables such as income and social class, social-psychological variables, such as aspirations, were included in the models (Sewell et al. 1969; Haller et al. 1974). This was original because it was an attempt to link aggregate levels of educational and social

outcomes with individual level, psychological processes. The status attainment tradition emphasised that ‘aspirations are a cognitive state that motivates or drives young people to strive for academic success’ (Strand and Winston 2008: 250). The core argument was that ‘significant others’ at school and home determined students’ beliefs and preferences regarding the future (Haller 1982; Haller and Portes 1973). This in turn determined the careers they wanted and how much they invested in obtaining educational qualifications.

Although subsequent research has suggested that the status attainment model may have overstated the explanatory relevance of aspirations, its great strength was that it took seriously psychological and belief formation mechanisms in modelling the educational attainment process (Morgan 2005). However, several important weaknesses with the model have been noted. First, the assumption about the importance of forward looking beliefs seemed to imply that all that was required to drive change in educational performance was a change in the aspirations of students and their families. This appears implausible given that we know educational outcomes are the product of complex, multi-causal processes. Critics (for example Bourdieu 1990) have suggested that this assumption also had some politically unappetising consequences: it shifted explanations for educational inequality onto individuals and their families and away from structural sources of inequality. A second important objection was that the status attainment tradition gave insufficient attention to students’ capacities for active decision making and self-reflection. As Morgan (2005) argues, students were simply assumed to internalise the expectations that others held of them and then adopted them as achievement orientations. As a consequence, the ability of individuals to think seriously and creatively about the future was downplayed and therefore failed to do justice to their capacities as ‘planning agents’ (Bratman 2014). Finally, a further weakness in the status attainment literature was the lack of a precise account about how parents actually sought to shape the aspirations of their children.

## **2.5 Social reproduction, education and aspirations**

Following the decline of Parsonian structural functionalism and critiques of the status attainment tradition in the early 1970s, sociological theories of social and educational reproduction came to dominate the intellectual landscape as researchers sought to understand why inequality remained such a pervasive feature of Western societies (Bourdieu 1973; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Moore 2004). A core focus of this tradition is on how advantaged social groups are able to maintain their position of dominance. A key assumption regularly underpinning research in this vein is that education, rather than being an egalitarian and equalising force, is actually an institution that reproduces and entrenches inequality. The most prominent figure growing out of this tradition is Bourdieu who continues to have a major influence on the field. Bourdieu is interested in the connections between educational institutions and wider patterns of class and economic domination; he argues that educational institutions, and the qualifications people obtain from them, are central to how social classes reproduce themselves (Bourdieu 1973, 1986, 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron). For Bourdieu, differences in educational outcomes are due to the unequal distribution of power and resources that members of different social classes are able to mobilise in the pursuit of social advantage.

Bourdieu has developed a broad range of conceptual tools, most notably cultural capital and habitus, which have been adopted enthusiastically by many in the sociology of education. Cultural capital refers to the advantages resulting from the possession of non-economic resources such as having a mastery of the dominant culture and knowledge of how institutions, such as schools, work (Di Maggio 1997; Schwartz 1999). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is stratified by social class and is central to his theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu 1973, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). In addition to using their wealth, middle-class families mobilise their cultural capital to pursue educational success and reproduce their class position. Of equal importance is Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Although notoriously difficult to define (Hedstrom 2005), Bourdieu appears to mean by habitus the internalised norms, beliefs and experiences gained from being part of a social group. It is 'a system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations,

and actions' (Bourdieu 1973: 24). Thus, Bourdieu suggests that there is a powerful relationship between one's social class, one's beliefs, values and preferences.

How social class and the education system influence students' beliefs and preferences is an important part of Bourdieu's thinking. However, he is sceptical about attributing explanatory importance to aspirations because he argues that they largely reflect 'the unequal opportunity structures of society' (Morgan 2005: 27). Therefore, it is broader patterns of social inequality and, in his eyes, social injustice, rather than individual dispositions that are of greatest explanatory significance. Bourdieu argues that the education system is structured to make it incredibly challenging, although not impossible, for working-class students to be academically successful. As a consequence, he thinks that these barriers have a powerful dampening effect on working-class children's desire to pursue educational qualifications. He focuses on how these 'objective probabilities' are internalised as subjective assessments of the chances of being academically successful. As such, he argues that 'the laws of the academic market-place determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied' (Bourdieu 1977: 83). In a similar vein he later states, 'Agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not "for us"' (Bourdieu 1990: 40). Bourdieu, if I understand him correctly, is arguing that aspirations are closely tied to the opportunities that individuals have for realising them – people want what they think they can achieve. This adaptive preference explanation, or what Elster (1985) calls 'sour-grapes' mechanism, is used to explain why people from different social backgrounds hold differing goals for the future – students adopt preferences that they think are realisable. Macloed provides further insight into Bourdieu's account of aspirations:

Aspirations are not the product of a rational analysis; rather, they are acquired in the habitus of the individual. A lower-class child growing up in an environment where success is rare is much less likely to develop strong ambitions than is a middle class-boy or girl growing up peopled by those that have 'made it' and where the connection between effort and reward is taken for granted. (Macloed 2009: 15)

Macloed concludes that aspirations are part of Bourdieu's overarching explanation for the 'educational mortality of the working classes' (Bourdieu 1977: 156). His argument

suggests that we should observe a strong connection between educational aspirations and social background, since social class influences the educational opportunities available to students.

A range of qualitative studies, drawing on Bourdieu, examine how parenting practices are shaped by social class which in turn shapes children's dispositions towards schooling (Devine 2004; Reay 2006; Reay et al. 2001, 2005; Vincent and Ball 2006). As Irwin and Elley note, researchers have given particular attention to how middle-class 'familial assumptions, cultures and resources of various kinds align with school and other institutional expectations' (2012: 112). This linkage between the cultural logics of the school and middle-class parenting means that middle-class parents are able to effectively pursue positional advantage for their children through education. Although not explicitly focusing on aspirations or expectations, this area of research points to class specific orientations to education and the future. It suggests that the parents of middle-class children may create an environment where attending university is simply a taken for granted assumption rather than something that has to be cautiously reflected upon. In contrast, working-class children may only consider university if they are very high achieving and may see a broader range of post-compulsory education options as being acceptable (Harding 2010).

A consistent finding in research on choice in higher education is that working-class students are more likely to 'go local', make choices that reduce feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence about higher education, and choose universities that 'are for people like us' (Bourdieu 1990). Reay et al. (2009, 2011) argue that the consequence of this is that educational decisions are strongly patterned by social class. This may be because many working-class and ethnic minority students experience a strong disjunction between their class or group specific 'habitus' and the cultural context of many UK universities. Thus, class inequality in educational outcomes is generated not only because working-class students do not achieve high enough grades to go to university but also because they are more likely to choose to attend non-elite universities (Gerber and Cheung 2008). A reasonable conclusion from scholarship in this area is that we should observe strong

class differences in attitudes towards obtaining qualifications and the types of educational institutions students want to attend.

Lareau's *Unequal Childhood* (2011), which is underpinned by Bourdieu's conceptual framework, also offers useful tools for thinking about aspirations. Although not directly focused on aspirations, her work is important because she shows, in impressive detail, how social background, and particularly social class, influences family life and parenting practices. These in turn exert a powerful influence on children's sense of self, their understanding of the world around them, and their dispositions towards education. Thus, her work sheds light on how educational inequality and social class is reproduced from one generation to the next. In her ethnographic study of working and middle-class families in America, she argues that parents adopt very different 'cultural logics' of child rearing (Lareau 2011: 3) On the one hand, middle-class parents engage in what she calls 'concerted cultivation'. Middle-class parents are more likely to intensively manage the development of their children, enrolling them in numerous extra-curricular activities, helping with and monitoring school work, and developing their language skills by reasoning with them and asking questions. They are also comfortable in their dealings with social institutions such as schools; intervening with teachers and other authority figures if they feel the needs of their children are not being met (Horvat et al. 2003). As result of this cultural logic, middle-class children develop a growing sense of entitlement; they are also in a better position to benefit from the educational opportunities offered by schools. Furthermore, schools endorse this approach as being the normatively desirable model of 'good parenting'.

On the other hand, working-class parents adopt a 'natural growth' model of parenting that is markedly different. Parents are more likely to speak in directives, emphasise clear boundaries between adults and children, and are less heavily involved in homework and schooling. In her study, working-class children spent more time unsupervised and with close family members such as cousins; they also spent less time doing extra-curricular activities. Importantly, working-class parents often deferred to the judgements of

teachers and were less confident about intervening at school. She argues that the ‘natural growth’ model of parenting fits less well with the culture found in educational institutions (ibid: 3). Taken collectively, this model makes it harder for working-class children to succeed at school. Lareau’s work is important because it draws attention to how the socialisation of children by parents varies in important ways by social background. It leads to different dispositions, attitudes and behaviours among children; her work suggests that middle-class children are more likely to be socialised to adopt a positive disposition towards education and to invest in the pursuit of educational qualifications. As we will see in Chapter 6, parenting practices and family life was absolutely critical for making sense of my interviewees’ aspirations, Lareau therefore offers an important point of reference.

Although many high quality studies that draw on Bourdieu’s work have been conducted, I believe we should also be sceptical about Bourdieu’s general account of educational and social reproduction and his account of aspirations in particular. One objection is that the predictions that seem to flow naturally from his theory are not wholly supported by the empirical evidence. Goldthorpe (2007) argues:

It is simply not the case that children from less advantaged class backgrounds have been excluded from, or have themselves rejected, the educational system to anything like the extent that these theories would suggest. (Goldthorpe 2007: 31)

This has become the standard, and in my view compelling, reason to partially reject Bourdieu’s account of social reproduction and educational inequality (Halsey et al. 1980). The same criticism can be extended to Bourdieu’s comments on aspirations. As we shall see later in the chapter, repeated survey data suggests that even students from highly disadvantaged backgrounds maintain relatively ambitious educational goals (Vaisey 2010). This means that aspirations are not connected to habitus or various capitals in the way Bourdieu proposes. This may not be a reason to reject his conceptual tools entirely but does suggest that his account of aspirations is problematic. A second objection is that Bourdieu assumes that people’s actions are almost entirely motivated by a desire to achieve social reproduction. As I will show later in the thesis, he therefore provides an excessively narrow account of people’s motivation for action.

## 2.6 Paul Willis and Jay Macloed

Two particularly important ethnographic studies relevant to the study of aspirations are Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977) and Jay Macloed's (2009) *Ain't No Makin' It*. Both of these studies are concerned with social and cultural reproduction but they diverge from Bourdieu in important respects. Willis's classic study is of 12 'non-academic' male white working-class students in an English comprehensive secondary school fictionally called Hammertown Boys. A core concern for Willis is how working-class children make decisions regarding education and the labour market. He argues that much of the existing debate around educational inequality focuses on how working-class children are forced out of the education system and ignores the fact that many actively reject the goal of obtaining educational qualifications. As a consequence, he thinks educational and social reproduction is presented as an almost mechanical process that removes any role for human agency or creativity. This was his main criticism of Bourdieu. He argues with regard to the options available to working-class students, 'It is much too facile to say that they have no choice' (Willis 1977: 1). Willis's neo-Marxist analysis is helpful in showing that social reproduction occurs in part because some working-class students exclude themselves from education and actively choose to go into working-class occupations.

Two groups emerge from the study: the 'lads' who adopt a counter-school culture and the 'ear'oles' who, in contrast, work hard and conform to the school's norms and aspire to middle-class jobs. A key difference between them is that they hold different educational and occupational aspirations. His aim is to understand their 'oppositional culture' – their rejection of schooling and the pursuit of academic qualifications. It is important to note that he assumes that the 'lads' rather than the 'ear'oles' are the true representatives of working-class culture and experiences. Rather than simply seeing the 'lads' as having 'low' aspirations that prevents them from succeeding, Willis sees the 'lads' rejection of schooling and desire to work in manual occupations as stemming from insightful 'penetrations' into their lives under capitalism (Willis 1977: 14). They believe that their prospects for advancement are so slim that investing in education and pursuing credentials is largely pointless. Instead, they focus on 'having a laff' and undermining the authority of teachers and the school in order to gain status. 'Opposition to the school is

principally manifested in the struggle to win symbolic and physical space from the institution and its rules' (Willis 1977: 26). They believe the 'ear'oles' are wasting their time. Willis argues that they accept and internalise the school's achievement ideology, falsely believing they have an opportunity for social and economic advancement.

The aspirations of the 'lads', rather than being self-defeating are actually a rational response to their position in an exploitative capitalistic society. The strength of Willis's approach is that he links culture to exploitation and domination in a way that preserves the agency of the young people in his study. His study also places the lives of his participants into a much broader macro-economic context. However, the same criticism I levelled at Bourdieu can also be made about Willis. Willis is clearly arguing that students from working-class backgrounds opt out of the education system because they perceive their chances of success and social advancement as being so limited. While this may be true for *some* working-class students, Willis overstates the extent to which working-class students reject rather than engage with the education system. Although his claims may have had empirical support 40 years ago, Willis's work is probably not now a reliable guide to working-class students' educational decisions and behaviour. A further important criticism is that he gives a one-sided account of working-class experiences of education because female students are almost totally ignored.

Jay Macloed's (2009) classic ethnography of American teenagers, *Ain't No Making It*, is an equally important study of aspirations. Similarly to Willis, he wants to understand how inequality is reproduced from one generation to the next. For Macloed, it is the aspirations of young people which matter most for generating educational and social inequality:

of all the factors relating to social reproduction (e.g. tracking, social relations of schooling, class based differences in linguistic codes), the regulation of aspirations is perhaps the most important. (Macloed 2009: 23)

He argues that aspirations matter because they shape young peoples' decisions to invest in education and their desire to achieve social mobility. His empirical materials are drawn

from a detailed ethnographic study of two groups of young men living in a highly disadvantaged neighbourhood. Macloed emphasises that low income and working-class students self-select out of the competition for middle-class jobs, extinguishing what slim chance they had of achieving social and economic advancement. Macloed rejects the idea that levelled aspirations are a 'quitter's cop out' which in effect 'blames the victim' and describes how the substantial social and economic obstacles facing many living in deprived urban neighbourhoods makes forming ambitious goals incredibly challenging. The core of his argument is that levelled aspirations are a culturally adaptive response to systematic inequality.

His study focuses on two groups of young men. One Macloed calls the 'Hallway Hangers', a group that consists mainly of white students whose aspirations for the future are relatively limited and who perceive very little chance for upward mobility. They stand in contrast to a group of African-American students he calls the 'Brothers'. Conversely, they are more optimistic and have higher occupational and educational aspirations: the Brothers believe that education will help them succeed in the labour market and achieve social mobility. This shared set of beliefs 'encourages high aspirations and reinforces behaviour that contributes to the realisation of their goals'; they therefore work hard and conform to the cultural norms demanded by the school (Macloed 2009: 127). Macloed suggests that this belief is the result of the Brothers internalising the 'achievement ideology' promoted in the school and American society more generally. This ideology supports the idea that inequality in America is fair because it is the result of differences in effort and ability. The puzzle for Macloed is this: why do the Brothers accept this ideology but the Hallway Hangers do not?

Macloed's answer focuses on parental socialisation and exposure to the local neighbourhood. The Brothers and their families believe that racial discrimination is declining. This leads the parents of the African-American students to believe that their children have greater opportunities available to them. This perception of change means that they are optimistic about the future and therefore encourage their children to adopt ambitious goals. The Brothers can ascribe their parents' lack of success to racial

discrimination, and believing that this barrier has been removed, assume that they have a good chance of achieving social and economic advancement; they therefore hold high aspirations and attach importance to gaining qualifications. Conversely, the parents of the Hallway Hangers believe that the 'deck is stacked' against their children; they therefore downplay the importance of education and the range of options available to them (ibid: 129). Macloed explains this as the result of long-term exposure to living in a highly marginalised and stigmatised urban environment. The Hallway Hangers and their families have been living in the same disadvantaged neighbourhood for several generations. Routinely exposed to poverty, disadvantage, and exclusion from the labour market, these experiences 'cannot but help contribute to a feeling of hopelessness and stagnation on the part of the Hallway Hangers' (Macloed 2009: 130). This can be contrasted with the experiences of the Brothers who are newer to the area:

[they] have lived Clarendon Heights for a much shorter length of time and have a more positive disposition to the area, many of the families see their move to the neighbourhood as a step up in social status; some families came from worse projects in the area, others from tenement flats in the black ghetto. (Macloed 2009: 131)

Macloed therefore focuses on how family socialisation and neighbourhood effects explain differences in aspirations. The strength of Macloed's work is that he is able to examine how broader patterns of social change, exposure to poverty and culture all interact to shape aspirations and how people understand the world around them. However, the same criticism of Willis can be levelled against Macloed: the lives and experiences of young women are only given marginal importance. A further criticism is that although he asserts that aspirations are *the* key mechanism through which educational inequality is produced the empirical evidence on which this claim is based is in fact relatively limited.

## **2.7 Rational Action Theory**

Sociologists drawing on Rational Action Theory (RAT) offer a different way of thinking about educational inequality. Some of the foregoing discussion has suggested why this may be necessary. According to Goldthorpe (2007), theories of social and cultural reproduction cannot adequately explain an empirical regularity: any comprehensive

theory of educational inequality must not only be able to explain why class differentials have persisted, but also ‘the more or less continuous increase in the participation of young people in education and in their overall levels of attainment across all classes’ (Goldthorpe 2007: 31). A good theory of educational inequality should be able to explain the absolute expansion of educational opportunity while also explaining the relative stability of outcomes between social classes. It should also offer a plausible account of why such large numbers of students chose to participate in rather than reject education. Researchers influenced by RAT generally draw attention to how different groups weigh the costs and benefits of pursuing particular courses of action which in turn determines their choices (Boudon 1974; Breen 1999). These are, of course, shaped by the resources that individual people have at their disposal. Thus, differences in beliefs, attitudes and aspirations are products of the ‘rational’ evaluation of situations rather than being based on class specific values or cultures. Goldthorpe (2007) argues:

It is simpler to assume that there is no systematic variation in levels of aspirations, or related values, among classes, and that variation in the course of action that are actually taken arises from the fact that, in pursuing any given goal from different class origins, different ‘social distances’ will have to be traversed. (Goldthorpe 2007: 31-32)

According to Goldthorpe and Boudon (1974) we should treat aspirations as a function of the cost and benefits that students, presumably in conjunction with their parents, ascribe to following certain courses of action. If pursuing a certain pathway has high associated costs or is perceived as ‘risky’, then it will be less appealing to disadvantaged or working-class students. The consequence of this is that the persistence of class inequality in educational attainment is due to the fact that students start from different class positions and evaluate constraints and opportunities differently.

Inequality of outcomes is thus the product of two interlocking processes: primary and secondary effects. Primary effects are generated by class differences in raw educational achievement; secondary effects are those originating from educational decisions that are taken after educational achievement is taken into account (Jackson et al. 2013a). This distinction is taken to be important because primary and secondary effects may be generated by different processes; by treating them as analytically distinct, researchers can be more precise about how educational inequality is generated. RAT is also associated

with a particular model of motivation: people's educational choices are driven by a desire to achieve a particular class location, and what motivates people is a concern with avoiding downward social mobility (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997: 284-85; Morgan 2005: 111-14).

Rational choice inspired theories lean towards portraying 'educational aspirations as a purely rational assessment of students' economic and social circumstances' (Strand and Winston 2008: 250). Two features of this approach initially seem appealing. First, it emphasises young people's ability to construct plans and be reflective about what they want to achieve. Second, it offers a parsimonious account of educational decision making that does not rely on vaguely defined cultural mechanisms or class specific cultures. However, I would argue that there are good reasons for not drawing on RAT to analyse young peoples' aspirations. The main one is that *if* aspirations are rational assessments of an individual's economic and social circumstances then we would expect, similarly to Bourdieu, that aspirations would be strongly tied to opportunities, and therefore to social background. But, as research has shown, 'there is ample evidence [to suggest] that aspirations are often uncorrelated with available opportunities' (Frye 2012: 1572). As Frye correctly observes, a wealth of data suggests that aspirations regularly run far ahead of the chances of them being realised – this seems to challenge a basic premise of the theory. I agree with Frye that this 'warrants a more radical departure from the rational choice approach' when analysing aspirations (ibid: 1572). A further objection is that it fails to do justice to the richness of people's motivations for action and construes aspirations as being broadly instrumental in nature. This forms part of a broader objection to RAT, which is that 'Too little effort has been expended evaluating whether the proposed specific micro-processes are reasonable models of behaviour' (Morgan 2005: 111). A range of evidence suggests that RAT does not work with a plausible account of what we are like as agents.

## 2.8 Contemporary research on aspirations

In the previous section, I engaged with some of the major sociological approaches to the study of aspirations. I now move on to discuss some of the more recent empirical work in sociology and education research which suggests that aspirations vary by parental education, income, class, gender and ethnicity (Archer et al. 2013; 2011; Croll 2008; Croll and Attwood 2010; Croll et al. 2008; Francis and Archer 2005; Gutman and Akerman 2008; Kao and Tienda 1998; Strand and Winston 2008). Research drawing on large-scale longitudinal studies such as the British Cohort studies and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England Survey (LSYPE) have shown that middle-class and wealthy children are more likely than are working-class children to express aspirations to remain in the education system, even when controlling for prior attainment (Attwood and Croll 2011; Croll 2008; Goodman et al. 2011). Parents from more advantaged backgrounds also tend to have higher aspirations for their children. In contrast, students and parents from socially and economically disadvantaged groups have comparatively lower aspirations (Akerman and Gutman 2008). It is also important to note that educational and occupational aspirations appear to form early in students' lives – relatively near the beginning of secondary school (Croll et al. 2011; Schoon 2006a).

Strand (2014) draws on LSYPE data to examine how achievement gaps at 11, 14 and 16 are related to various features of students' social background including socio-economic status (SES), gender and ethnicity. However, he suggests that insufficient attention has been paid to the 'relative size of ethnic, social class and gender gaps' (Strand 2014: 132). Furthermore, he also stresses that more attention should be given to how these factors interact; in exploring both of these issues he evaluates the potential role played by aspirations. He argues that his research findings support the claim that parental and student aspirations (along with other factors such as truancy and exclusion) are 'prominent among the factors that could account for...achievement gaps (ibid: 162). He goes on to describe the extent to which aspirations are shaped by the interplay between ethnicity and social class

‘...while only 60% of White British working-class boys, 72% of Black Caribbean working-class boys and 75% of White working-class girls aspired to continue in FTE after 16, aspiration was uniformly high (95% and above) across the SES spectrum for all other minority groups, including for Black Caribbean girls...’ (ibid: 162)

This offers support for earlier research (Strand 2011) which found that ethnic minority parents held high aspirations for their children, that Black Caribbean students held higher

aspirations than White British students, and that both parental and student aspirations contributed in part to educational attainment at age 14.

However, an important caveat should be noted. Results from numerous recent studies also find that disadvantaged students are relatively ambitious, with many working-class students expressing a desire to pursue some form of higher education (Gorard et al. 2012; St Clair 2011; St Clair et al. 2013). Most young people want to remain in the education system and pursue some form of undergraduate degree. With regard to occupations, young people aspire to mostly well-paid middle-class and professional jobs; this means that the aspirations of young people are not aligned to the occupational structure of the UK. Indeed, 'many more aspire to professional, managerial and technical jobs than the likely availability of these occupations' (Croll 2008: 46). As a result, increasing numbers of young people are not going to achieve their occupational aspirations, even if they have invested heavily in education.

With regard to gender, female students have been shown to hold higher aspirations than boys (Schoon and Eccles 2014; Schoon and Polek 2011). Partly this is explained by girls having higher levels of attainment but may also reflect a belief among female students that they need to invest more heavily in education if they are to be successful in the labour market (Archer et al. 2013). There are also important differences in the subjects male and female students wish to pursue. Male students are more likely to aspire to study STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects, whereas female students select humanistic disciplines in disproportionate numbers (Burke 2007; Schoon et al. 2007).

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain how aspirations come to vary systematically by social background. The most common of these are cultural adaptations to disadvantaged contexts, parenting practices, school ethos, peer groups and gender norms (Bandura 1995; Bandura et al. 2001; Furlong et al. 1996; Harris 2011; Macloed 2009; Robinson and Harris 2013; Strand and Winston 2008). It is also necessary to

explain why aspirations are generally increasing over time. A likely explanation is that with the growth of mass higher education we have moved into an era of ‘university for all’: as university is increasingly presented as a normative goal by politicians and many parents, young people from all social backgrounds are more likely pursue higher education, especially when the message of ‘learning equals earning’ is promoted so vigorously (Brown and Lauder 2011). This may help to explain why the educational and occupational aspirations of young people in the UK have increased in recent decades. An interesting area of research has also focused on the ‘aspirations-attainment gap’. This refers to how young people’s aspirations for education and the labour market may be ‘misaligned’ because they do not have the appropriate levels of educational attainment to pursue their goals. The worry is that having uncertain and misaligned aspirations can lead to poor decision making that affects well-being and economic successes; it also appears that disadvantaged students are more likely to have misaligned aspirations (Staff et al. 2010; Schoon et al. 2012).

What does recent research suggest about how differences in aspirations matter for outcomes? I would argue that while there is uncertainty about precisely how much aspirations matter for outcomes, the current literature supports the claim that they play a non-trivial role in the educational attainment process. A challenge for researchers though is that aspirations and outcomes may be reciprocally related: ‘Aspirations can be both a predictor of educational achievement and an outcome of it’ (Gorard et al. 2012: 41). However, important progress has been made. Numerous longitudinal, quantitative studies have suggested that career aspirations are related to adult social status and do play a role in predicting children’s educational attainment (Cummings et al. 2012; Goodman et al. 2011; Gutman and Akerman 2008). Schoon and Polek find that the aspirations teenagers hold at age 16 are ‘significantly associated with educational and occupational attainment in addition to and above social background, general cognitive ability, and time spent in higher education’ (Schoon and Polek 2011: 215). Also, high aspirations during adolescence appear to be related to higher levels of achievement and positive outcomes in adulthood such as employment and higher wages. These findings

are consistent with other observational studies in the UK that provide significant evidence that high aspirations are associated with desirable adult outcomes.

Unsurprisingly, research has shown that negative attitudes towards staying in the education system are highly predictive of decisions to leave once compulsory education has been completed (Attwood and Croll et al. 2008). Goodman and Gregg (2010) argue that aspirations have an effect on test scores and are an important reason for the emergence of educational attainment gaps during adolescence. They go on to conclude that ‘raising children’s aspirations and desire for advanced education – from primary schooling onwards – should be considered as a way of closing educational attainment gaps’ (Goodman and Gregg 2010: 8). A concern that Gorard et al. (2012) raise about the existing literature on aspirations is that very few studies warrant strong causal claims about the relationship between aspirations and outcomes because these studies are observational rather than experimental. Of course it would be very difficult to conceive of any experimental design that could be used to test the role of aspirations.

## **2.9 The EPPSE Case Studies**

A further important reference point for my analysis of aspirations is the work emerging from the mixed methods EPPSE study itself, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. An important part of the mixed methods study was fifty in-depth Child and Family Case Studies. These provide useful insights into why certain groups of students are more or less likely to be educationally successful (Siraj-Blatchford 2010a; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2003, 2011, 2013). Adopting a bioecological perspective on children’s development, the purpose of the Case Studies is to:

Extend our understanding of how child, family, community, pre-school and school factors and experiences interact and contribute to the achievement or underachievement of children in school. (Siraj and Mayo 2014: 3)

This is in keeping with the broader goals of the EPPSE study. A particularly important focus of the Case Studies is to understand why certain children are able to ‘succeed against the odds’. Therefore, from the main EPPSE sample, twenty children from

working-class families who were doing better than expected at the end of primary school formed part of the fifty Case Studies.

Similarly to Lareau (2011), the Case Studies highlight how important family life, parenting, and the home learning environment are to the educational outcomes of young people. It also draws attention to the value of adopting an ecological approach to child development, recognising that children and families are connected to broader social settings such as neighbourhoods and schools and embedded in particular cultural and historical contexts. As I mentioned above, an important focus of the Case Studies is on how *some* disadvantaged families are still able to promote the educational success of their children despite the absence of resources that middle-class families can typically draw upon. Siraj and Mayo argue that the parents of children who ‘succeed against the odds’ engage in some behaviours and practices more typically associated with middle-class families:

They are actively involved with their child’s learning within the family context: they both provide stimulating home learning activities and become actively involved in the child’s learning process through their advocacy in school. (Siraj and Mayo 2014: 177)

In certain respects their thinking is influenced by Lareau’s distinction between ‘concerted cultivation’ and ‘natural growth’. However, although they find that this distinction provides a useful heuristic, they also find that it does not fully capture the parenting practices of the children who succeeded against the odds, ‘effective parenting in low SES families was by no means a mirror image of concerted cultivation’ (ibid: 248). They argue that although they were socialised to benefit from schooling their lack of financial, social and cultural resources means that they could not fully engage in concerted cultivation. For example, they could not easily provide extra-tuition or a full range of extra-curricular activities. For this reason, they choose to describe the child rearing practices of children of parents in this group as ‘active cultivation’.

Siraj and Mayo (2014) also suggest that aspirations may be particularly important for understanding educational inequality and parenting practices. They argue that the ability to promote ambitious goals in the face of multiple disadvantages is important; as a result

they suggest that aspirations ‘may be considered a feature of cultural capacity’ (ibid: 247). Although this point is not more fully developed, Siraj and Mayo draw attention to how parents of working- and middle-class may differ in subtle but important ways. They claim that:

Unlike the middle-class families who were helping their children to aspire to something that they as parents had already achieved, these working-class parents were helping their child to aspire to something more than they had managed to achieve for themselves: in effect to move upwards on the social mobility ladder. (ibid: 248-249)

In subsequent chapter I attempt to highlight how the parents of children in my sample tried to instil high educational aspirations in order to promote social mobility. As we shall see, I argue that ‘parenting towards high aspirations’ forms part of how the parents in my sample engaged in ‘active cultivation’ and tried to support their children in the absence of other factors and goods that may promote educational success.

## **2.10 Ethnicity and aspirations**

A large number of students in my qualitative sample come from ethnic minority backgrounds; I therefore examine if this matters for their aspirations and how they approach decisions regarding the future. In the UK there has been long-standing concern about educational attainment among ethnic minority groups and the presence of attainment gaps. In particular, the low achievement of Afro-Caribbean boys relative to other groups has received particular attention (Fenton 2003; Gillborn 2008, 2010). A striking feature of the empirical evidence is the relatively large amount of variation in levels of attainment between ethnic and racial groups (Archer and Francis 2007; Carter 2005; Connolly 2006; Modood 2008; Strand 2007, 2011, 2012; Wilson et al. 2011). Strand, in summarising the evidence on educational attainment, states that:

Broadly speaking, the mean scores of Black Caribbean, Black African, Black Other, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are below the mean for their White British peers, while the mean scores for Chinese, Indian and Irish students are higher than the mean of their White British peers. (Strand 2011: 198)

This leads to significant differences in the likelihood of attending university and differences in labour market outcomes. Scholars have also paid attention to questions of intersectionality. Strand (2014a) correctly observes that, rather than simply assuming that

ethnicity has an ‘independent’ effect on educational outcomes, we should also consider ‘the importance of explicitly evaluating interactions between ethnicity and SES in their associations with educational achievement’ (ibid: 239). He finds significant interactions between ethnicity and social class and suggests that a plausible account of educational inequality has to be sensitive to these facts.

A range of explanations have been put forward to account for variation in educational attainment between ethnic groups. Some of the most prominent explanations focus on issues of discrimination and racism, variation in school quality that leads ethnic minority students to disproportionately attend lower quality schools, and the low expectations of teachers (Fryer and Levitt 2004, 2006; Gillborn 2008; Harris 2011). Rather than discussing this huge literature, I simply focus on research most directly relevant to the study of aspirations. For example, particular attention has been given to the fact that students from a wide range of ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK, particularly those from Indian and Chinese backgrounds, have systematically higher educational aspirations than their White British peers (Modood 2003; Shah et al. 2010). Research in the US suggests that Asian American students hold higher aspirations than white and black students (Kao and Tienda 1998). Furthermore, it has been suggested that once social class has been controlled for black students express higher aspirations than their white peers (Cheng and Starks 2002; Hao and Bonstead-Bruns 1998). If ethnic minority groups hold high aspirations they may be more likely to invest heavily in education, even if they are from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. Strand and Winston (2008), drawing in part on Appadurai (2004), suggest that aspirational cultures particularly among certain ethnic minority groups may help to explain the high levels of commitment to education among certain ethnic groups and may also help to explain the origins of ethnic attainment gaps. Studies regularly draw on ideas of culturally specific norms in explaining attitudes to education and approaches to parenting (Archer and Francis 2007; Cheng and Starks 2002; Hao and Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Kao and Tienda 1998; Modood 2003). However, the analytical challenge is to identify precisely what we mean by ‘aspirational cultures’ and how they matter for educational outcomes. A possible alternative explanation of high aspirations is that ethnic minority

students invest more in education because they anticipate discrimination in the labour market (Cheung 2013; Cheung and Heath 2007). It seems plausible that *both* of these mechanisms may be at play.

In explaining the high aspirations and levels of attainment of some ethnic minority groups, a prominent strand of research has drawn on the idea of social capital which was first developed by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988). Social capital is the ‘advantage created by a person’s location in a structure of relationships’; the resources embedded in social networks help to explain ‘how people do better because they are somehow better connected with other people (Burt 2011: 4). For example, Coleman argues that parents are able to achieve ‘intergenerational closure’ around Catholic private schools and that this explains why children in these types of schools do better than do children attending regular public schools. Intergenerational closure, according to Coleman, is the social network of parents around the school and the students who attend them – parents know the parents of their children’s friends (Coleman 1988: 1994). These dense associational ties enable parents to more effectively monitor and regulate the behaviour of their children. Thus, parents do not only draw on financial resources to promote the educational success of their children but also their social relationships.

The concept of social capital has proven attractive to researchers seeking to explain the relatively high levels of educational attainment and aspirations of certain ethnic minority groups despite the absence of financial and cultural capital (Horvat et al. 2003; Zhou and Lin 2005). In the UK, the idea of ‘ethnic capital’ has been proposed as an explanation for the high educational aspirations and continuation rates of certain ethnic minority groups (Modood 2004; Shah et al. 2010). Modood argues that ‘ethnic capital’ helps to explain a sociological puzzle: ‘why are non-white ethnic minorities in Britain so over-represented in applications to university and among students in higher education?’ (Modood 2004: 93). He argues that a great deal of sociological research, particularly class based analyses drawing on Bourdieu, offer only limited help in being able to explain this phenomenon and suggests a ‘wider sociological framework will be necessary in order to answer the question about entry into higher education’ (ibid: 87). He suggests that within many

ethnic minority families and communities there are a shared set of 'beliefs and values' about the importance of achieving educational qualifications; this cultural context supports the idea that education is central to achieving economic success and social mobility. This cultural orientation towards achieving educational qualifications reflects a 'general, but durable, ambition to achieve upward mobility'; parents of ethnic minority students therefore 'prioritize the acquisition of (higher) education' (ibid: 95). Strong family ties and strict parenting styles also help to protect students from negative peer groups and neighbourhood influences. This model of how 'ethnic capital' operates has been examined by focusing on the educational experiences of British–Pakistani students. Shah et al. (2010) interviewed over 60 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 in Slough about their experiences of school, family and plans for the future. They found that 'ethnic' capital was 'important in explaining why many working-class Pakistani students enter higher education (Shah et al. 2010: 1123). I argue that my data is broadly consistent with this line of research.

## **2.11 The 'new East End'**

My qualitative data was collected from a sixth form college in the East End of London. As we shall see, this geographic and social environment is important for understanding my interviewees' aspirations. Historically, east London has been where the capital's white working-class population lived and worked. In the 19th and early 20th centuries the local economy of the East End was structured around the docks, the production of textiles and other forms of manual labour. Although a vibrant site of working-class culture, it was also a place of intense urban deprivation and poverty. Highly influential studies by Booth examined the social and economic ecology of the East End, highlighting the poor living conditions of its working-class residents who played a key role in Victorian London's development into a global centre of trade. By the middle of the 20th century London had just emerged from the Second World War and the modern welfare state was emerging. East London remained a centre of trade and industry and continued to house a large proportion of the city's working-class population. Young and Wilmott's (1957)

famous study of the time drew attention to the extensive, close-knit kinship ties and dense social networks that appeared to characterise much of social life in the East End. In modern sociological terms, Young and Wilmott foregrounded the idea of social capital, and argued that the resources embedded in social networks were mobilised to deal with the challenges of everyday life in deprived neighbourhoods. Despite important changes, we will see that such resources play a role in explaining the aspirations of the students in this study.

The area of London from which I recruited my participants has continued to experience dramatic changes in its social, ethnic and economic composition – so much so, that it has been described as ‘new East End’ (Butler and Hamnett 2011). A major driver of this ‘newness’ has been immigration and neighbourhood sorting along class, ethnic and religious lines. For example, East London has moved from a traditional white working-class area to a predominantly multi-ethnic, racially diverse one – the product of multiple waves of immigration (Gilroy 2002). The economic composition of the East End has also seen significant change in recent decades: starting in the 1970s the area suffered from extended periods of economic decline as de-industrialisation spread, taking with it jobs that working-class families had relied on. More recently, the economy has shifted towards services, and with the development of the area around Canary Wharf and the 2012 Olympics, inward investment and also gentrification has occurred. Throughout this period, new and established ethnic minority communities have continued to make the East End their home, having a marked influence on the social ecology of the area. Although much has changed in this part of London, it still remains an area characterised by some of the highest levels of deprivation and social dislocation in the city. Interestingly though, since the 1990s, the quality of schools and levels of educational attainment have been rising in the capital.

It is useful here to think about possible connections between parents, aspirations and the ‘new East End’. This relationship is explored in Butler and Hamnett’s (2011) book *‘Ethnicity, Class and Aspiration: Understanding London’s new East End’*. They argue that in

recent years, new opportunities for social and economic advancement has led to increasing optimism among many ethnic minority groups in the capital. They find that 'moth-balled aspirations' for social mobility, and entry into more middle-class occupations, have taken on a new urgency and come within reach, or at least are perceived to be in reach. In particular, they emphasise the presence of high aspirations with regard to education and the labour market; they are indicative of a wave of optimism that many ethnic minority parents have for their children. This optimism is linked to the belief that social mobility is to be achieved through investing heavily in education. They believe in:

[M]eritocratic achievement in the education system with the expectation that, if they did well, it would be recognised in professional or managerial employment with high levels of social esteem and material well-being. (Butler and Hamnett 2011: 94)

I would argue that my data is complementary to both this argument and characterisation of the social and cultural worlds from which my students are drawn. As we shall see, a large number of the students I interviewed expressed a sense of optimism about the future and strong commitment to pursuing educational qualifications. My analysis also differs in some respects from Butler and Hamnett's. While they offer a more macroscopic view of change and rely on interview data with parents, I focus on the young people themselves.

## **2.12 Evaluating the literature**

It is clear that the sociology of education, education research and other disciplines in the social sciences have taken aspirations to be an important focus of enquiry. The literature shows that in different countries, and in different cultural contexts, there is variation in educational and occupational aspirations. For example, poor and working-class students are less likely to hold aspirations for attending university than more advantaged students; although it is also important to recognise that many disadvantaged students still express ambitious educational and occupational goals. The evidence regarding the relationship between aspirations and outcomes is less clear-cut. On the one hand, both quantitative and qualitative studies suggest that young peoples' aspirations play an important role in influencing educational and occupational attainment. On the other hand, scholarship in

this area has not been able to settle precisely how much aspirations matter for outcomes and if aspirations are more significant for certain groups of students compared to others. Beal and Crockett (2010: 258) argue that although ‘adolescents’ future oriented cognitions [may] shape their ultimate attainments, the underlying processes through which this occurs are not well understood’. This suggests a need for further research in this area.

A unifying feature of the literature is its focus on how family and parental socialisation is particularly important for the educational success of children and how parents play a central role in shaping their children’s dispositions towards schooling. However, although there has been a great deal of interest in aspirations, there are still relatively few studies in the UK that focus specifically on young peoples’ aspirations in general and on the connection between family socialisation and aspirations in particular. Irwin and Elley (2012: 394) argue that:

There has been less analytic engagement with parents’ expectations and aspirations regarding the children’s future occupations ... Typically, analyses have been quantitative and focused on children’s outcomes.

There is also a need to analyse the aspirations of young people in a diverse range of social and geographic settings; this would allow us to examine how young people’s orientations to the future may differ in important ways across the country. This suggests a need for a range of studies across a variety of social, economic and cultural settings in the UK. My study contributes to this end.

There are also important issues to investigate prior to examining how aspirations might matter for outcomes. Not enough sustained attention has been given to the mechanisms shaping aspirations, although important work has clearly been done. My project seeks to build upon work in this area. An advantage of using data from the EPPSE study is that it is particularly rich and detailed. It can answer questions relating to the interaction of ‘family, neighbourhood, pre-school, primary and secondary factors in the development of students’ educational and social abilities that has details unavailable in other studies’ (Sylva et al. 2012: 2). The EPPSE data therefore offers a richer and more holistic way of evaluating the range of factors that shape aspirations; my analysis of the factors that predict high aspirations at age 14 is the focus of Chapter 6. A particular absence in the

literature relates to the meaning that young people ascribe to their aspirations. I argue that if we want to understand aspirations we need to focus on what aspirations mean to young people and how they relate to their sense of self. The literature on aspirations says remarkably little about this. These are questions that I take up in Chapters 7 and 8.

There is also an ongoing need for research on aspirations because we need to understand how they interact with broader social and economic changes. This provides a justification for re-asking important questions. The UK has undergone some major changes in recent decades: we have seen huge growth in higher education, increasing income inequality, the introduction of top-up fees and experienced a major recession. If we think aspirations are likely to be adaptive in the face of broader social changes, both in the education system and economy, then there is a need for a regular re-examination of the role aspirations may play in peoples' lives and in the educational attainment process. The fact that we have good reason to accept the idea that what people want, and how they think about the future, is at least minimally sensitive to such changes provides a justification for working in this area.

Neither has the current sociological literature fully focused on the refining, testing and development of theory relevant to the study of aspirations. Given that a core objective of sociology, and other social sciences, is to improve the theories that are used to explain social phenomena, an important goal of this thesis is to evaluate some of the existing theories that have come to dominate the field and see how well they stand up to empirical scrutiny. Some of the major sociological theories drawn on to explain educational inequality make strong claims about the nature of aspirations and how they matter for educational attainment. For example, Bourdieu's seems to predict a strong association between social class, habitus, capitals and aspirations. It is surprising that the claims made by different theories about aspirations are not more regularly evaluated against the available data. I make a necessarily partial attempt to do so in this thesis.

In order to make theoretical progress and suggest how our understanding of aspirations can be improved, I argue that we should draw on intellectual resources outside of, but relevant to, the sociology of education and education research in the UK. Much can be learned from two areas of research. The first is the US urban poverty literature that has examined in detail the structural and cultural mechanisms associated with the causes and consequences of poverty (Carter 2005; Wilson 1987, 2009). In particular, studies of how people experience disadvantaged urban areas and how they make sense of opportunity and mobility offers a rich set of conceptual resources that I draw upon to make sense of my data (Carter 2005; Harding 2010; Lamont and Small 2008; Young Jr 2004). Similarly, to support my argument about how we should understand aspirations, I also draw on recent work in the sociology of culture that examines the relationship between normative evaluations of behaviour and identities (Frye 2012; Lamont 2000; Vaisey 2010). Rather than introducing it here, I discuss it in subsequent chapters as I actually engage in my analysis of the data. This is the most effective way of demonstrating its utility.

## **2.13 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to make the case that aspirations are a practically and theoretically important topic of study. I began the chapter by placing the idea of aspirations into its broader historical and political context. I engaged in a sustained discussion of the major theories that have underpinned a large amount of work in the sociology of education. Throughout, I have identified how all of these traditions have made valuable contributions to the field but suggested how their accounts of aspirations may be problematic. Towards the end of the chapter, I turned to more recent research that has sought to empirically evaluate the role aspirations might play in the educational attainment process.

Simply put, much of the research literature on aspirations is concerned with proving answers to the following three questions: What are young people's aspirations? How are they formed? And, how do they relate to educational and social outcomes? Although important contributions have been made, I would argue that the answers to these

questions remain incomplete. It is therefore necessary to revisit these important questions with new data. In particular, I will focus on the first two of the questions which appear central to the literature. Furthermore, towards the end of the chapter I suggested that answers to all three of these questions have been hampered by insufficient attention being paid to how young people understand and make sense of their own aspirations. A useful contribution to the literature, therefore, would be to focus on issues of meaning-making with regard to aspirations; this, I believe, would allow us to develop a better theoretical understanding of them.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology and data**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

No single method has been able to claim a monopoly on how to generate interesting and important insights into young peoples' aspirations. Both nationally representative quantitative surveys and ethnographies focusing on only a handful of people have both informed our understanding of aspirations. However, few studies have taken a mixed method approach to studying them. This provides a motivation for my study which draws on responses to survey questionnaires and data about students' attitudes, backgrounds and outcomes and also rich interview data from a purposive sample of young people in an East London college in a highly disadvantaged context; these two sources of data comprise the empirical core of my project. The logic underlying my research design is that they are complementary sources of data and allow for substantive progress to be made in making sense of educational and occupational aspirations

In this chapter, I provide an overview of how this study was conducted; this involves describing and justifying my choice of research design. I begin the chapter by giving a broad overview of the project and situating it within the methodological literature on mixed methods research. This is followed by a discussion of the quantitative and

qualitative components of the study. In the final sections of the chapter, I return to methodological issues by focusing on the advantages of adopting a mixed methods research design. The different sources of data in this thesis are connected in a single mixed methods study – they are concerned with the same phenomena, driven by the same theoretical questions and further integrated at the level of interpretation and in theory construction.

There are two overarching research questions that underpin, and unify, the qualitative and quantitative components of my thesis. They are:

1. What are the key processes and factors that shape young peoples' educational and occupational aspirations?
2. How theoretically should we understand aspirations?

The first question is concerned with identifying the social mechanisms that shape aspirations; this requires that I consider the relative influence of a range of social contexts. I examine the role individual, family, school and neighbourhood factors play. Bronfenbrenner's contextual and ecological model of child development is useful here; this framework emphasises that children are nested within a range of overlapping and interacting social environments and that these can all play a role in productive youth development (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Evans 2000). Importantly, this approach also sees young people as active agents rather than being passively conditioned by these wider social environments. Rather than adopting his whole conceptual apparatus, I simply adopt the idea that multiple factors and social contexts are likely to matter in shaping young people's aspirations. The second question is more abstract and theoretical. An important goal of this thesis is to engage in a limited form of theory construction and to think about how our understanding of aspirations can be improved.

### 3.2 Data sources

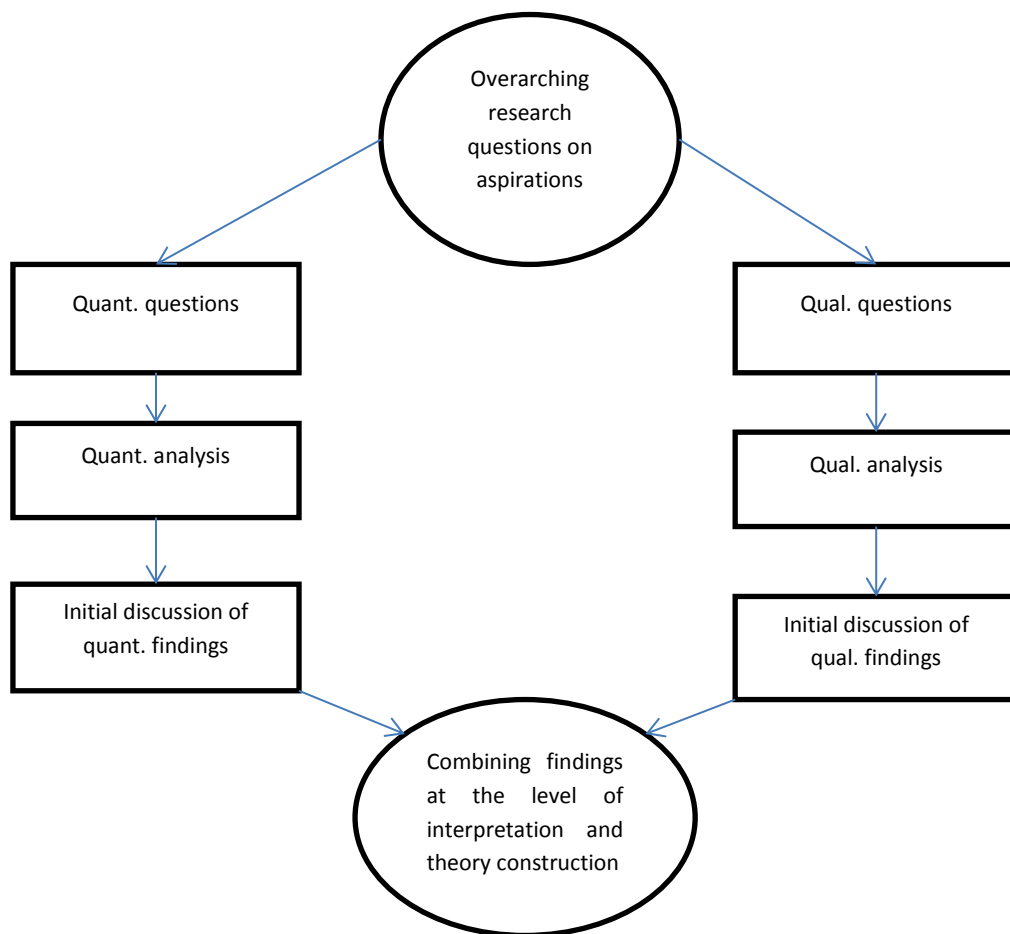
The quantitative component of my study involves the analysis of a subset of data from the EPPSE project. The EPPSE study is a longitudinal, mixed methods study of over 3,000 young people in England. The original study had multiple, interlocking aims. Broadly speaking, it sought to investigate the role of different social contexts such as the family, schools and neighbourhoods on the social, behavioural and educational development of children (Melhuish et al. 2006, 2008; Sammons et al. 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b; Sylva et al. 2008, 2010). Adopting a mixed method educational effectiveness design, the project also sought to establish whether certain early-years settings and schools were more effective in promoting the development of children and if so, *why* they were more effective (Sammons 2010b; Sammons et al. 2008c; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2006). Furthermore, the research team attempted to identify features of educational practice (e.g. quality of early-years settings and pedagogical practices) that promoted better outcomes for children, and to evaluate the longer term consequences of early learning experiences. Data was also collected on primary and secondary school experiences through student surveys. The EPPSE dataset that I draw on contains a large range of variables relevant to the study of educational inequality and data was also collected on the participants' educational and occupational aspirations at age 14. The findings of the EPPSE study fit well with the theoretical perspectives outlined and offered by Bronfenbrenner and his colleagues in that it shows that children are influenced by a range of proximal (e.g. the family) and distal (e.g. the school or neighbourhood) factors.

The qualitative data is from 29 students recruited from a sixth form college in the East London borough of Waltham Forest, an economically deprived part of the capital which has an ethnically diverse population. The students were drawn from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds. They were recruited in order to have different attainment profiles and were taking a range of academic and vocational courses. I interviewed students taking BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council), GNVQ (General National and Vocational Qualification), and A-level (Advanced) courses. This allowed me to examine how aspirations were related to students' different educational pathways. Each

student was interviewed once and data collection took place over a five-month period from December 2011 to April 2012. The timing of my data collection is significant – it took place during a major recession, a period of economic uncertainty and high youth unemployment. In subsequent sections of the chapter, I provide further details about the nature of the data used in this study. I also explain how they are linked together.

Figure 3.1 provides a visual representation of my mixed methods research design.

**Figure 3.1 Visual representation of my research design**



As Figure 3.1 shows, the two components are united by overarching research questions. The qualitative and quantitative components were carried out separately but my thinking about data analysis was inevitably shaped by the fact I was analysing both forms of data throughout my DPhil. The final lines indicate that the two parts of my study are linked together at the end when the findings are put into a constructive dialogue.

### 3.3 A mixed methods approach

Adopting a mixed methods approach to aspirations allows me to draw on the distinct strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies within a unified research design. Drawing on both is advantageous because it allows me to evaluate existing theories and empirical evidence using different sources of data; as a consequence, by the end of the thesis I will be in a position to suggest what a convincing theory of aspirations should offer. Thus, a major advantage of adopting a mixed methods research design is my ability to integrate diverse finding within an overarching study. For example, I take it to be a major advantage of this study that I am able to explore and identify the nature and strength of between-group differences in aspirations using data from a nationally representative study and also to explore and evaluate the meanings a small group of students in a particularly disadvantaged context attached to them.

The literature on mixed methods research has grown substantially in recent decades. A range of researchers in disciplines such as health, sociology, education, political science and policy studies now regularly adopt mixed methods research designs to study a range of social phenomena (Tashakkori and Creswell 2008; Teddlie and Sammons 2010). As we should expect given this diversity, there is a degree of methodological eclecticism in the field. However, there has also been a sustained attempt to define what mixed methods research is and what distinguishes it from other approaches to social science research. In the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of articles on the philosophical and theoretical foundations of mixed methods research, weighty new handbooks, and the emergence of specialist journals (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2009, 2010, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Whether such activity is a sign of a field ‘coming of age’ or still defining

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<sup>1</sup> Given the limitations of space it is not possible to give a fuller account of the true diversity of mixed methods designs (I direct the reader to Tashakkori and Teddlie 2009 for a fuller discussion).

itself remains a matter of dispute (Small 2011). Given this proliferation I only draw on the most pertinent and highest quality literature.

The emergence of mixed methods research needs to be understood in relation to wider methodological debates about the alleged virtues and vices of quantitative and qualitative research. Since the second half of the twentieth century, when social science became institutionalised in universities, there have been ongoing disputes about the most appropriate methods for studying the social world. On the one hand, quantitatively oriented social scientists have extolled the virtues of large-scale observation and the application of statistical models, and see the social sciences as appropriately grounded in the methods and epistemology of the natural sciences. The goals of the social sciences on this view are mainly description, explanation and generalisation (Goldthorpe 2007; Williams and May 1996; Williams 2002, 2003). On the other hand, qualitatively minded scholars, broadly speaking, question the possibility of generalisation and objective knowledge; they see the goal of social inquiry as interpretive – to understand the social world from the perspective of its participants (Bryman 2008; Hammersley 2013; Root 1993; Silverman 2001). Researchers in this tradition are much more likely to emphasise the differences between the natural and social sciences. The polarisation between qualitative and quantitative research was particularly noticeable in the 1980s and early 1990s during what became known as the ‘science wars’. Some of these debates cut to the heart of what social scientific research should and can be. However, as Poteete et al. note, the intransigence and dismissiveness of some has led to ‘proponents of different approaches talking past each other’ (Poteete et al. 2010: 8).

It is out of this adversarial context that mixed method approaches have emerged as a viable and attractive approach to research design. It has been described as a ‘third paradigm’ and as a ‘paradigm whose time has come’ (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004: 15). Mixed methods researchers adopt a pluralistic stance to the value of different methods and stress the importance of being driven by the question at hand; philosophically, mixed methods researchers draw on ideas from the pragmatist tradition

(Siraj and Mayo 2014; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). As a starting point we can define mixed methods research as:

research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry. (Tashakkori and Creswell 2008: 4)

However, what counts as a mixed method study is unclear because the meaning of terms such as ‘method’, ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ varies substantially across researchers and research traditions (Small 2011: 58-9). This lack of coherence may also stem from the sheer diversity of disciplines that draw on mixed methods research designs. In the recent literature various typologies have been constructed in order to delineate the range of mixed method designs available to researchers (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009, 2010). The main differences between them relate to questions of sequencing, mixing of data and how the findings are integrated. For example, some mixed methods studies come closer to traditional notions of triangulation while others are much more fully integrated. In fully integrated mixed designs (Teddlie and Sammons 2010) the mixing of data occurs at all stages of the study allowing for hypotheses to be simultaneously tested and generated in an iterative fashion.

Where does my own study fit into this wider methodological context? My study can be described as a ‘non-nested design’ (Small 2011) because I am using two different sources of data within the same study that are drawn from different sample populations. Alternatively, it can be defined as a parallel mixed design:

Parallel mixed designs evolved from the concepts of methodological triangulation, which is the concurrent use of both QUAL and QUAN methods to study a single problem. (Teddlie and Sammons 2010: 119)

Creswell provides a further definition:

The concurrent triangulation approach is the most familiar of the six major mixed methods models ... It is selected as the model when a researcher uses two different methods in an attempt to confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings within a single study. (Creswell 2009: 217)

In studies of this nature, findings can be integrated during the interpretation phase, when making meta-inferences about the phenomena being studied, and in theory building. As

both of the latter definitions make clear, these types of designs are related to long-standing ideas about triangulation. This is where multiple perspectives are brought to bear on a single object of enquiry. However, my use of triangulation differs in important respects from its standard usage where multiple methods are used to study the same sample population. My use of triangulation is focused more closely on conceptual and theoretical issues that are brought into focus by using data from different sample populations.

My qualitative and quantitative data are linked together through their shared focus on the overarching phenomenon of aspirations. The quantitative data is suited to looking at larger macro-patterns and, for example, evaluating more precisely the influence of school, individual, and family level factors on aspirations. The qualitative component is ideal for examining aspirations in relation to issues of culture and how they relate to students' identities. I argue in this thesis that *both* are essential to understanding how aspirations are formed and the consequences they have for educational outcomes. I further argue that using different data and methodologies, while not giving an entirely holistic picture of aspirations, provides complementary windows onto them as a sociological phenomenon.

In the mixed methods literature a virtue is often made of fully integrating different methods into a unitary set of questions that guide all aspects of data collection (Greene 2007; Plano-Clark and Creswell 2008). A potential problem of making my methods converge onto the same underlying questions is that something important is lost in doing so. Small argues that it is important in mixed methods studies that each method is allowed to answer questions to which it is best suited. In his own study of Child Care Centres he states:

I assume that different questions require not only different data but also different methodological orientations, and that data sources should be employed to answer only those types of questions ... for which they are best suited. (Small 2009: 199)

I take this as a call to respect the unique strengths of different methods and a warning about the dangers of making methods try to answer research questions to which they are

ill-suited. I adopt the same intellectual position. I do so by having questions that link the two components of my thesis together but also questions that are distinct to each source of data and method. I return to the advantages of adopting a mixed methods research design later in the chapter, after I have discussed how the study has been carried out.

### **3.4 Quantitative component of the thesis**

The three questions at the heart of the quantitative part of my thesis are:

1. Are there significant differences in educational aspirations at age 14 by socio-economic groups?
2. What factors help predict students holding 'high' aspirations at age 14?
3. Are there differences in students' aspirations after educational attainment has been controlled for?

These questions are answered using a subset of data from the EPPSE project. Data collection for the EPPSE study began in 1996 when students were aged three and began attending pre-school. The students were then tracked as they went through primary school, secondary school and on to their post-16 education, training and employment destinations. Data collection ended in 2013. As I have already mentioned, the study aimed to evaluate a range of factors and contexts on the social, behavioural and educational development of the children who participated (Sammons 2010a; Sammons et al. 2012a; Sylva et al. 2012, 2014). A central aim was also to establish whether different institutional settings and home learning experiences could ameliorate educational inequalities (Sammons 2008b; Siraj-Blatchford 2010). To this end a huge amount of data was collected, across multiple time points, on the children's demographic characteristics, the home learning environment, the educational institutions they attended and important neighbourhood characteristics. The result is a remarkably rich dataset that could be used to investigate a wide range of factors shaping the lives of participants in the study.

The EPPSE study adopted a mixed method *school effectiveness* design (Siraj-Blatchford 2010b). This involved gathering multiple forms of data from a range of sources; for example: social, behavioural and educational profiles completed by pre-school and school staff; interviews with schoolteachers and staff, and observations of teaching pedagogy (Sammons et al. 2002, 2003). Children attended a range of pre-school (n=141), primary (n=800), and secondary school settings (n=387). Contextual value-added scores were created for each school. Statistical techniques such as multilevel modelling were then used to examine the ‘value added’ these contexts contributed to child outcomes after taking into account the influence of home, parent and child factors. As a consequence, the characteristics of more or less effective educational environments could be identified.

As I drew attention to in the last chapter, a range of case studies were also conducted (Siraj-Blatchford 2010a; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2003, 2006, 2011; Siraj and Mayo 2014). They were used to identify and elucidate the underlying mechanisms that explained why some settings were more effective in promoting successful child development. For example, researchers undertook studies of school settings where children had positive outcomes (Sylva et al. 2004: i). Case studies were also conducted with children from families who ‘succeeded against the odds’ (Siraj-Blatchford 2010). This drew further attention to the importance of parenting practices in supporting the social and educational development of children. Siraj-Blatchford (2010) and Siraj and Mayo (2014) persuasively show that the parents of children who ‘succeed against the odds’ engage in ‘active cultivation’. Despite often living in disadvantaged circumstances they took an active role in supporting their child’s education; promoted resilience, offered emotional support and engaged in extra-curricular activities. By contrast, the home learning environments of low achieving students were much less favourable to academic success. By adopting a mixed methods approach the EPPSE team was able to both challenge and confirm findings from different strands of the study.

The EPPSE project has had a significant impact on education policy in the UK, particularly in relation to providing evidence about the importance of early-years education (Taggart et al. 2008). The study provided robust evidence to support the claim that disadvantaged students benefit from attending high-quality pre-schools; that certain pre-school settings are more effective than others; and that the effects of attending high quality educational environments endure up to the end of compulsory schooling (Sylva et al. 2014). Overall, the EPPSE data is particularly well placed to evaluate important questions relating to the drivers and consequences of educational inequality in England.

In this thesis I analyse a subset of the EPPSE project data. The dataset I work with contains 174 variables and contains a wide range of measures relating to family background, including parental levels of education, employment status and reports of family income, measures of school effectiveness, home learning environment and neighbourhood disadvantage. It also contains variables relating to the children's experience of school, their academic self-concepts and multiple measures academic attainment. A key strength of the EPPSE data-set is the range of theoretically relevant variables I can include in my analysis. A further advantage is that the data was recently collected; I am therefore able to take advantage of some of the latest available data on students currently passing through the English education system.

The quantitative research questions are answered through a close analysis of data collected on students' aspirations. At multiple points in the study students were asked to complete questionnaires that included a range of questions relating to their background and experience of school. At the age of 14 students were asked a series of questions relating to their aspirations and expectations. Students were asked about their intentions to pursue qualifications following their GCSEs, their expectations regarding exam performance, aspirations to obtain a university degree and preferences for leaving school and entering the labour market. For example, students were asked, *'How important is it for you to get a university degree?'* and to rate their replies on a Likert-type scale. In Chapter 4, I give a detailed account of the variables I used in my analysis and how they were selected.

The quantitative analysis proceeded in a number of stages. At the beginning I spent a great deal of time familiarising myself with the dataset, a range of statistical packages and analytical techniques. This involved analysing descriptive statistics and studying associations through cross tabulations and correlations between variables in the dataset. This was a necessary first step before further analysis could be conducted.

In Chapter 4, I provide answers to the first two quantitative questions. This is done by providing a range of descriptive statistics that illustrate how educational aspirations vary by important background characteristics. I then proceed to identify which variables play a statistically significant role in predicting high aspirations. I use a range of statistical techniques to help evaluate the influence of a range of individual, family, neighbourhood and school level variables. This is done by reporting the results of a series of binary logistic regression models that are appropriate for analysing categorical data. In the next chapter, I give a more detailed account of the data and the analyses.

### **3.5 Qualitative component of the thesis**

Although my thesis is structured so that the quantitative chapter comes first, I engaged in the collection and analysis of my qualitative data during the same period of time. As with the quantitative part of my thesis the qualitative component was guided by distinct research questions:

1. What are the reported educational, occupational and broader aspirations of the students I interviewed?
2. What social, cultural and economic processes appear to be important for shaping student aspirations?
3. What meaning do aspirations have for the students?

The interviews were conducted to provide more detailed insights into students' aspirations and capture some of the complexity of how they thought about the future. It thus deals with their subjective understanding of the social world around them and how

this relates to their educational and occupational aspirations. It shares with the quantitative component, and the overarching research questions, a concern with understanding if and how family, peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods are influential with regard to shaping aspirations. However, it also provides insight into cultural and social processes that the quantitative data could not capture and investigates the meanings underpinning young people's aspirations.

I decided to utilise semi-structured interviews, since they provide the opportunity to 'understand the world from the subjects' point of view, [and] to unfold the meaning of their experiences' (Kvale and Brinkman 2008: 1); thus they provide detailed and textured information about the participants and their social world (Kvale 2008; Kvale and Brinkman; Rubin and Rubin 1995). Interviewing can provide a range of insights into people's lives, not only about their 'behavior, but also about representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals, as well as emotional states' (Swidler and Lamont 2014: 6). By using semi-structured interviews I had the dual advantage of having consistency in questions across the interviews, which made them easier to compare in the analysis phase, and the flexibility that allowed the interviews to develop more naturally.

### **3.6 Choosing the site and sample population**

A common claim by policymakers is that disadvantaged students, those from low income families and children living in neighbourhoods with high levels of unemployment, have low aspirations. I aimed to choose a site that contained students from these groups and contexts. I therefore recruited students from a purposively selected sixth form college in the London borough of Waltham Forest. The socio-demographic characteristics of the area and the student intake make it ideal for engaging with the theoretical concerns of the thesis. It is one of the most disadvantaged boroughs in England and has high rates of child poverty. Waltham Forest ranks fifteenth in the most deprived boroughs of the 326 local authorities in England. Out of 33 London boroughs, Waltham Forest is the sixth most deprived after Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets, Haringey and Islington.

Deprivation data shows 53,038 people (34.8% of the resident population) in Waltham Forest are experiencing income deprivation and 16,580 people are experiencing employment deprivation. The college offers a range of academic and vocational qualifications. The student body, as one would expect in this area of London, was highly ethnically diverse. A large number of students came from families originating in Pakistan, Bangladesh and other south-Asian countries. There were also White-British and Afro-Caribbean students. As the EPPSE data on ethnicity is relatively limited this was also a good opportunity to examine the relationship between ethnic identity and aspirations.<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that this level of ethnic diversity makes my sample relatively unrepresentative of wider British society.

A further reason was entirely pragmatic. For two years I had been a teaching assistant and lecturer in the English department. I had also lived in this part of London and knew the area surrounding the college. This purposive and convenience sampling strategy had several advantages, particularly because I was seeking to work with disadvantaged populations. It made gaining access to the colleges easier and I had a good understanding of the social and cultural life of the area. Making use of my existing contacts in the area was essential to gaining access to the college.

My choice of site raises questions about sampling. The qualitative part of my study follows the distinction made by Yin (discussed by Small 2011) between case study logic and sampling logic (Yin 2003). Sampling logic underpins all statistical research. According to sampling logic, the sample should be drawn from a specified population and all potential subjects should have an equal chance of being selected. In doing so the sample should be representative of a wider population. This can be contrasted with Yin's interpretation of case study logic. Here, the aim is not to achieve representatives but to select cases that illuminate the research questions and the research problem. The aim is

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<sup>2</sup> Even with 3,000 students the sample is insufficient to produce large enough ethnic groups to conduct robust statistical analysis on the relationship between ethnicity and outcomes.

to reach theoretical saturation of a given issue (Bassey 1999; Yin 2003). In selecting the site of my research I was driven much more by case study rather than sampling logic. This is because the study was exploratory and was concerned with conceptual and theoretical development.

I draw on the argument of Small (2009) who argues that if the aim is maximising the amount of 'rich' data then the use of sampling logic can be problematic for two reasons. First, it would detract from the important task of achieving saturation; second, it would potentially give the illusion of being representative when in fact the interviews 'would not be truly representative of any real population' (Small 2009: 26.) He goes on to argue that:

What case study logic provides, instead, is a clearer procedure for discovering previously unknown practices or processes, and refining one's understanding ... In this respect, case study logic is more powerful, I believe, when seeking to discover *how* and *why* practices and processes take place (for uncovering mechanisms). (ibid: 27)

The purpose of my data collection was to get the richest possible data about students' aspirations. I aimed to gain insights into what students' aspirations meant to them, how they defined them and how they understood their social situation. My sampling strategy can thus be thought of as being strategic or 'purposive' (David and Sutton 2004). I take this to mean selecting individuals and groups on the basis of how relevant they are to helping develop an improved theory of aspirations. Having an existing relationship with the college facilitated this goal. Given these aims, and nature of the study, the college from which I recruited students was ideal for the questions motivating the research project.

### **3.7 Working in college and working with students**

At the start of the project I asked permission from the Vice-Principal of the college and the Head of Student Affairs about the possibility of recruiting students. After considering my research proposal they agreed to participate. Negotiating access to the research site can be incredibly challenging, as is well attested to in the literature

(Atkinson et al. 2003; Flick 2009). Although my prior connections with the college were helpful the process of gaining access and permission to recruit students still took several months. I believe that my reputation within the college made this process far easier.

Working well with gatekeepers and with people who have authority in institutions is essential to making research projects go well (Flick 2009). The senior staff assisted in identifying teachers who would be helpful in recruiting students and would offer practical support during my time in the college (e.g. returning consent forms and helping to find an interview room). Having the endorsement of the senior staff helped with the smooth running of the project. Throughout the course of my data collection, which ran for five months, I also spoke to staff as key informants. They provided a great deal of information and insight into the demographic make-up of the college and provided a broader perspective on the students' aspirations and their decision making. During my time at the college I tried to give general feedback about the progress my project was making. Once the study is complete I will report my main findings back to the college and discuss with them if findings have any implications for their existing policies, especially regarding advice on education and careers.

Recruiting students was a major challenge. Students were mainly recruited from two tutor groups. One group was mainly comprised of students taking A-levels; the other was comprised of students taking BTEC and GNVQ (only one student) courses. I was invited to talk to the students in form time about the project and handed out consent forms for the students and their parents. Recruiting enough students to take part required multiple attempts. I worked closely with a teacher who helped me recruit students outside of these groups when insufficient students had agreed to take part. We discussed the mix of students I wanted in the study and she helped to recruit them from other classes. I was therefore reliant on her to find some participants. I have no way of confirming if her selection of students led to any systematic distortions in the characteristics of students in my sample.

I chose to focus on students aged between sixteen and eighteen. I did so because they have already taken their GCSEs and made important choices about subjects and qualifications; they were therefore able to reflect on their past decisions and experience of education. Furthermore, this is an important transitional phase within the education system and places a certain degree of pressure on them to think about the future. It was therefore a particularly opportune time to discuss their educational and occupational aspirations - they could reflect on past decisions and think about options for the future. After all the interviews had been conducted I made a summary table to capture important background characteristics. This includes, where available, their gender, ethnicity, their parents' occupations, levels of education, course of study and also a measure of neighbourhood deprivation (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index score). This information provides the starting point for my analysis. In chapter 5 I provide a more detailed summary of the interviews and the interviewees.

### **3.8 The interviews**

Every student returned individual and parental consent forms directly to me or their form tutor prior to the interviews; the college made a room available in which interviews could take place. A critical task for me in this situation was to set the students at ease and make them feel that their responses were not being officially evaluated or judged. As Hammersley and Atkinson note it is important to 'make the interview situation less threatening for interviewees and encourage them to be more forthcoming' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 111). In conducting successful interviews it is essential to try and build a positive rapport with participants if they are to be open about their experiences (Arksey and Knight 1999; Kvale 2008). At the start of each interview I spent several minutes casually talking to students before moving onto more formal questions.

After the initial interviews I decided to change the room because I was worried it was having a negative effect on the students' responses. I was initially given a room on a corridor that was next to the offices of the Principal, Vice-Principal and many of the senior administrators at the college. I became concerned that it made the interviews feel

unnecessarily official and that the students would perceive them as some form of assessment which would have a distorting effect on their responses. I moved to another room in the college, one that students would pass on an almost daily basis; it was also far away from the offices of senior staff and the staff common room.

The interviews were conducted to provide insights into each student's aspirations and to explore how they thought about the future, what they wanted to achieve, and how they made sense of the opportunities available to them. They aimed to explore how aspirations were related to their sense of identity and how aspirations were used by the students to forge their identity. In order to try and make the interview situation less daunting I began with the least private and invasive questions, which allowed trust and rapport to be built over the duration of the interview. The interviews were broadly chronological in nature – they moved from earlier experiences of school and moved into their possible futures. They generally conformed to the following structure:

- a) The interviews always began by asking questions about their life histories. I asked the students to tell me about their family in as much detail as they could. This involved probing for information about siblings, parental occupations and educational levels, and ethnic and religious background. I also asked the students where they lived. In almost all cases this allowed me to narrow down to an area that allowed me to confidently match up the neighbourhood with an Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) score. The students gave extensive comments about their experience of school.
- b) The second group of questions related to their daily routines, friends and friendship groups. I wanted to understand their social relationships and social networks. We also discussed their experience of local neighbourhoods. The aim was to uncover what students thought of them as social spaces, how they defined them, how much time they spent outside of the home, and to generally uncover the role neighbourhoods played in their daily lives. I tried to encourage students to think about a range of aspects of their local neighbourhood to ensure that

both positive and negative aspects were included. This involved talking about crime rates, how closely they were connected to others in the neighbourhood and the presence of social organisations such as youth clubs and places of worship.

- c) We then turned to their experiences of college and aspirations. This formed the central part of the interview. I asked students to tell me about why they decided to come to college and how they made choices regarding subjects and qualifications. We then focused more directly on their aspirations. Rather than narrowing down the discussion to education and work I asked something broader. All students were asked a variant of: 'generally speaking what do you want from life?' or, 'describe what it would mean for your life to go well'? This proved to be a very effective way of getting students to reflect, in more depth, about their aspirations in a more open-ended way. More directed questions around educational aspirations, plans and employment were then asked.
- d) The final group of questions related to their ideas about opportunity and life chances. They explored issues of perceived barriers to achieving their goals and their explanations for why some people succeeded and others failed. This provided insights into their views about how mobility and opportunity operate.

At the end of the interviews I switched off the tape recorder and asked if they wanted to say anything else. I wanted to give the students a chance to reflect on any issues that may not have been discussed because of their concerns about being recorded. Most of the time the students had little else to say but when they did, I listened, and wrote down notes after they had left. Most of the interviews lasted for forty-five minutes. The longest was eighty-five minutes and the shortest was only twenty-five minutes long. In interviews that dealt with sensitive issues such as sexuality, and in one case a student considering suicide, the recorder was turned off and the interview stopped temporarily.

These interviews were therefore not fully recorded.<sup>3</sup> After the interviews had finished I made notes about my initial reactions to the interviews. This was either done straight away or in the evening following the interview. I also tried to make notes on things voice recorders would not pick up such as my perception of their mood, body language, how they responded to questions and my perception of their emotions when talking about particular topics.

### **3.9 Cultural distance and difference**

When conducting interviews it is necessary to be sensitive to the social disjuncture between the interviewer and interviewee. This is particularly true when dealing with disadvantaged or marginalised social groups (Coffey 1999; Lee 1993). While some amount of 'distance' between the interviewer and interviewee is perhaps inevitable it is by no means clear that 'matching', in the sense that it is desirable to try and ensure that both parties share important background characteristics such as social class, is always the best strategy (Mellor et al. 2013). Social distance was also less of an issue because I had close connections to the local community. This provided at least a modicum of insider knowledge and some understanding of the social context within which the students were embedded. Prior to the interview, during our initial conversations, I would tell the students that I had been both a teaching assistant and a lecturer at the college. Although this could have positioned me as an older authority figure, potentially shutting down the conversation, I experienced the opposite to be true. My knowledge of teachers, and the college more generally, provided useful common-ground on which to begin our interactions.

Having some local knowledge, especially of local geography, was often a central ingredient for making the interviews successful and the data intelligible. I believe that without it my understanding of their social world and the interviews would have been severely restricted. It made conversations about place and local neighbourhood possible because I could signal my knowledge of the area and engage with their responses. A

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<sup>3</sup> In this situation I spoke with the student about how he was feeling. Afterwards I sought advice from my supervisors and communicated with his form tutor about what had happened.

good example of this was provided by my discussion with a young male student who discussed at length his experiences of growing up on a notorious local housing estate. Being able to confirm that I knew the estate and understood its social make-up appeared to set the student at ease and he was very forthright about the challenges of living there. This insider knowledge meant that I could probe to get students to reflect on their social environments outside of college. I believe this would have been impossible if I did not have extensive knowledge of the local area.

The interviewer can often assume the position of an epistemic authority in relation to the interviewee. In an attempt to engage with this issue (following Harding 2010), the interviews were also framed as their chance to be an 'authority'. This required them to play the 'expert' by giving an account of life in their neighbourhoods. Similarly to Harding, I found that once it became clear 'that the purpose of the interview was to allow them to tell their stories from their perspective, they became engaged' (Harding 2010: 264). I found that the students generally enjoyed the opportunity to tell me about the areas that they lived in.

An interesting feature of the interview situation is that it can have a performative element for both interviewer and interviewee. This has become a common interpretation of the process since the rise of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor (Atkinson et al. 2003). I was concerned that students would exaggerate or distort their answers in order to fit what they thought I wanted to hear, a common source of alleged bias (Young Jr 2004). It is difficult to establish if their responses were conditioned by their perceptions of what they thought the 'right' answer would be or if they embellished any of their accounts. Although I was concerned about this during data collection, I found Harding's discussion of his fieldwork with teenage boys in Boston, which dealt with themes similar to my own research, particularly illuminating on this issue:

even when boys tell somewhat exaggerated stories of their experiences or act to impress an outside interviewer, the way they construct their narratives – the identification of key actors, the categories they use to describe individuals, groups or events, and the cause-and-effect interpretations they attach to events – reveal

as much about their understandings of their social worlds as the ‘facts’ of their stories. (Harding 2010: 261-2)

I have no reason to suspect that any of the students systematically misrepresented their background stories or plans for the future. However, even if they did so the data remains illuminating.

All of the interviews were transcribed and where possible sent to the students for participant validation. I was able to hire someone to transcribe a large number of the interviews. In order to familiarise myself with the data and the process of transcription I conducted eight myself. When all the transcriptions were returned, I randomly selected five to check for accuracy and that they had been transcribed in full. All the interviews were then transferred into the qualitative data analysis package NVIVO and the names were changed to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

### **3.10 Ethical issues in the field**

All of the participants were paid £10 for taking part in the study. Paying participants to take part raises a range of potentially significant ethical issues. These are widely discussed in the literature on incentives in social research (Alderson and Morrow 2011; Head 2009). One set of concerns relates to the idea that paying participants could be coercive or that it distorts decisions to participate. These issues are particularly acute when researchers are dealing with those in extreme poverty. A different worry is that *not* paying research participants is unethical because they are sacrificing their time and providing help to the researcher. An absence of some form of reimbursement for time and inconvenience could also thought to be exploitative.

I decided to pay participants as a minor tool to aid in recruitment and to compensate them for sacrificing their time during a busy period in the college year. As £10 is a relatively small amount it is highly unlikely that this would make a difference to their wider economic situation so I did not feel it was financially coercive. Furthermore, given that recruiting students was a huge challenge it also seems unlikely that payment had a distorting effects on recruitment. If it had, then the process of recruiting students would

presumably have been far easier. Thus, I found the payments to be a minor incentive and a fair recompense for the time taken to be interviewed.

During the course of the interviews I was faced with an ethical dilemma often faced by researchers working with disadvantaged populations: how to respond when being asked for help or giving guidance on issues of consequence? I found that this tested the boundaries between being an observer and a participant in their lives. Several students at the end of the interviews asked me directly what I thought they should do in the future. One female participant had been thrown out of her home by her father because she wanted to stay in the education system and was living in supported accommodation. She asked me if she should stay in college or leave and return home. Although in my advice I emphasised the importance of it being her choice, and that she should seek further advice from her tutors, I felt I was implicitly endorsing her decision to leave home and stay in the education system. It remained a challenge to preserve the role of an outside figure and remain neutral when my advice was sought. In these situations I tried to give an honest response to such questions. I did not deflect them but emphasised that they were my opinions.

The research project adhered to the ethical standards set out by the University of Oxford and those of the British Education Research Association. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, how the data would be used and stored, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. It was made clear that their identity would remain anonymous although the neighbourhood they lived in may be identifiable.

### **3.11 Qualitative data analysis**

My main source of inspiration for how to approach qualitative data analysis has come from what I take to be exemplary studies in the fields of sociology and education research. A welcome addition in many published books is appendices that describe the research project in detail, including methods of data collection and analysis. In particular

Annette Lareau's (2011) *Unequal Childhoods*, Fiona Devine's (2004) *Class Practices*, David Harding's (2010) *Living the Drama* and Jay Macloed's (2009) classic ethnography on young people's aspirations – *Ain't No Makin' It* – have all proved more useful than any of the numerous textbooks on qualitative data analysis. In particular their capacity to be guided by theory without being restricted by it and their ability to draw out commonalities across groups while still doing justice to the experiences of individuals is exemplary. It has left me convinced that the best way to learn about qualitative methodology is to read the best studies in the field.

The process of data analysis started during the data collection phase. This was achieved through writing short memos and summaries of the interviews, recording thoughts about how the interviews had gone and identifying any initial patterns emerging from the data, an approach suggested by Lofland and Lofland (1994). These reflections were used throughout the main period of data analysis and supplemented my more formal approach using NVIVO. In almost all commentaries on qualitative data analysis attention is drawn to the fact that analysing data is time consuming and the sheer volume of data can be overwhelming (Devine 2004). It was only when I was faced with hundreds of pages of transcripts that this point was really brought home to me! An important phase of data analysis involved immersing myself in the data; this required reading and rereading the transcripts, picking out any particularly striking themes and 'getting to know' the data. During this period I also moved back and forth between reading the secondary literature and reading my transcripts to keep the theoretical issues in focus.

Once all the transcripts had been summarised, and all been read multiple times, a more formal approach to data analysis was employed. All of the data was entered into the software package NVIVO where coding was carried out and 'nodes' were created. This was an essential data reduction technique (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Miles and Huberman 1994a, 1994b). The purpose of coding was to adopt '[a] systematic way in which to condense extensive data sets into smaller analyzable units through the creation of categories and concepts derived from the data' (Lockyer 2004). I selected codes from

existing theory in the research literature, by their relevance to the underlying research questions, and codes that emerged from my initial reflections on the data. These took the forms of ‘umbrella’ (Carter 2005) codes such as ‘ethnicity’, ‘parental expectations’, ‘student aspirations’ and so on. This broad approach to coding was then supplemented by more specific ‘dimensional’ (ibid: 2005) codes relating to beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. This includes codes such as ‘experience of neighbourhood crime’ and ‘explaining inequality’.

This resulted in a coding frame comprising fifty-two different codes that became main nodes of analysis in NVIVO. All of the transcripts were analysed using this coding frame (an extended extract from the code book is in Appendix I). The codebook contains numbers for each code, the name of the overarching category, a description of it and an example quote. As with most qualitative analysis it was an iterative process of coding transcripts, refining nodes and recoding. This allowed me to identify nodes or themes that were particularly salient and those which were less important. The process allowed me to refine my analysis of the students’ aspirations and to put my data into dialogue with existing theory.

I was also sensitive to the claims made by those adopting a grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis (Charmaz 2000, 2004; Strauss and Corbin 1994). In grounded theory one of the key aims is ‘the discovery of theory from data’ (Glasser and Strauss 1968: 1). Researchers drawing on grounded theory emphasise the importance of moving back and forth between analysis and data collection and are engaged in a more inductive form of theory building. In addition to the more ‘top-down’ coding strategy, I also created codes and ‘node hierarchies’ that emerged as the analysis was being conducted. This allowed me to move from more general to specific topics. They grew out of my ongoing analysis and were not directly supplied by the theoretical perspectives outlined in the literature. Such codes were ‘beliefs about the good life’ and ‘fear of poverty’,

‘shame’, and a range of feelings, thoughts and beliefs that recurred throughout many of the interviews.

Once all the transcripts had been coded I was able to look for patterns and similarities in responses by parental income, gender, ethnicity and other important characteristics. Although this has its advantages, I was also concerned with doing justice to the individual nature of each of the interviews. Therefore, throughout my analysis and writing I tried to keep in mind the importance of ‘[p]erson-centred analysis ... by considering each subject individually to understand the relevance of various theoretical concepts to their perspectives and daily experiences’ (Harding 2010: 267). When taking an excerpt from a transcript to fit into my wider analysis I always read the transcript in its entirety to make sure it was representative of their wider perspectives. Making sense of the interviews was an ongoing challenge. I found myself switching between the empirical data and theory and they were ‘held in a kind of dialectical tension’ (Macloed 2009: 259). Furthermore, I found that my analysis of the material and the writing of draft chapters were not separate enterprises (Devine 2004). It would give an inaccurate picture of my research project if I claimed that the content of the chapters emerged in a linear fashion from the analysis of data.

### **3.12 Advantages to mixed methods research design**

I have adopted a mixed methods research design because I believe it enables substantive progress to be made in studying young peoples’ aspirations and orientations to the future. In keeping with much of the mixed methods literature, I believe it allows me to draw on the distinct strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies within a unified research design. Furthermore, it helps in refining hypotheses, enhancing findings and the development of better theory (Creswell and Plano-Clark 2010). Mixed methods research has also been advocated as a particularly powerful way of engaging with areas of research relevant to public policy:

The question of whether quantitative research is preferable to qualitative research creates a false divide ... The most persuasive policy research includes both of

these elements: numbers that define the scope and patterns of the problem, and a story that shows how the problem works in daily life and provides empathetic understanding. These two elements stem from quantitative and qualitative research. (Spalter-Roth 2000: 48)

These arguments have appealed to ‘pure’ researchers interested in studying the mechanisms that produced social regularities (Small 2011) and more applied researchers in fields such as educational effectiveness that seek to inform policy responses.

The case for adopting a mixed methods research design is made more compelling by looking at successful studies. For example, the mixed methods EPPSE project has offered new and important insights into the effectiveness of different educational institutions and the interaction between different social settings on children’s educational and broader outcomes. It could do so because the mechanisms and processes identified by the quantitative part of the study could be explored in the qualitative case studies. The US urban poverty and neighbourhood effects literature has also been successful partly because of increasing dialogue across methodological boundaries (Sampson 2012; Sharkey 2013). This growing methodological pluralism has been built on a common understanding of the need to take into account both socio-structural *and* cultural factors when studying the dynamics of poverty. This point was made forcefully by Wilson (1987) discussing his own highly influential approach to poverty research:

We need a broader vision that includes *all* the major variables and, even more important, reveals their relative significance and their interactions in determining the experiences and life chances of inner-city residents. (Wilson 1987: xix)

There is increasing recognition that understanding a complex social phenomenon like urban poverty requires that the full range of social mechanisms, structural *and* cultural, be kept in view. This has led to more mixed or multi-method studies and also an increased sensitivity to the insights offered by different research traditions.

These arguments have relevance for educational researchers in the UK studying aspirations and educational inequality more broadly. The study of aspirations, as with poverty, is highly complex. It requires us to take into account aggregate patterns of educational aspirations and to evaluate general hypotheses – this requires some form of

quantitative analysis. Aspirations also have a cultural component. Understanding the meaning people attach to them, and the detailed social processes at the micro level, is important for understanding larger aggregate patterns. This requires some form of qualitative data and insight. Most importantly it requires us to try and link these together into a comprehensive analysis of educational inequality and aspirations. This thesis tries to do just that. I believe that the insights that this thesis offers would have been impossible without drawing on multiple sources of data within a single overarching project.

I do not uncritically accept all the supposed benefits of mixed methods research and ignore some of the potential problems. Nor would I want to suggest that all studies would be improved by adopting a mixed methods design. There is still a need for ‘more considered epistemological work in relation to mixed methods research’ (Furlong 2013: 197). For example, a particular area of debate is around the so-called ‘incommensurability thesis’ (Small 2011). This refers to the claim that some methods may be fundamentally incompatible with each other because they are built around very different epistemological and ontological assumptions. A worry for some is that mixed methods research designs adopts a formal, and in spirit positivistic, model of social science that neglects more interpretive approaches to qualitative data collection and analysis. However, I would argue that claims about the incompatibility of methods are largely overstated. A particular weakness of this line of reasoning is the claim that particular methods are *necessarily* linked to particular philosophical positions. This weakness can easily be demonstrated by pointing to the fact researchers within a field such as ethnography or users of interview based methods often adopt radically different epistemological positions. It seems that claims about incommensurability regularly rest on prior philosophical commitments that are imposed on the method rather than being constitutive of it.

### 3.13 Limitations

Like all research projects there are limitations that need to be acknowledged. An unfortunate feature of my research design is that it cannot study aspirations longitudinally. At the start of the study I had hoped to have data available from when the students were aged sixteen, but permission to access the most recent data was not given by the Department for Education (DfE) until after publication of the EPPSE Key Stage 4 reports. This meant I could not establish to what extent aspirations may change over time and if they are predictive of students pursuing particular educational pathways. I also cannot evaluate whether students' aspirations have become more realistic over time or if high aspirations are more important for particular groups in explaining transitions through the education system. I hope in the future to have access to this data and to be able to further investigate the role aspirations may play in explaining the EPPSE students' post-16 destinations.

The EPPSE dataset contains a huge amount of information. However, it is unfortunate that it does not contain more direct measures of parents' aspirations and expectations, although it does contain many important measures of parental involvement in the home learning environment. As the research literature suggests that parents' aspirations and expectations are important influences on their children's it is unfortunate that they cannot form a larger part of the quantitative analysis. What is contained in the dataset is a variable relating to the importance students attach to their parents' views of GCSE choice. This is used as a proxy for one of the ways in which significant others may influence aspirations.

Neither does the qualitative component take a longitudinal perspective, as each student was interviewed only once. Further insights would have been provided if I had followed the students over a period of time and interviewed them on multiple occasions. This may have shed further light on how their aspirations changed over time and were linked to the decisions they made. However, given the huge amount of rich data I did gather, I am not sure I would have had the time to collect or analyse

further interviews. A further caveat is that as the qualitative component is relatively small scale and exploratory in nature it places certain limits on how far I can infer beyond my study population. In the subsequent chapters, I try to avoid overstretching myself and making generalisations that cannot be supported by my data.

### **3.14 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have described and explained how I intend to answer the research questions in this thesis. It is worth restating the two overarching research questions again to keep them in focus:

1. What are the key processes and factors that shape young peoples' educational and occupational aspirations?
2. How theoretically should we understand aspirations?

In the remainder of the thesis I provide answers to these and other questions relevant to the qualitative and quantitative components of my study.

At the beginning of the chapter, I provided an overview of my research design and explained that it is a mixed methods study that can be described of as a 'non-nested' research or a 'parallel mixed design' (Creswell 2009; Teddlie and Sammons 2010: 119). This is because I draw on multiple sources of data: quantitative data from the EPPSE project and qualitative data from twenty-nine semi-structured interviews with young people from East London. While they are not from the same sample population they are complementary and share the same object of concern. I have described in detail the data used in this study, how it was collected and analysed, and how these choices were made. I also signalled that in subsequent chapters I will provide further methodological details where necessary. Importantly, I have argued that using both qualitative and quantitative data provides major advantages to studying aspirations because it allows me to explore both patterns and processes within a single study. The 'vision advantage' (Burt 2011) created by engaging in a 'numbers and narratives' (Gorard and Taylor 2004) approach to research provides the grounds for improving our understanding of educational

aspirations. In the remaining chapters, I demonstrate this argument with empirical evidence.

## Chapter 4

### Aspirations: A quantitative analysis

#### 4.1 Introduction

The findings I present in this chapter are based on my analysis of data from the Effective Provision of Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project. I have discussed this dataset and my general analytical strategy in the previous chapter. I begin by briefly recapping the research and policy context which frames the contours of my analysis. I then discuss the data gathered at Key Stage 3 during the EPPSE project that underpins my analysis; this is followed by some basic descriptive statistics on educational aspirations. I then engage in the more complex task of presenting results from a series of binary logistic regression models; these models test a range of individual, family, neighbourhood and school level variables as predictors of students holding high educational aspirations at age 14. At the end of the chapter, I discuss the significance of these findings for my research questions and the implications they have for the existing literature and policymakers.

In this chapter, I provide answers to the quantitative research questions. These are:

1. Are there significant differences in educational aspirations at age 14 by socio-economic groups?
2. What factors help predict students holding 'high' aspirations at age 14?
3. Are there differences in students' aspirations after educational attainment has been controlled for?

Answering these questions is a necessary first task before investigating how they may be related to students' educational outcomes. If we were to observe no significant variation in students' educational aspirations then clearly they could play no role in explaining differences in educational outcomes. It is also no less important to determine the range and relative influence of a range of factors on students' aspirations. In this chapter I do not claim that I am able to settle such issues. Instead, I begin this task and examine the role various factors have on predicting students holding 'high' aspirations to achieve a university degree.

## **4.2 Context for the chapter**

Although I have already discussed the policy context and research literature it is worth briefly recapping the main issues at stake and how this chapter relates to them. I have argued that educational aspirations are an increasingly prominent feature of public policy debates around educational inequality in England (Cabinet Office 2008, 2009, 2011). Despite the recognition of structural barriers to educational achievement, such as family poverty or school quality, aspirations are regularly invoked to explain why patterns of educational inequality are so entrenched and policy interventions are not more effective. Such claims lean towards a 'culture of poverty' explanation of educational inequality that adopts a 'deficit view' of young people and their aspiration (St Clair and Benjamin 2011: 502). The assumption guiding much of this policy discussion is that aspirations are a key mechanism in explaining educational inequality and that there is large variation in students' aspirations according to socio-economic background.

In previous chapters I have also discussed the variety of theories that attempt to explain how students' aspirations, and other orientations to the future, are related to social structure. For example, some research in cultural sociology has rejected the importance of aspirations as an explanatory variable, thus posing a challenge to the status attainment tradition which places strong explanatory weight on aspirations (Morgan 2005). For instance, Swidler argues that 'the very poor share the values and aspirations of the middle class', observing that 'In repeated surveys, lower class youth say that they value college' (Swidler 1986: 275). The conclusion of Swidler's line of reasoning is that aspirations are irrelevant because there are no patterned differences in educational aspirations by social class. However, recent research makes this position problematic: there appears to be at least some variation in aspirations between social classes and income groups. Alternative accounts of aspirations have been offered by Bourdieu and those adopting an RAT approach to the study of aspirations. I have argued that we have good reasons to think that some of these dominant accounts of educational aspirations are in need of modification. The core of my argument focused on issues of empirical validity – some of the predictions made about variation (or lack thereof) in student aspirations seems weakly supported by the empirical evidence. A related criticism was that existing accounts of how aspirations are formed, and the role they play in decision making, builds in a number of unwarranted assumptions regarding motivations for action.

In this chapter, I begin to put empirical data into productive dialogue with the theoretical assumptions underlying much of the contemporary literature. In doing so, I evaluate the credence we can give to some of the predictions made by these theories with regard to educational aspirations. Rather than adopting any meta-theoretical assumptions about how aspirations are distributed or how they matter for educational outcomes my goal is more straightforward. I examine the aspirations of young people in the EPPSE study and investigate factors that help to predict students holding high aspirations at age 14. Given the relatively few sources of data on aspirations of students currently passing through the education system, this is an important task. It also allows us to examine whether some of the claims about aspirations in the public policy arena, and also the

research literature, are well supported by the empirical evidence. It is a topic that has not been covered previously in the EPPSE research and thus makes new use of existing data.

I avoid making causal claims and overreaching what I am able to say about how student aspirations are formed. This is necessary given the nature of the data and the analytical tools I am able to make use of. Furthermore, given that disentangling the effects of various social contexts on aspirations, and other educational outcomes, is empirically challenging I am cautious about claiming that my analysis allows me to cleanly distinguish between them. The findings are the first step in a much wider empirical project. My focus is on investigating variation in aspirations and identifying the role of various statistical predictors of aspirations.

### 4.3 Data and sample

In the previous chapter I provided a detailed discussion of the EPPSE study and the data collected as part of it. In this thesis, I am drawing on data collected during a relatively 'late' phase of the study: when the students are in Year 9 at secondary school and taking their Key Stage 3 examinations. Student participants in the study were only two years away from taking their GCSE exams. The overall aims of this phase share the same overarching goals as the rest of the study. It seeks to:

Explore the ways in which the influences of pre-school, primary school and secondary school together with social and family background (including out of school learning) shape children and young people's educational achievement, attitudes and social-behavioural adjustment over time. (Sylva et al 2012: 1)

During Year 9, all participating students were asked to complete two questionnaires. These student questionnaires aimed to capture what students' thought about school, their peers and life in the classroom; they were called '*All about Me*' and '*All about Me at School*'. Unsurprisingly, data could not be collected from all members of the original sample (n=3172) due to attrition and a failure to return questionnaires. However, data was available for over half of the sample: 56% (n=1766) for the *All about Me* questionnaire and 53.3% (n=1752) for the *All about Me in School* questionnaire. Appendix

II shows some of the key characteristics of the sample at Year 9. Those returning the Year 9 questionnaires were broadly similar to the original sample but there were some minor differences: students from higher social class backgrounds were slightly over-represented as were girls (51.9% compared to 48.1% in the original sample).

#### **4.4 The measure of aspirations: Descriptive statistics**

I now turn to some basic descriptive statistics relating to aspirations. There is a range of questions relating to educational aspirations in the EPPSE project questionnaire given to students. These relate to preferred destinations following GCSE exams and also continuing to higher education; the key questions and responses are discussed below. In addition to simply summarising the data, chi-square tests were used to formally evaluate the statistical relationships between social background and the various measures of aspirations and expectations; the results are reported in Tables 4.1–4.5.

Table 4.1 provides a summary of students' intentions to go to some form of college or 6th form following their GCSEs. This was a binary response question where students could respond either 'Yes' or 'No'. Table 4.1 reveals that the overwhelming majority of students hold high aspirations. It shows that 93.6% of students from high income families (earning over £67,500) stated that they wanted to attend a college or 6th form. The equivalent figures were lower for less advantaged groups. Students from families reporting 'No salary earned' (79.4%) and 75.5% of students from families earning £2,500–£17,499 stated that they aspired to pursue further academic qualifications. The range between income groups is 14.2%. Thus, it seems that at age 14 there are small, but non-trivial, differences in students' educational aspirations by parental income level. Nonetheless, a key pattern revealed by Table 4.1 is consistently high educational aspirations across all income groups, even those from low income families. If we substitute other theoretically significant variables such as social class or maternal levels of education for family salary a very similar pattern can be observed.

**Table 4.1 University aspirations and expectations by family salary**

| Family salary at Key Stage 1      | % Aspirations to attend college or 6th form |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| £67,500+                          | 93.6 (n=131)                                |
| £40,000–67,499                    | 88.4 (n=289)                                |
| £30,000–39,999                    | 77.6 (n=166)                                |
| £17,500–29,999                    | 76.8 (n=222)                                |
| £2,500–17,499                     | 75.5 (n=216)                                |
| No salary earned                  | 79.4 (n=220)                                |
| Total N                           | 1244                                        |
| $\chi^2=37.01$ , df= 5, $p<0.001$ |                                             |

The EPPSE project also collected data on students' aspirations relating to higher education and this is the focus of the rest of the chapter. In particular I focus on students holding high aspirations for obtaining an undergraduate degree. This focus is important given the widespread concern about the low levels of continuation rates to higher education among certain groups of students in the UK. Students in the EPPSE study were asked the following question: *'How important is it to you to get a university degree?'* Students could respond on a four point scale that ranged from (1) Very important (2) Fairly important (3) Not very important, and (4) Not at all important. In all, 87.2% stated that obtaining a degree is at least fairly important to them. The results are summarised in Table 4.2. Only a tiny number of students fall into the bottom category where only 2.1% (n= 37) of students responded that obtaining a degree was not at all important. This means only 12.8% of students fell into the bottom two categories. This already suggests that the EPPSE data does not provide strong empirical support to the claim that large numbers of students have 'low' aspirations.

As we can see, over 60% of students responded that getting a degree was very important to them. Table 4.2 also identifies the number of missing cases in the dataset. As I discuss below, missing value analysis was conducted in SPSS to provide an overview of patterns of missing data and multiple imputation was used in the main analyses.

**Table 4.2 Aspirations to obtain an undergraduate degree**

| Valid % Aspirations to obtain an undergraduate degree |               |
|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Very important                                        | 61.4 (n=1071) |
| Fairly important                                      | 25.8 (n=450)  |
| Not very important                                    | 10.7 (n=187)  |
| Not at all important                                  | 2.1 (n=37)    |
| Total                                                 | 55 (n=1745)   |
| Missing                                               | 45 (n=1427)   |
| Total                                                 | 3172          |

If we look in more detail at the students who responded ‘Very important’ to the above question we can see, similarly to Table 4.1, variation in responses by family income at Key Stage 1. The pattern is one of generally high aspirations across all groups but with non-trivial differences between income groups. This is shown in Table 4.3. What we can see is a general trend in which the higher the level of family income the greater the proportion of students holding high aspirations. There are two particularly striking features of Table 4.3. First, students from the lowest income group had the highest aspirations out of any other with the exception of students in the £67,500 top income bracket. This may just be an anomaly in the data or possibly it could reflect something particular about the composition of this group. For example, a disproportionate number of students in this category are from ethnic minority backgrounds and may hold higher aspirations than their White British counterparts (Strand and Winston 2008). Second, the difference between the students in the top income groups and all the others (with the exception of the No salary earned group where the gap is 26.6%) is over twenty

percentage points. What we see, therefore, is consistently high aspirations across all income groups but notably high aspirations among students from the wealthiest families.

**Table 4.3 University aspirations and expectations by family salary**

| Family salary at Key Stage 1 | % University degree ‘very important’ | % University expectations (Yes) |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| £67,500+                     | 83.3 (n=115)                         | 80.9 (n=93)                     |
| £40,000–67,499               | 61.2 (n=200)                         | 67.8 (n=135)                    |
| £30,000–39,999               | 54.5 (n=115)                         | 64.3 (n=87)                     |
| £17,500–29,999               | 56.2 (n=162)                         | 59.3 (n=109)                    |
| £2,500–17,499                | 56.7 (n=164)                         | 42.7 (n=77)                     |
| No salary earned             | 65.9 (n=182)                         | 47.3 (n=98)                     |
| Total N                      | 938                                  | 554                             |

Family salary\*expectations  $\chi^2=114.6$ ,  $df=20$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Expectations\*aspiration  $\chi^2=437.1$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Family salary\*aspirations  $\chi^2=40.4$ ,  $df=5$ ,  $p<0.001$ .

Table 4.3 also adds further details to this picture by comparing responses to the question on educational aspirations with responses to the question on expectations for applying to university. In the EPPSE pupil questionnaire expectations were explored by asking students: ‘*How likely is it that you will ever apply to university?*’ Table 4.3 compares aspirations and expectations according to salary group. The figures show that expectations are notably more stratified by family income than are aspirations. Table 4.3 thus draws attention to an aspirations–expectations gap that grows as family salary decreases. This may reflect that expectations are more likely to be realistic appraisals of the likelihood of applying to university and aspirations are less constrained by perceptions of available opportunities. It also suggests that disadvantaged students are more likely to have misaligned aspirations. It has been argued that this may have a negative impact on educational achievement and attainment (Sabates et al. 2011). As we have good reason to think that people’s beliefs about the possibility of pursuing particular courses of action is significant for their behaviour, it is unfortunate that more emphasis in recent educational

research in the UK has tended to fall on aspirations rather than on expectations and how they may interact (for notable exceptions see Goodman and Gregg 2012; Gorard et al. 2012).

I replaced parental income with social class to see if a similar aspirational pattern emerged (this enables me to see if variation is robust across different measures of socio-economic differentiation). Table 4.4 shows responses by social class category. The highest social class category – ‘professional non-manual’ contains the highest proportion of students in this category, 71.2%.

**Table 4.4 High aspirations by social class**

| Social class                      | % University degree ‘very important’ |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Professional non-manual           | 71.2 (n=136)                         |
| Other professional non-manual     | 60.9 (n=328)                         |
| Skilled non-manual                | 54.7 (n=140)                         |
| Skilled manual                    | 57.3 (n=133)                         |
| Semi-skilled                      | 55.1 (n=54)                          |
| Unskilled                         | 65.0 (n=133)                         |
| Unemployed or not working         | 65.9 (n=139)                         |
| $\chi^2=38.75$ , df= 18, $p<0.01$ |                                      |

Table 4.4 shows relatively high aspirations across all social class but those outside the professional non-manual group hold slightly lower aspirations. The difference in responses between three class categories (skilled non-manual, skilled manual and semi-skilled) is very small. Interestingly the percentage with high aspirations in the ‘never worked’ category is much higher than this. Whether we use parental income, social class or parental levels of education we observe high aspirations across students but with some non-trivial differences.

Socio-economic status is a multi-faceted and complex concept. In order to further look at different aspects of it, I also examined the relationship between maternal educational qualifications and aspirations. Table 4.5 shows the association between the two variables.

**Table 4.5 Maternal education levels by high aspirations**

| Maternal education qualifications                          | % High aspirations |
|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| None                                                       | 65.3 (n=177)       |
| Vocational                                                 | 57.6 (n=136)       |
| 16 Academic                                                | 52.6 (n=340)       |
| 18 Academic                                                | 61.2 (n=92)        |
| Degree or equivalent                                       | 72.3 (n=199)       |
| Higher degree                                              | 82.5 (n=85)        |
| Other                                                      | 61.1 (n=17)        |
| Total                                                      | 1039               |
| Parental ed.*high asp. $\chi^2 = 57.45$ , df=7,<br>p<0.001 |                    |

Table 4.5 shows that, on average, children with a mother with a degree or higher degree report holding higher aspirations than young people whose parents have lower levels of qualifications. Chi-square tests showed the relationship between maternal education and aspirations is significant at the 5% level.

Tables 4.1 to 4.5 have been descriptive and illustrative. They have shown, generally speaking, that students from all income groups have relatively high aspirations. They also show that the aspirations of young people are running ahead of the chances of them being achieved, given current continuation rates into higher education. The descriptive data also reveals that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds report, on average, somewhat lower aspirations. However, the fact that a very large percentage of students across all income and social classes hold high aspirations and very low numbers of students have preferences to leave the education system seems to challenge some of the received wisdom about low aspirations being a characteristic of disadvantaged students.

#### 4.5 Predicting variation in aspirations: Using statistical models

I now move on to analyse in more detail the factors that help us to understand variation in students' aspirations in the EPPSE dataset. I investigate characteristics of individual students, their families, schools and neighbourhoods that helps us to predict the likelihood of students holding high aspirations. I do this through fitting binary logistic regression models to the data. My aim in this chapter is to estimate or predict the likelihood of a 'success' outcome (holding high aspirations) conditionally on a set of independent variables such as gender or parental income. As Powers and Xie (2008) note, this is a common and useful way to assess 'the effects of explanatory factors on the relative risk of outcomes' (Power and Xie 2008: 37). The basic model can be expressed more formally as:

$$\text{logit}(p_i) = \left( \frac{p_i}{1 - p_i} \right)$$

The logistic link function is used because of the categorical nature of the data. The logarithmic transformation prevents the linearity assumption being violated. This allows me to evaluate the predicted probabilities of a range of explanatory variables on students' aspirations. This approach is particularly useful for examining 'the odds of success or another substantive outcome, or the odds of success faced by one group relative to another' (Powers and Xie 2008: 38). In binary logistic regression models this is examined through the odds ratio, the most common measure used to evaluate the odds of success in an outcome between groups (e.g. university attendance or not).

#### **4.6 Selecting variables**

Prior to conducting any complex statistical modelling a necessary first step was to conduct bivariate analyses to examine the nature of the relationships between the variables. In conjunction with the background theories and research this helped me select variables that could be used to predict aspirations in my logistic regression models. My goal was to construct models containing theoretically relevant variables that were also parsimonious; I did not want to create a model that simply included a huge number of variables. I created a correlation matrix and conducted chi-square tests on the categorical variables to look at associations between variables. This allowed me to see if some of the required statistical assumptions of logistic regression were met. For

example, an assumption in regression is that the predictor variables are independent of each other. Multicollinearity is problematic because if two predictor variables are strongly correlated then the model is less robust and the significance tests for the regression coefficients are potentially not valid. No multicollinearity assumption were violated and diagnostic tests were conducted to make sure the appropriate conditions had been met. Appendix III provides a correlation matrix of the main variables.

## **4.7 Dependent and independent variables**

### **Dependent variable**

For the purpose of this chapter those with high aspirations are defined as those responding 'very important' to the question relating to the importance of achieving an undergraduate degree. A binary variable was constructed. All responses 'very important' were coded as one and all other valid responses were coded as zero. I focus on the high aspirations category for two reasons. First, holding high aspirations are thought to be particularly salient with regard to educational decision making. Second, a larger number of students fall into this category, compared to the bottom two, providing greater statistical scope to examine the effects of social background on student aspirations.

### **Independent variables**

#### **a) Child, family and home factors**

In the analysis I included both gender and ethnicity. However, due to small numbers in the majority of ethnic groups ( $n < 30$ ) it would be problematic to draw any conclusions about the effects of ethnicity on aspirations. I grouped together all the ethnic groups, with the exception of students identified as 'white British', to create a composite 'all other' category. This allowed me to make a broad comparison between these two groups. Although students in the 'all other' category were more likely to hold high aspirations than were white British students, it is impossible to draw any wider inferences because of

how heterogeneous this group is. It is unfortunate that we cannot examine this in further detail as other research suggests significant differences in aspirations between various ethnic groups (Modood 2004; Shah et al. 2010; Strand and Winston 2008). I also include a measure of family salary recorded at Key Stage 1.

An important strength of the EPPSE study is the information collected on the early 'home learning environment'. Data was collected on a range of relevant factors when children were at Key Stage 1 age of schooling. Information about the home learning environment was gathered through the EPPSE Key Stage 1 parental questionnaire. Four particular areas were focused on: whether there was a computer in the home, parent-child interactions, parent and child outings, and creative play. To give some examples, the 'home computing' factor asked parents if the child played on the computer by themselves and if they used the computer with them for educational activities. With regard to parent-child interactions, parents were asked if they read to the child and if they played games and puzzles with them, and also if they read to the child. I have included the early home learning environment questions in Appendix III(a). All the measures were aggregated into a scale measure from 0–45. The higher the score on this index the higher the quality of the home learning environment (HLE). This variable was transformed into three groups to represent high, medium and low quality early HLEs. Although aspects of the home learning environment we measure at a later time (KS2) these measure were not in the dataset made available to me.

Income at age 7 was selected for two reasons instead of the other available measure (Key Stage 2 family salary). First, because of the extensive literature which suggests the early-years are pivotal in shaping later outcomes (Sammons et al. 2008a). I was therefore interested to see if 'early' family income was significant for understanding variation in young people's aspirations. Secondly, bivariate analysis suggested that the association between Key Stage 2 family salary and aspirations was weaker than for Key Stage 1 family salary.

### **b) Neighbourhood factors – IMD score and employment rates**

The IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation) is used in the UK to try and capture the multidimensional nature of deprivation. It therefore includes dimensions of deprivation relating to education, health, crime and living conditions. I also include a variable relating specifically to local employment rates. I used the IMD score rather than the IDACI measure because the latter is only a measure of income deprivation. The IMD provides a more holistic measure of contextual disadvantage and was regularly included in the EPPSE reports in addition to individual level variables (Sammons et al. 2008b, 2008c)

### **c) Academic self-concept, student–teacher relationships, parents’ views and homework.**

I included three variables derived from the results of factor analysis conducted on the EPPSE questionnaire (see the next section). The first is a measure of academic self-concept in English. This was measured at age 14 concurrently with the collection of data on aspirations. The second is ‘student–teacher relationships’ measure and the final measure is labelled ‘enjoyment of school’. I tested for the effects of 'enjoyment of school' on aspirations in a range of models but found no statistically significant results; I therefore excluded it from the final analyses reported in this chapter. Each of the variables was standardised. All have a standard deviation of one. In addition I also include two categorical variables relating to the importance students perceive their parents attach to GCSE subject choice and the time they report they typically spent on homework on a school night. This is a behavioural measure likely to be related to academic success.

### **d) Attainment variable – Key Stage 3**

Given that attainment is often the most significant predictor of a range of educational outcomes, including decisions to stay in the education system, it is necessary to see if the other background variables contribute to predicting aspirations taking this into account. The attainment measure is a composite variable of maths, English and science

performance measured in assessments at Key Stage 3 that has been standardised. I used a concurrent measure of attainment because students' aspirations may be more sensitive to their most recent levels of academic attainment rather their past levels. However, Key Stage 2 (Year 6) measures of attainment were also available in the data. In order to explore the effect of prior attainment at Key Stage 2 on predicting high aspirations, I also ran my logistic regression models containing a composite measure of prior attainment. The results were very similar and do not change the substantive findings. The results of the models using prior attainment at Key Stage 2 can be seen in Appendix IV. Appendix III(b) provides summary statistics of the variables used in the analyses.

#### **4.8 Factor analysis of EPPSE data**

Factor analysis was employed to analyse the underlying factor structure of the EPPSE questionnaire. This allowed me to evaluate the underlying structure of the students' responses and to examine underlying latent variables relating to academic self-concept, relationships with teachers and enjoyment of school. Prior to the main analysis I tested to see if factor analysis was suitable for the items on the questionnaire. The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.883 which is significantly above the commonly suggested value of 0.6. Furthermore, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $X^2 = 16176$ ) =df 325,  $p < .0001$ ). Given these indicators factor analysis was deemed suitable for the 28 items.

Principal component analysis was used to examine the underlying factor structure. The analysis revealed five factors with eigenvalues  $>1$ . This explained 57.649% of the variance. In order to delineate the factor structure clearly a Varimax rotation solution was applied. The difference between Varimax and Oblimin solutions was negligible. Table 4.5 shows each of the five components' eigenvalues and their individual contribution to explaining the percentage of the variance. Relevant factors were reverse coded where necessary.

**Table 4.6 Principal component analysis results**

| Component               | Initial eigenvalues |        |       | Rotation sums of squares |       |       |
|-------------------------|---------------------|--------|-------|--------------------------|-------|-------|
|                         | Total               | % Var. | Cum.  | Total                    | %Var. | Cum.  |
| 1 (Maths SC)            | 5.54                | 21.30  | 21.30 | 4.19                     | 16.13 | 16.13 |
| 2 (English SC)          | 3.77                | 14.49  | 35.78 | 4.06                     | 15.61 | 31.73 |
| 3 (Relationships)       | 3.14                | 12.08  | 47.86 | 3.33                     | 12.80 | 44.53 |
| 4 (Enjoyment of school) | 1.74                | 6.70   | 54.56 | 2.41                     | 9.27  | 53.80 |
| 5 (Work)                | 1.06                | 4.08   | 58.65 | 1.26                     | 4.84  | 58.64 |

The scree plot showed that after these five components were identified there was a significant levelling off in eigenvalues. Table 4.6 reports factor loadings for each of the items in the five different components. The first two factors relate to academic self-concept in maths and English. The third factor I have labelled ‘student–teacher relationships’. The fourth factor relates to students' attitudes towards school and is labelled ‘enjoyment of school’. The final factor relates to teachers and school work. In the analysis I suppressed all factor loadings  $<0.5$ . Following the initial analysis the internal consistency of the scales was assessed.

The Cronbach’s alpha scores for the first three factors were strong: maths self-concept  $=.891$ , English self-concept  $=.899$ , student–teacher relationship  $=.833$ . The Cronbach’s alpha for enjoyment of school was weaker  $=.674$  but deemed acceptable. No substantial increase in the score would have been achieved by removing more items from the analysis. The final factor, ‘teachers and school work’, contained three items and performed poorly when the consistency of the scale was assessed (.187). Due to this fact, and also because one of the items loads onto another factor, it was removed from further analysis

**Table 4.7 Factor loadings**

| Factor                                                    | Factor loading |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| (1) Academic self-concept (maths)                         |                |
| How good are you at maths?                                | .805           |
| I learn things quickly in maths                           | .828           |
| I have always done well in my maths class                 | .854           |
| Compared to others in my age group I am good at maths     | .861           |
| Work in my maths class is easy for me                     | .761           |
| I get good marks in maths                                 | .846           |
| (2) Academic self-concept (English)                       |                |
| How good are you at English?                              | .767           |
| I learn things quickly in English                         | .824           |
| I have always done well in my English class               | .835           |
| Compared to others in my age group I am good at English   | .825           |
| Work in my English class is easy for me                   | .749           |
| I get good marks in English                               | .846           |
| (3) Relationship with teachers                            |                |
| Most teachers make helpful comments on my work            | .705           |
| Most teachers mark and return helpful comments on my work | .683           |
| Most teachers mark and return homework promptly           | .758           |
| Teachers praise me when I work hard                       | .741           |

|                                                         |      |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Teachers tell me how to make my work better             | .741 |
| The teachers in this school show respect for all pupils | .755 |
| (4) Enjoyment of school                                 |      |
| On the whole I like being in school                     | .705 |
| My school is a friendly place                           | .683 |
| I feel out of place in school                           | .643 |
| In class I worry what others think of me                | .516 |
| School is a waste of time                               | .593 |
| (5) Teachers and school work                            |      |
| Teachers sometimes give me my own work to do            | .604 |
| Teachers are easily satisfied                           | .674 |

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#### 4.9 A multilevel approach?

An important issue to explore relates to the possible school effect on students' aspirations. In public policy discussions it is often claimed that schools play an important role in promoting ambitious goals among their students. Also, research in the social sciences has repeatedly demonstrated variation between schools and teachers in their effectiveness in terms of student attainment and other important factors relevant to pupil success (Chapman et al. 2012; Creemers et al. 2010; Strand 2010). It is therefore important to investigate, and take into account, any school-level variance in effects on aspirations.

The importance of taking into account the hierarchical nature of data-sets in the social science is becoming increasingly acknowledged (Goldstein 2011; Kreft and de Leeuw; Snijders and Bosker 2012). Ignoring these structural features can lead to errors of inference because, at least in part, it can potentially lead to ‘unreliable standard errors of the coefficients in the models’ (Sammons 2010: 429). The EPPSE study adopted an educational effectiveness research design which means researchers are able to model the effects of clustering in the data. However, the clustering was for 141 pre-schools and the sample moved to a large number of primary and later secondary schools. This means many schools had only a few EPPSE students in them.

I explored any possible school effects (following the strategy described by Steel (2009)) using the statistical package MLWIN which is specifically designed to estimate multilevel models. This was done by constructing a multilevel model which took into account school effects on educational aspirations (the binary dependent variable described above). As the dependent variable is binary I fitted a null model for a Two-level Random Intercept Logit Model. Again, following Steel (2009) this can be expressed as:

$$\log\left(\frac{\pi_{ij}}{1 - \pi_{ij}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{ij} + u_j$$

This means that the model intercept  $\beta_{0j}$  is comprised of a fixed effect which is shared across all students in the study and a random effect  $U_{0j}$  specific to each school in the EPPSE dataset. The small value of the variance partition coefficient (VPC) showed that there were no significant effects at the secondary school level (0.045). This figure and the Wald statistic show no significant variation in aspirations that can be attributed at the secondary school level. The residuals derived from the null model with their 95% confidence intervals show that all the confidence intervals (bar two schools) overlap with each other. However, the high numbers of secondary schools, and therefore the relatively low numbers of EPPSE students across each, means that I was not able to truly assess any impact of schools on student aspirations because there were insufficient

numbers of students in the sample in most schools. Adopting a multilevel binary logistic regression framework was therefore deemed appropriate.

#### **4.10 Missing data**

Dealing appropriately with missing data is important because it can potentially have a distorting effect on results and lead to incorrect inferences being drawn. It is therefore important to show how I dealt with missing data in my analyses of the EPPSE data; especially because at Key Stage 3 there is a significant amount of ‘missingness’ relating to students regarding their aspirations. Furthermore, the data was not missing completely at random. There are numerous ways of dealing with missing data and given the complexity of the challenge there are no easy or fully ‘right’ answers. However, multiple imputation has been advocated as a methodologically and theoretically sophisticated way of tackling missing data in surveys (Horton and Kleinman 2007; Little and Rubin 2002; Rubin 2004). It has also been shown to be a better alternative to standard techniques such as list-wise deletion, dummy coding/recoding of missing data and mean imputation (Rubin and Schneker 2010). I use multiple imputation to treat missing data. Such a strategy is well supported by the literature and is the same one adopted by the EPPSE researchers in their official reports; multiple imputation receives extensive discussion during the Key Stage 3 phase of the study (Sammons et al. 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Sylva et al. 2012). After conducting the multiple imputation procedure I compared the results with the original results; there were only very small differences. Appendix V shows the logistic regression results without imputed data. The results in this chapter are derived from imputed data.

#### **4.11 Main results**

I present my results in three stages. Model 1 examines child, family and neighbourhood factors. Model 2 includes variables derived from the factor analysis – students’ academic self-concept, student–teacher relationship and their enjoyment of school. The final model includes a measure of attainment that allows us to evaluate a fuller range of

theoretically relevant variables. Models 1 and 2 are presented in Table 4.7 and Model 3 is presented in Table 4.8. A stepwise approach was used.

Model 1 is concerned with examining the importance of demographic and family background variables on predicting high educational aspirations. Gender, maternal levels of education and family salary play an important role in predicting aspirations. Female students had greater likelihoods of holding high aspirations compared to boys (O.R=1.42). When we turn to the effect of maternal education levels it becomes clear that having a mother with a university degree (O.R=1.77) or a postgraduate qualification (O.R=2.50) plays a statistically significant role in predicting high aspirations. Compared to the contrast group (16 Academic) the impact of having a mother with a higher degree is particularly noticeable. There appears to be very little difference between students in the groups below these top categories. Interestingly, students with mothers having no qualifications are more likely to have high aspirations than students in the contrast group. Model 1 suggests that rather than seeing effects at all levels of maternal education we see a dividing line between students whose mothers have a degree or higher and the other qualification groups.

**Table 4.8 Binary logistic regression models of high aspirations**

| Factor                                         | Model 1      |     |      | Model 2     |     |      |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----|------|-------------|-----|------|
|                                                | B            | S.E | O.R  | B           | S.E | O.R  |
| Gender (ref. group Male)                       |              |     |      |             |     |      |
| Female                                         | .35***       | .10 | 1.42 | .38***      | .09 | 1.46 |
| Mother's education (ref. group 16 Academic)... |              |     |      |             |     |      |
| None                                           | .19          | .12 | 1.21 | .17         | .14 | 1.19 |
| Vocational                                     | .19          | .16 | 1.21 | .22         | .16 | 1.25 |
| 18 Academic                                    | .27          | .20 | 1.31 | .31         | .19 | 1.36 |
| Degree                                         | .57***       | .15 | 1.77 | .53**       | .16 | 1.71 |
| Higher degree                                  | .92*         | .27 | 2.50 | .83**       | .28 | 2.29 |
| Family salary (£67.5+)                         |              |     |      |             |     |      |
| £None                                          | -.89***      | .23 | .41  | -.84**      | .24 | .43  |
| £2,500–17,499                                  | -<br>1.15*** | .26 | .32  | -.99*       | .27 | .37  |
| £17,500–29,999                                 | -<br>1.13*** | .26 | .32  | -<br>1.02** | .27 | .36  |
| £30,000–39,999                                 | -<br>1.12*** | .27 | .33  | -.98**      | .28 | .37  |
| £40,000–67,499                                 | -.91**       | .26 | .40  | -.77**      | .26 | .46  |
| Ethnicity (ref. group White)                   | 1.44*        | .18 | 2.21 | 1.35*       | .17 | 2.08 |
| HLE (ref. group low)                           |              |     |      |             |     |      |
| HLE medium                                     | .03          | .10 | 1.03 | .04         | .10 | 1.05 |
| HLE high                                       | .02          | .15 | 1.02 | .01         | .16 | 1.01 |
| IMD                                            | .04**        | .01 | 1.04 | .04*        | .01 | 1.04 |

|                                      |       |         |     |        |         |      |
|--------------------------------------|-------|---------|-----|--------|---------|------|
| Employment levels                    | -.41* | .16     | .66 | -.48*  | .19     | 1.26 |
| Teacher–student relationship         |       |         |     | .23*** | .05     | 1.26 |
| Parent’s views (ref. group Not imp.) |       |         |     |        |         |      |
| Important                            |       |         |     | .11    | .10     | 1.11 |
| Very important                       |       |         |     | 1.20** | .25     | 3.33 |
| Homework (ref. group <30 mins)       |       |         |     |        |         |      |
| 30–60 mins                           |       |         |     | -.01   | .22     | .99  |
| 60–120 mins                          |       |         |     | .35    | .21     | 1.41 |
| 120 mins+                            |       |         |     | 1.06*  | .39     | 2.87 |
| Academic self-concept                |       |         |     | .39*** | .07     | 1.48 |
| Constant                             |       | -.038   |     |        | -.538   |      |
| -2 Log likelihood                    |       | 1338.86 |     |        | 1253.35 |      |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>            |       | 11.3    |     |        | 20.8    |      |

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; p\*\*\*<0.001

A similar pattern can be observed with regard to the effects of family salary on predicting high aspirations. Students falling outside the top income bracket of £67,500+ are less likely to hold high aspirations when compared to their wealthier peers. This is consistent with the descriptive statistics, which tell us that 83.3% of students in the £67,500+ group fall into the high aspirations category. Again, this suggests that rather than seeing large differences as we move down each income bracket, what we see is a particularly strong preference for attending university among students from the wealthiest families.

The final family background variable in Model 1 is the early home learning environment. No statistically significant effects of early HLE were observed. This is somewhat surprising given that other EPPSE research suggests that HLE often plays a pivotal role

in determining educational outcomes, especially at pre-school and primary school (Siraj-Blatchford 2010). However, it is possible that the analysis fails to pick out any subtle interaction between the home environment and educational aspirations. The final two variables in Model 1 relate to contextual neighbourhood variables. Both the IMD and employment levels had a statistically significant effect on predicting high aspirations, suggesting that social contexts outside of the family and school are potential sources of influence on aspirations.

Model 2 shows an improvement in the overall model fit ( $-2 \log \text{likelihood} = 3490.95$ ) and in the amount of variance explained (20.1%). Model 2 examines the influence of two of the factor scores – teacher–student relationship and academic self-concept – on the chances of holding high aspirations. Both are statistically significant. For example, a student scoring one standard deviation above the mean on the student–teacher relationships score increases the chances ( $\text{O.R} = 1.26$ ) of holding high aspirations to obtain a university degree.

The inclusion of these factor scores is important because they contain measures of attitudes and experiences of schooling not commonly included in studies of educational aspirations. The results of Model 2 show that they are important predictors and potential mediators between aspiration and other background variables. This provides a more nuanced understanding of the factors that help shape student aspirations. It also suggests the need for future studies to look more closely at how attitudes to school and relationships with teachers influence aspirations rather than focusing on the standard staple of demographic variables such as gender, income or social class.

My analysis could not directly take into account the effect of parental aspirations and expectations on students holding high aspirations. What I could do was explore the importance students attach to their parents' views on choice of subject at GCSE. My analysis reveals that students whose parents' views were very important to these decisions were far more likely to hold high aspirations than students whose parents' views were unimportant ( $\text{O.R} = 3.33$ ). Taken in conjunction with the effects of student–teacher relationship some support is offered to the main insight of the status attainment

tradition that ‘significant others’ are central to shaping young people’s aspirations (Morgan 2005). I also examined whether aspirations were connected to behaviours likely to promote academic success. This was achieved by including in the analysis time spent on homework; results show that a large amount of time spent on homework (O.R=2.87) was predictive of students’ holding high aspirations.

Model 3 contains all the variables in the analysis and includes a measure of prior attainment. This allows us to look at whether educational aspirations are merely a marker of previous academic performance or whether other factors remain important even when this has been taken into account. Table 4.8 shows the results with prior attainment included as a predictor in the model. It shows that prior attainment is indeed a predictor of aspirations held (O.R=1.29). This is consistent with the existing literature, which shows attainment to be strongly linked with preferences to remain in the education system.

**Table 4.9 Binary logistic regression model including attainment**

| Factor                                         | Model 3 |     |      |
|------------------------------------------------|---------|-----|------|
|                                                | B       | S.E | O.R  |
| Gender (ref. group Male)                       |         |     |      |
| Female                                         | .34***  | .09 | 1.41 |
| Mother’s education (ref. group 16 Academic)... |         |     |      |
| None                                           | .23     | .14 | 1.26 |
| Vocational                                     | .23     | .16 | 1.26 |
| 18 Academic                                    | .26     | .19 | 1.30 |
| Degree                                         | .45*    | .15 | 1.58 |
| Higher degree                                  | .76*    | .28 | 2.14 |

|                                      |        |         |      |
|--------------------------------------|--------|---------|------|
| Family salary (£67.5+)               |        |         |      |
| £None                                | -.70*  | .26     | .50  |
| £2,500–17,499                        | -.88*  | .28     | .42  |
| £17,500–29,999                       | -.95*  | .26     | .39  |
| £30,000–39,999                       | -.91*  | .28     | .40  |
| £40,000–67,499                       | -.73*  | .26     | .48  |
| Ethnicity (ref. group White)         | 1.32   | .24     | 1.96 |
| HLE (ref. group low)                 |        |         |      |
| HLE Medium                           | .03    | .16     | .94  |
| HLE High                             | .06    | .10     | 1.03 |
| IMD                                  | .04*   | .01     | 1.04 |
| Employment levels                    | -.51*  | .19     | .60  |
| Teacher-student relationship         | .24*** | .05     | 1.27 |
| Parent's views (ref. group Not imp.) |        |         |      |
| Important                            | .15    | .10     | 1.16 |
| Very important                       | 1.39** | .30     | 3.99 |
| Homework (ref. group <30 mins)       |        |         |      |
| 30-60 mins                           | -.05   | .22     | .95  |
| 60-120 mins                          | .29    | .22     | 1.33 |
| 120 mins+                            | .95*   | .40     | 2.60 |
| Academic self-concept                | .30*   | .09     | 1.35 |
| Attainment (KS3)                     | .25*   | .08     | 1.29 |
| Constant                             |        | -.676   |      |
| -2 Log likelihood                    |        | 3467.04 |      |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>            |        | 21.14   |      |

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; p\*\*\*<0.001

However, what Model 3 also shows is that even taking prior attainment into account, other background variables remain important. Although prior attainment reduces the odds ratios for other significant background variables, they are still relevant predictors.

As in the previous two models, gender (O.R=1.41) and having a mother who holds a higher degree (O.R=2.14) are both significant in predicting high aspirations. Model 3 also shows that children from less wealthy families are less likely to hold high aspirations than children in the top income bracket. This could further support the claim that a particularly strong orientation to attending university exists among students from the wealthiest families and with highly educated mothers, rather than disadvantaged groups having 'low' aspirations per se.

In the final model there is no significant effect of HLE on student aspirations once the full range of contextual variables are taken into account. Given the complexity of how this is known to impact on student outcomes it would be unwise to dismiss it as irrelevant to understanding student aspirations. IMD scores and local employment levels remain predictors of aspirations in Model 3. Again, this offers some support for the idea that aspirations are shaped by 'place' and broader social contexts outside the family and school (St Clair et al. 2011). Although the odds ratios decrease slightly once prior attainment is included in the model, academic self-concept and positive teacher–student relationships still have noticeable effects on predicting aspirations. This is also the case for parents' views regarding GCSE choice (O.R=3.99) and time spent on homework (O.R=2.60). Thus, over and above the effects of prior attainment, a range of background variables influence the likelihood of children holding high aspirations.

#### **4.12 Identifying issues**

As with any statistical analyses, it is essential that I take into account issues that may make my findings unreliable. There are a number of key assumptions that must be taken into account when conducting logistic regression analyses. A particularly important issue relates to influential cases and outliers. This was assessed by analysing the Cook's distance statistic. A frequency table of Cook's distance for the model showed no cases with a value over 1 which is generally held to be the level at which cases may be unduly influencing the model. I also saved the standardised residuals for the models. Following

the advice of Field (2012), I found that significantly fewer than 5% of cases had absolute values over 2. Several cases did have values over 3. I explored these in the dataset and nothing suggested that they should be considered outliers or that values associated with the variables had been miss-coded. Appendix VI also shows for all the models the results from the Hosmer and Lemeshow tests. They were all non-significant, indicating that I have fitted an acceptable model.

#### **4.13 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of the variation in self-reported aspirations of the young people in the EPPSE project at age 14. I have analysed the factors that help to predict students' aspirations for attending university and found that they generally hold high educational aspirations even if they come from less advantaged backgrounds. However, my results revealed that students from these groups do hold somewhat lower aspirations than their more advantaged peers. In the highest income bracket, nearly all students reported high educational aspirations. There were also clear links with behaviour, KS3 attainment, and school experiences.

What implications do the results have for the issues I introduced at the start of the paper which motivated the forgoing analysis? I first deal with the research questions:

1. Are there significant differences in educational aspirations at age 14, by socio-economic groups?
2. What factors help predict students holding 'high aspirations' at age 14?
3. Are there differences in students' aspirations once prior attainment has been controlled for?

Question 1 can therefore be answered with a qualified, yes. It requires qualification because what is striking about the results is that despite some differences the majority of students, irrespective of their social background, maintain high aspirations. However, these differences in aspirations at least warrant further investigation to see if they are

related to future educational outcomes. It seems probable that some students' high aspirations to go to university will be unfulfilled.

With regard to question 2, my results show that levels of attainment, gender, family income and higher levels of maternal education all predict holding of high aspirations. These factors have all been shown to be important predictors of attainment for students in the EPPSE sample (Sammons et al. 2012a; Sylva et al. 2014). They also point towards the importance of students' interactions and relationships with their teachers and the weight students attach to their parents' views of subject choice. This lends further support to the insight provided by the status attainment tradition of research that 'significant others' play a pivotal role in shaping young people's aspirations (Morgan 2005). With regard to question 3, my results also show differences in aspirations even after attainment has been controlled for.

Research should continue to examine the more specific ways in which aspirations shape students' orientations to the future. It also suggests a more productive policy approach to tackling educational inequality. Rather than focusing on the supposed lack of ambitious aspirations among disadvantaged students, a more fruitful approach would be supporting parents and teachers in providing the best possible guidance to students as they transition through the education system. Such guidance could further emphasise, especially for high achieving but disadvantaged students, the differing levels of prestige attached to institutions of higher education and make clear the benefits and costs of pursuing particular educational pathways.

My results complement and extend existing research, using some of the latest available data in England, which points to systematic differences in aspirations. An important strength of the analysis is the range of theoretically significant variables that could be included in the analysis. My findings render problematic claims that students' aspirations are largely a reflection of the opportunities available to them, or are tightly linked to the

likelihood of them being achieved, because educational aspirations seem to run well ahead of available opportunities. It was for this reason that Macleod, in his famous ethnography of educational aspirations *Ain't No Makin' It*, argued that Bourdieu and Passeron offered a 'too mechanistic and simplistic relationship between aspiration and opportunity' (Macleod 2009: 140). The aspirations of many disadvantaged students in the EPPSE project are unlikely to be realised given existing patterns of continuation rates to higher education, and their current (KS3) levels of educational achievement; yet they remain relatively optimistic. Interestingly, their reports of their expectations regarding applying to university seem more 'realistic' and are correspondingly lower. Further research on the role of expectations and how they relate to aspirations would be an important focus for future research on students' orientations to the future.

In much of the public policy discourse a prominent assumption is that educational aspirations are highly stratified by socio-economic background. The results of this chapter do indeed show important between-group differences in aspirations. Importantly though, our data also shows that aspirations remain high even for students from low income families. This simple data pushes back against claims that poverty of aspiration can be said to be a significant characteristic of disadvantaged or low income groups. This is not to deny that aspirations either may matter or are irrelevant in explaining differentiation in educational outcomes. However, we still do not fully understand the precise role they play in the educational attainment process.

How social problems are framed and thought about matters for the types of policies likely to be enacted. The relentless focus on aspirations by policymakers is unfortunate in that it obscures the importance of other, arguably more important, factors, such as structural disadvantages or practical knowledge and familiarity with the education system in explaining educational inequality. This focus may give undue explanatory weight to supposedly culturally dependent factors, serving to reinforce popular assumptions that individuals remain disadvantaged because of their own shortcomings. Such a narrative about the causes of educational inequality is rhetorically effective in advocating certain policy solutions but is misleading in suggesting that low aspirations are more prevalent

among disadvantaged groups than they actually are. The generally high aspirations of all students suggest that the problem is not necessarily one of low aspirations but of the absence of opportunities and conditions for them to be realised. Furthermore, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that interventions designed to raise aspirations are likely to be effective in narrowing educational attainment gaps (Gorard et al. 2012). These findings and my results suggest far greater caution should be exercised in how aspirations are used to explain educational inequality or advocated as a solution to it.

## Chapter 5

### Aspirations in the East End

#### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I move onto the qualitative part of my thesis. I begin by recapping my qualitative research questions and then drawing attention to several important methodological issues. My main goal is to introduce and summarise the qualitative data; I pay particular attention to the interviewees' demographic characteristics and their educational and occupational aspirations. By engaging with these sociologically salient characteristics, I set the scene for further analyses in the subsequent chapters.

The research questions guiding the qualitative component of my thesis are:

1. What are the reported educational, occupational and broader aspirations of the students I interviewed?
2. What social, cultural and economic processes appear to be important for shaping their aspirations?
3. What meaning do aspirations have for the students I interviewed?

In seeking to provide answers to these questions, I engage in current debates about aspirations and educational inequality. Let me very briefly comment on how my findings relate to the research questions. First, I found that the aspirations of my interviewees

were optimistic and ambitious, although the tone and character of their aspirations was influenced by their experience of social disadvantage. As a consequence, my interview data raises some of the same theoretical issues as my quantitative data. Second, I argue that interpersonal relationships, particularly between family members, were crucial for understanding my interviewees' aspirations. I also suggest that there was a dynamic interplay between these relationships and broader institutional and social contexts outside of the family. This is the focus of Chapter 6. Finally, I show that the intersubjective meaning that aspirations had for students was crucial for understanding them: their aspirations were connected with ideas of risk and security, and they were used as a cultural tool to create a positive sense of self-worth. These issues are explored in Chapters 7 and 8.

## **5.2 Methodological issues**

Before moving on to the empirical materials it is worth drawing attention to some underlying methodological issues. First, I attempt to not lose sight of the fact that this was a small-scale qualitative study; as such it was exploratory and will not be able to fully substantiate my quantitative findings. I therefore proceed tentatively and do not assume that my qualitative data can always directly inform the findings from my quantitative analyses. However, there is also an important connection. Both shed light onto the processes that shape aspirations and I can use both to evaluate existing theories.

Second, my sample was ethnically diverse and drawn from a particular social context – the East End of London; the borough in which the college was located was one of the most deprived in the capital. As I have already discussed, some researchers have described it as the 'new East End' (Butler and Hamnett 2011). Understanding this social context was important for understanding the interaction between my interviewees' identities, aspirations and attitudes towards education. As we shall see, ethnic identity and the experience of immigration played at least some role in how my interviewees approached decisions regarding the future. My claims have to be sensitive to the fact that the students I interviewed were different from white working-class students in Wakefield or comfortably upper-middle-class students living in a leafy part of Oxford. As a

consequence, I will be judicious about claiming how far my findings can travel beyond the population I am studying.

Third, I focused on some of the ‘success’ stories of the East End of London – my participants had remained in the education system, did well enough to go on to relatively academic pathways at college, the majority of parents were committed to education and many were thinking seriously about pursuing higher education. Young people with less positive educational and social outcomes, shaped, in no small part, by a legacy of long-term social exclusion, poverty and disadvantage, were not well represented in my study. Throughout, I try and keep this in focus and not give an overly sugar-coated account of social change in the East End. In order to give a more complete and accurate account of what life is like for young people living in places like Walthamstow, or neighbouring boroughs like Leytonstone or Hackney, I would need to draw upon a wider range of perspectives.

However, I would also argue that rather than being truly exceptional, the students I interviewed are also part of a broader process of social change where historically disadvantaged groups, including many white working-class students, now see higher education as a viable option and see it as necessary to achieving social mobility. With the ‘massification’ of higher education, increasing rhetoric about university being ‘open to all’, and university being presented as a normatively desirable goal, I would argue that my interviewees are part, perhaps a particularly noticeable one, of a of broader process whereby lower income and working-class students are increasingly aspiring to go to university, even if they do not end up attending. In this way, my evidence and arguments do have broader significance.

Fourth and finally, I pay attention to differences and similarities between the students in my sample, and consider if and how they can be analysed as a group. On the one hand, there appeared to be significant areas of similarity in terms of school experiences, experiences flowing from generally being a member of minority groups and living in the same city. On the other hand, there were differences between students in my sample; the

most obvious being gender and religion. But there are also differences in terms of exposure to types of neighbourhoods, social class and parental levels of education. My analysis tries to respect these differences, and draws out how they mattered for understanding the formation of students' aspirations. However, I would argue that the students share sufficient characteristics that it justifies thinking of them collectively.

### 5.3 The data

Ke'Oni: Well, especially last year, every two minutes there was some sort of stabbing or killing that was like literally even on my road, one of them was, and like round the corner, and that's not a nice environment to grow up in.

Abby: Personally our house is very small, we have to share with my other brothers, like three, and it's really, really hard for me to study as well. Cos when I go home it's like a different environment. You know, all the kids there ... Eleven people in four bedrooms.

Ke'Oni and Abby were both softly spoken and hard-working students. They appeared to take their studies seriously, wanted to go to university and hoped that doing so would give them a chance of getting a good job and building a better life. At the time, I was struck by how much attention they were able to give to their studies despite the challenges they faced outside of the college gates. I begin with these two quotes not because they were exceptional but because, in an important way, they reflected the social and economic circumstances facing many of the students I interviewed. For analytical purposes it is important to keep in mind that they were recruited from highly disadvantaged communities and, in their day-to-day lives, experienced challenges associated with neighbourhood crime, poor housing, restricted opportunities and other problems associated with living in deprived urban areas. However, before I say anything more about these issues it is necessary to give an overview of the students. Who were they? Where were they from? What sort of family backgrounds did they have? And so on.

#### **5.4 Background characteristics**

Table 5.1 provides a summary of all the students who participated; it provides a summary of the following characteristics:

1. name (anonymised)
2. gender
3. ethnicity
4. parent's qualifications
5. parent's occupations
6. neighbourhood IDACI score
7. course of study

**Table 5.1 Summary of interviewees (Part 1)**

| Name     | Gen. | Ethnicity             | Parents' qual.     | Parents' occupation               | IDACI score | Course |
|----------|------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|--------|
| Zaib     | F    | Pakistani             | F=None<br>M=GCSE   | F=Self-employed builder<br>M= TA  | 3924        | AS     |
| Yaouade  | F    | Nigerian              | M=Degree           | M=Nurse                           | 273         | BTEC   |
| Awais    | M    | British–<br>Pakistani | F=None<br>M=None   | F=Manual labourer<br>M=Unemployed | 416         | AS     |
| Shelina  | F    | Bangladeshi           | F=None<br>M=None   | M=Not working                     | 1852        | BTEC   |
| Summaiya | F    | British-Indian        | F=GCSE<br>M=GCSE   | F=Retired<br>M= Not working       | 558         | AS     |
| Muzzy    | M    | ‘Asian’               | M=GCSE             | M=Not working                     | 65          | BTEC   |
| Deborah  | F    |                       | M=Degree           | M=Admin assistant                 | 1995        | AS     |
| Yaseen   | M    | Mixed-race            | F=Degree<br>M=None | F= Accountant<br>M= Not working   | 1267        | A2     |

|           |   |                  |                      |                                                 |      |         |
|-----------|---|------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------|---------|
| Kishan    | M | White British    | F=Degree<br>M=Degree | F=Secondary school teacher<br>M=Charity manager | 3846 | A2      |
| Maryam    | F | Pakistani        | F=Degree             | F= Civil service<br>M= Not working              | ?    | AS      |
| Abby      | M | Afghan           | F=GCSE<br>M=None     | F=Unemployed<br>M=Not working                   | 983  | AS/BTEC |
| Fayza     | F | Pakistani        | F=GCSE<br>M=None     | F=Taxi driver<br>M=Not working                  | 567  | BTEC/AS |
| Bakhtawar | F | Irani-British    | F=A-level<br>M=None  | F=Civil service<br>M=Not working                | 2083 | BTEC    |
| Ke'Oni    | F | British-Jamaican | M=A-level            | M=Prison service                                | 467  | AS      |
| Rubel     | M | Bangladeshi      | M=None               | M=Not working                                   | 1917 | A2      |

**Table 5.1 Summary of interviewees (Part 2)**

| Name   | Gender | Ethnicity | Parent's ed. | Parent's occupation | IDACI score | Course |
|--------|--------|-----------|--------------|---------------------|-------------|--------|
| Hisham | M      | Ugandan   | F=GCSE       | F=Security guard    | 1312        | A2     |

|           |   |                   | M=None                 | M=Not working                             |      |               |
|-----------|---|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------|---------------|
| Warda     | F | Tanzanian         | M=None                 | Not working                               | ?    | BTEC/AS       |
| Shannon   | F | White<br>British  | M=A-level              | M=Police                                  | 4782 | BTEC/GN<br>VQ |
| Michelle  | F | White<br>British  | F=Degree<br>M=Degree   | Self-employed accountants                 | 9160 | BTEC/AS       |
| Ismael    | M | Mauritian         | F=A-level<br>M=A-level | F=Admin manager<br>M=Admin assistant      | 3846 | AS            |
| Chris     | M | White<br>British  | F=A-level<br>M=A-level | F=Mechanic<br>M=Assistant shop<br>manager | 3457 | A2            |
| Adefiola  | F | Nigerian          | F=Degree<br>M=?        | F=Driving instructor<br>M=Not employed    | 3404 | BTEC          |
| Ahsan     | M | Pakistani         | F=A-level<br>M=GCSE    | F=Retired (ill-health)<br>M=Not employed  | 831  | AS            |
| Chee      | M | Chinese-<br>Malay | F=Postgrad<br>M=Degree | F=Web-design<br>M=Nurse                   | 3091 | AS            |
| Kimberley | F | White<br>British  | M=GCSE                 | M=Catering                                | 3945 | AS            |

|        |   |                  |                    |                                           |      |      |
|--------|---|------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|------|------|
| Fred   | F | Mixed-race       | F=GCSE<br>M=Degree | F=Security guard<br>M=Mental health nurse | ?    | BTEC |
| Toheeb | M | Nigerian         | M=Degree           | M=SEN<br>Teacher                          | 750  | A2   |
| James  | M | White<br>British | M=A-level          | F= Cab driver<br>M= Not employed          | 1896 | BTEC |
| Asma   | F |                  |                    | F=Cab driver                              |      |      |

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### 5.5 Gender

Many classic studies of educational inequality, and particularly those researching social class, have focused on male rather than female students, although this bias has changed in recent years. I wanted to look at both male and female students and explore how gender may have impacted on their aspirations. For example, is it the case that the gendered expectations of parents and significant others shape young people's aspirations? Fourteen male and fifteen female students took part in this study. In the early phases of data collection, female students were slightly over-represented; therefore, as it progressed, I sought to recruit more male students; eventually the sample was almost balanced with regard to gender.

### 5.6 Ethnicity

The ethnic diversity of my sample is shown in Table 5.1. In all of the interviews we discussed the students' family background; often this involved a narrative about how the students' parents or grandparents ended up in the UK. Shelina, a female student of Pakistani origin, reflected on her family background:

Shelina: So basically my mum and dad were immigrants into this country, so my dad was a factory worker in West London. It was actually opposite Chelsea's stadium, which is quite cool. And my mum was a housewife and that was it.

A majority of students had at least one parent who immigrated to the UK, some families had been here for many years and some were more recent. The students' ethnic identity was, in some cases, ambiguous and hybridised. Awais spoke about how while his parents were immigrants he did not see this as an important part of his identity:

Awais: I'm from Newham, East London. Stratford. Obviously mum and dad are from Asia, Pakistan, or Kashmir, somewhere. I'm British born and bred, so like obviously I ain't really got that kind of ethnicity in me, I ain't got that kind of culture so yeah I'm just from here, innit.

Awais's comment highlights the uncertainty and ambiguity often surrounding how people define themselves in relation to ethnic, national or racial categories (Fenton 2003). In my sample there were also six Afro-Caribbean and Black African students. In the 2011 Census, 3.3% of students defined their ethnicity as Afro-Caribbean or Black African which shows that students from these groups were over-represented in my sample. Although most of the students were the children of first or second generation immigrants there were also a number of white British students and those that simply defined themselves as 'British'. Although many white working-class families have moved further east into outer London boroughs such as Barking, a significant number still remain part of the East End. Overall, my sample is highly ethnically diverse with many students drawn from immigrant communities.

## **5.7 Parents' education and occupational background**

Parents play an essential role in their children's development and education. They are the primary socialising in children's lives, providing basic goods, love, guidance and a range of emotional and practical support. They structure activities in the home and act as intermediaries between their children and institutions such as schools. Of course, there is important variation in the resources, capacities and skills of parents from differing social backgrounds. In the literature, a great deal of attention has been given to how differences in parental levels of education and occupation matter for the sort of strategies, behaviours, home learning environment and attitudes they adopt, and

furthermore, how these lead to different educational and social outcomes. As we shall see in the next chapter, parents played an important role in the development of their children's aspirations.

All of my interviewees were asked about their parents' educational qualifications and the jobs they had. For the most part, the parents of my students came from non-middle-class backgrounds. James, one of the White British students, talked about his parents' level of education and employment history:

My mum doesn't work but everybody else works in the family, so my dad's a cab driver ... I think they've only had, like, basic education.

A range of students told a similar story about their parents having few qualifications; however, the number of parents with some form of undergraduate level qualification was actually quite high. Table 5.1 shows that fourteen of the students' parents had undergraduate degrees, and nineteen had qualifications up to GCSE and A-level, or their equivalent. To put these figures into context, in the EPPSE sample only 14% of working-class parents had an undergraduate degree. For a small number of students their parents had not gone to university but their siblings or close relatives had ( $n=5$ ). Overall, relative to their socio-economic status or social class, levels of parental education were higher than we might expect. However, it is important to note that those that attended university went to institutions with low levels of institutional prestige.

Twelve students had parents with much lower levels of educational attainment. Table 5.1 shows that it was students' mothers who were most likely to have no formal qualifications or to have left education at an early stage. Two students spoke about their mothers' lack of education and how they had stayed at home to raise the family. One student simply stated, 'She didn't get education'. Another said:

Chris: Education? Mum, she didn't actually go to university. After college she went straight into work. And obviously back in those days it was easier to get into work. But nowadays it's a lot harder. My dad went to college and then dropped out. And then he went into cars.

Although their parents did not go to university, these students reported that they were generally supportive of their desire to pursue undergraduate level qualifications. For Chris's mum this was largely because she recognised things are 'harder' without formal qualifications; Chris reported that she saw university largely in terms of preparation for the labour market. In summary, although some of the students had parents who had been to university, a large number had not; it was unusual if both of the student's parents had attended.

Analysing the educational and occupational histories of parents was complicated by the fact that some of them were educated outside of the UK and their educational qualifications were not valued in the UK labour market. For some parents, this meant that although they had been to university this had not translated into their being employed in graduate level occupations. This was highlighted by Adefiola. Near the start of the interview we discussed her parents' experiences of education; she explained that while her father had been to university in Nigeria, he had found his qualifications to have precious little value in the UK:

Adefiola: My dad, he studied in Nigeria. He has so many degrees but when he came here, obviously it's not the same. So he has to ... like he studied history, but when he came here he couldn't study that. He couldn't go further to get education. He had to drop down to driving instructor.

Despite being highly qualified and having skills associated with gaining a degree, he had no choice but to accept a relatively low skilled job and found it impossible to enter the middle-class professions. Although her father was reported as being angry about his own lack of social mobility and economic success, Adefiola told me he thought coming to the UK was still worth it:

Adefiola: The reason he is in this country is because of us. Because he wants us to have a better life than he has, and he thinks that by doing that, he's stayed in this country to encourage us to do that ... [he wants] us to do well in education. For us to be people. Go to university, make the best of life, and do our best.

What Adefiola made clear was the disparity between her father's educational background and occupational position in the UK. In my sample, there were a small number of

students where there was a mismatch between their parents' qualifications and the labour market position (n=6).

Only a small number of parents were reported to be employed in middle-class jobs (n=9). Ten were in lower-middle-class occupations such as administration and nursing; eleven were in working-class occupations; two were unemployed and the remainder were not working (the formal distinction between these two categories is between those who were unemployed but looking for work and those who were not). Zaib, a female student, discussed how both her parents were employed in working-class occupations:

My dad's a self-employment builder. So as soon as he gets a job he'll go and do that. And my mum's a teacher, a nursery teacher, reception. So she's teaching assistant ... she works on Wednesdays.

Although most students have experienced financial or social deprivation, few were from families where both parents had experienced long-term unemployment or were weakly attached to the labour market. Kimberley, a seventeen year-old taking a BTEC in photography, discussed her mother's fragmented occupational history:

Kimberley: And then she got ... I can't even remember. Quite bad grades but then she dropped out. She stopped going to school when she was about 15, but still took her GCSEs. And then she was working in a supermarket. And then started working in a pub. And then another pub [laughs]. She just kind of chopped and changed.

In my sample there were also a small number of students whose parents were in middle-class professions. Kishan, one of the few middle-class students, commented:

Kishan: My mum works for an educational charity, she's recently been promoted to manager. My dad is head of science at a secondary school in Hackney. They've been to uni. I don't think they did particularly well at college, but they retook and stuff, and now they've got uni degrees and the careers they wanted. They're both pretty successful right now.

Kishan's parents were unusual in this regard. The fact that my sample contains a small number of more traditional middle-class students is useful as they provide a contrast to the majority of the others students' backgrounds. Table 5.1 clearly shows that most of the parents were employed in what would typically be considered working-class or lower-middle-class professions.

## 5.8 Neighbourhoods

I began the data section of this chapter with a quote from Ke'Oni who described the regularity with which violent crime occurred in her neighbourhood. Her comments brought into focus the challenges face by young people living in such areas. She provided a detailed account about growing up in a high poverty part of the East End:

I don't know how to describe it. It's like a ghetto area I suppose, there's lots of street violence and crime over there, and I don't really like it.

She went on to talk about the presence of street gangs in her neighbourhood and how this presented particular challenges to her young brother. Particularly worrying for her was the high level of violent crime in the area. This concern was shared across my sample and for good reason. Around 60% of the students had either been the victim of a street robbery or had a close family member who had been robbed in the last two years. Typically, this meant being robbed for their mobile phones and wallets by young men in their teens or early twenties. As we shall see in later chapters, students often employed a range of strategies to protect themselves from these very real threats.

Although London is one of the world's major metropolises, occupying a central position in the global economy and acting as a hub for financial services, it is also characterised by stark inequalities and high levels of deprivation. This was reflected in the IDACI scores of the neighbourhoods in which the students lived. Table 5.1 shows neighbourhood levels of income deprivation for each student. In the interviews, I asked the students where they lived; often I was given full address or could narrow in to the surrounding streets, and this allowed me to derive IDACI scores for all but two of the students. Two students lived in areas classified as being in the bottom 1% of neighbourhoods in the country.

Twelve students lived in areas classified as being among the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods in the entire country; six of the students lived in areas classified as being in the most disadvantaged 2.5%. Five students lived in areas classified as relatively disadvantaged by IDACI scores but not containing the same intensity of income

deprivation. The remaining four students lived in more middle-class neighbourhoods and suburban areas. A striking feature of students' discussions of neighbourhood was how localised their conception of it was – often it meant only a few streets around their houses. Although a large number spoke about the negative features of their local neighbourhoods, many students were also proud of where they lived and spoke about the benefits of living in inner London. One student, Chris, had been bought up on a council estate that bordered an increasingly gentrified area and he spoke positively about the cosmopolitan and multicultural life of his estate:

Chris: I actually live in an estate, and I know a lot of people on my estate. All the people are really lovely, you know ... It's a close estate and the people that live round there we've got like a Turkish family, an Asian family as well. It's just ... sometimes during summer they come out, they have barbecues and stuff, and it's very nice. There's a lot of cohesion there.

The insights provided by Chris and Ke'Oni show the variety of local neighbourhoods in which members of my sample lived. They ranged from some of the most disadvantaged in the country, to stable lower-middle-class neighbourhoods, and also middle-class streets in highly disadvantaged areas – in effect small enclaves of wealth. For all of the students, neighbourhoods formed a daily part of their experiences; they were places where they socialised with friends and family, and also places they passed through on their way to college. It is worth underscoring a point relating to disadvantage. As the above discussion makes clear, a large number of students came from highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods and came from family backgrounds characterised by an absence of extensive social and economic resources. Although there are more deprived areas and groups in the UK, I keep in mind that many of the students who formed part of my sample had experienced quite extensive levels of deprivation.

## **5.9 Course of study**

All of the students who participated in this study had made the choice to pursue further qualifications after they had completed their GCSEs. This raises an important issue: the students had at least reached a threshold in terms of academic achievement, a threshold that not all young people meet. My sample is therefore skewed towards more educationally successful students. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the students' qualifications and shows they were taking BTEC, GNVQ, AS and A-level courses. Most

of the students taking a BTEC qualification were on Level 1 or 2 courses in Applied Science. Among the A-level students there was significant variation in levels of academic achievement: while some had been highly successful at school, almost half of the students had met or just exceeded the minimal requirements set out by the college for pursuing A-levels. Two students were 'high-flyers' with a strong likelihood of getting mostly very high grades in their final A2 exams. This was confirmed by their tutors who stressed their exceptional levels of academic achievement.

Yaseen was one of the most academically successful students; he described his family background as 'mixed' with ties to countries as diverse as Yemen, Syria and South Africa; his father, an accountant, was the only member of the family who worked. He described his positive experience of going to a local comprehensive school and how he did exceptionally well in his GCSEs, achieving all A\*s. He elaborated that his parents had thought about sending him to a grammar school but he ended up at the college because it was close to his house. Yaseen reported on his father's belief that if his son was committed to education 'then wherever you go it doesn't matter, you're gonna study, you're gonna do well'. He had always excelled at science and these were the A-level subjects he decided to take:

Yaseen: I just wanted to get like the A-levels in science. I chose like the sciences that people would say are hard but ... cos I find them quite easy. But I know that it gives me like a ... if I just do these subjects, it won't close my future so I can still choose whatever I wanna do, I think.

Yaseen was a highly motivated and engaged student. He was on course to achieve high grades across all his subjects and was intending to go on to study medicine at a Russell Group university.

Over half the students were either in their first or second year of A-level studies. Less high achieving students were taking BTEC courses; most had done well enough in their GCSEs to get into college but not well enough to pursue A-level study. This meant they were following a more vocational pathway that would likely lead them into careers such

as nursing. Overall, there were 13 students on these types of courses; the female members of my sample were more likely to be following this pathway.

Warda, a young woman from Tanzania who lived with her mother and three siblings, spoke about her experiences of school and how she ended up on her course of study. Her school life had been disrupted by a high turnover of teachers and neither of her parents had been to university. She explained that her choice of taking a BTEC in Applied Science was determined by the fact that she did not achieve high enough grades:

I chose Applied Science and A-level Maths because in Secondary School I did Core Science and triple Science, and triple Science was quite hard. Basically, it's sort of like A-level work. So I didn't do as good as I should have – I should've been getting B or higher than that, but I got a C. So that's why, and because I really wanted to do science, in A-level. That's why I got put into Applied Science, but I guess it's alright.

A number of students had experiences similar to Warda's. Despite not progressing on to A-levels, they remained committed to gaining qualifications and were enthusiastic about being at college. Most did not see their BTEC courses as terminal qualifications but as stepping stones to further study. This underscores the relatively high aspirations of students in my sample.

### **5.10 Educational aspirations**

Table 5.2 summarises the students' educational and occupational aspirations. It is straightforwardly descriptive – it does not capture more subtle dimensions of their aspirations such as levels of commitment and their understanding of how to pursue their goals. In the discussion below, I draw attention to some of these distinctions. The most important feature of Table 5.2 is that it shows that the students' aspirations were high – most said they wanted to go to university.

Table 5.2 Aspirations of interviewees (Part 1)

| Name      | Gender | Educational aspirations     | Occupational aspirations        |
|-----------|--------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Zaib      | F      | Degree (journalism)         | Journalist/teaching/social work |
| Yaouade   | F      | Degree (media)              | Music production                |
| Awais     | M      | Unsure/leave ed.            | Unsure                          |
| Shelina   | F      | Degree                      | Teacher                         |
| Summaiyah | F      | Degree (pharmacy)           | Medicine/pharmacist             |
| Muzzy     | M      | Unsure/leave college        | Music video production          |
| Deborah   | F      | Unsure (maybe degree)       | Socialite                       |
| Yaseen    | M      | Degree (offer from Q. Mary) | Medicine                        |
| Kishan    | M      | Degree (offer)              | Film director/creative          |
| Maryam    | F      | Leave                       | Join air force                  |
| Fayza     | F      | Unsure                      | 'Help people'                   |
| Bakhtawar | F      | Degree                      | Nutritionist                    |
| Ke'Oni    | F      | Degree                      | 'Psychology'                    |

|          |   |                       |                       |
|----------|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Rubel    | M | Degree (Birmingham)   | Law/‘professional’    |
| Hisham   | M | Degree                | PE teacher            |
| Warda    | F | Degree                | Nursing               |
| Shannon  | F | Degree                | Midwifery             |
| Michelle | F | Degree                | Police                |
| Ismael   | M | Degree                | ICT                   |
| Chris    | M | Degree                | Nursing               |
| Adefiola | F | Degree (Pharmacology) | Medicine/pharmacology |
| Ahsan    | M | Degree (Queen Mary)   | Medicine/dentistry    |

Table 5.2 Aspirations of interviewees (Part 2)

| Name      | Gender | Educational aspirations | Occupational aspirations |
|-----------|--------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Chee      | M      | Degree                  | Web/game design          |
| Kimberley | F      | Unsure                  | Police/photography       |

|        |   |                      |                      |
|--------|---|----------------------|----------------------|
| Fred   | M | Degree               | Bio/medical sciences |
| Toheeb | M | Degree               | Teacher              |
| James  | M | Degree               | Don't know           |
| Abby   | M | Unsure/leave college | Medicine             |

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Twenty-two out of the twenty-nine students hoped to attend university; this included those who had already applied and those who would do so in the near future. Although there was variation in levels of certainty with regard to applying to university, it still emerged as the central educational aspiration for the majority of my interviewees. Two female students spoke firmly about wanting to pursue higher education:

Michelle: Well, I've applied for university and I've chosen my first and second choice. So hopefully if I get into one of them, I'll do four years – University of Essex and University of Gloucester – hopefully I'll do four years with the year abroad or a term out or something, wherever.

Shannon: I want to aim to go to uni, and to study midwifery, specifically. And if not, nursing.

The majority of the interviewees were clear that attending university was the only post-college pathway they were seriously considering. Even students who were ambivalent about further study gave the impression that they would still consider pursuing an undergraduate degree at some point. Rather than understanding this transition as unusual or special, although some did, many students saw university as a natural progression in their educational careers.

Of the students who wanted to attend university, eight were pursuing more vocational courses of study. This was reflected in their plans for the future – they were focused on

pursuing vocational qualifications. A student taking a BTEC level 1 in Applied Science stated:

Bakhtawar: After doing this, I will apply in uni for a nutritionist course.

Although students taking vocational courses had lower levels of educational achievement they were still committed to the idea of obtaining undergraduate degrees. They were also mostly aware that moving onto a degree programme would take longer, and that their options may be more constrained, compared to students taking more academic A-level courses. Six students were more ambivalent or unsure about pursuing higher education. Although they mentioned wanting to attend university this was regularly accompanied with a qualification; they often spoke in conditionals such as ‘maybe’ or ‘perhaps’ and discussed a wider range of options that they were considering, such as entering the labour market. Students in this group were more likely to express doubts and adopt a ‘wait and see’ approach to educational decisions; they spoke about the future in relatively abstract and vague language and found it hard to articulate specific courses of action related to pursuing qualifications or occupations.

Awais, a seventeen year old British-Pakistani student who described himself as ‘British born and bred’, was particularly ambivalent about the prospect of going on to higher education. Neither of his parents had any formal qualifications; his father worked in casual, manual labour and his mother was unemployed. When discussing his plans he claimed he would only attend university if it helped him achieve specific outcomes:

If it helps me, then I’ll go; if it don’t, then there’s no point, it’s just a waste of money. If it helps me build connections that will achieve my goal, then I’m there. If it gives me real knowledge then I’ll go for it.

His reasoning was quite striking. His decision to pursue further qualifications was dependent on knowing specifically what it would allow him to achieve. Most of the other students assumed it would be helpful even if they were not sure quite how. His father was one of the few parents who were reported to play down the importance of university:

Awais: He tells me that knowledge is more important than qualifications. There’s a difference between them both, you know.

The distinction his father made may explain his scepticism about the value of formal learning and educational institutions. He went on to argue that:

Awais: University is just a building with people talking and trying to spread knowledge.

Throughout this exchange, he emphasised the difference between formal knowledge gained through qualifications and ‘real’ knowledge gained outside of educational institutions; in his eyes the latter was more important than the former. His educational aspirations reflected a desire to cultivate this type of knowledge which he believed would provide the practical tools to be successful in life.

Three students stated that they were unlikely to pursue higher education after college. The students’ reasons took two forms. First, all three disliked their courses. One found her college work boring and had very little motivation for completing her homework. This affected her academic performance which in turn decreased her enjoyment of college even further; this led her to conclude that she would not enjoy university. A more positive reason, expressed by two students, was that further qualifications were unnecessary in pursuing their occupational goals. A student who wanted to join the Royal Air Force argued that pursuing higher education would be a distraction and would not provide advantages for a successful application:

Maryam : Basically, like right now, I actually don’t want to go university. I just really want to go to the military, just really badly.

The three students who wished to leave the education system did not frame this as a decision to ‘drop out’. They simply expressed alternative plans that did not involve higher education.

Only three students mentioned the possibility of obtaining postgraduate qualifications. For the majority of students it was simply not part of their thinking regarding the future. Also, many of the occupations that the students were able to articulate did not require higher degrees. Among the students who did mention them, postgraduate qualifications were discussed as a way for individuals to distinguish themselves in a congested labour market. Table 5.2 shows that educational aspirations were generally high across the

students: a clear majority were interested in pursuing some form of undergraduate study. It was also clear, when discussing possible courses that the focus was generally on applied or vocational ones rather than humanistic or social scientific disciplines. Overall, given average transition rates of students to higher education and the popular discourse around 'poverty of aspiration' the commitment of my interviewees to education is quite striking.

### **5.11 Occupational aspirations**

A natural progression in our interviews was from educational to occupational aspirations; in many cases they were closely related. I asked students what sort of job they wanted to do and what they thought they might be doing in the future; the aim was to explore whether their goals were realistic. The difference between their aspirations and expectations was not always clear-cut and the occupations they reported being interested in were, with some exceptions, within the bounds of possibility. When our discussion turned to possible jobs all the students except for two were able to specify a career or occupation they were interested in pursuing. Even students who were unsure about what they wanted to do were able to identify a potential occupation that appealed to them and could say what they wanted from a job. Most of the jobs discussed were middle-class or lower-middle-class occupations. Table 5.2 provides a summary.

Four relatively distinct occupational categories emerged, although the distinctions between them were not hard and fast. The first set of responses can be classified as traditional middle- or upper-middle-class occupations such as law, medicine and dentistry. Eight students stated that they wished to work in these fields. Two students wanted to be surgeons:

Yaseen: I wanna do everything so I see myself as a surgeon. I'm not sure, maybe heart surgeon or brain surgeon.

Summaiya: I would love to be a surgeon. I think it's just something ... it would be amazing if I was a surgeon, cos you can actually help save lives, kind of thing.

Summaiya recognised that her chances of achieving this goal were slim and had a back-up plan of pursuing a career in pharmacology. When I asked students what was

appealing about these areas of work, they generally responded that they would be intellectually rewarding and well-respected jobs. In the next chapter, I explore in more detail why medical professions may have been particularly appealing to students in my sample. Very few of the students stressed financial rewards as a motivating force in choosing their occupations, although they stated that having enough money was important. The high-achieving male students were the most concerned with having professional careers: they were focused on obtaining upper-middle-class jobs and had been successful in applying to competitive universities. One male student's aspirations to study medicine seemed very unrealistic. Abby, an Afghan student with very low grades said he wanted to pursue a career in medicine despite struggling on all his courses. He was one of only three or four students whose aspirations seemed to run a long way ahead of the chances of them being realised.

Five students wanted to work in creative media or technology industries and comprised the second group. They discussed jobs such as working as a music producer, a photographer and as a games designer. More advantaged students were over-represented in this small group, maybe suggesting that careers in this area were more attractive or perhaps obtainable to students from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds. When discussing these occupations, students said they appealed because they allowed for self-expression, fun, independence and were more stimulating than 'regular' jobs. Yoaudae, who wanted to work in music production, explained:

Yoaudae: I don't like people telling me what to do. I wanna work on my own. And to be honest, I really don't want to work every day of my life. I don't see myself, like, Monday to Friday, no.

Two of the middle-class students in this group had a distinct advantage over the others. They were able to draw on extensive family resources to gain the skills and experience necessary for entering jobs in their field of interest. Chee and Kishan, two middle-class respondents, were able to give much fuller accounts of the steps and skills required to achieve entry into these types of occupations. This appeared to stem from the fact that they had parents and family members who could provide information and guidance on how to get middle-class jobs.

The third group was larger and more heterogeneous (n=13). In this group, occupational aspirations ranged from teaching, traditionally a middle-class occupation, but with an increasingly diverse composition, to lower-middle-class jobs such as nurse, nutritionist and police officer. A range of jobs in this category could be classified as being ‘caring professions’ which have historically been dominated by women. Students in this group stressed that they enjoyed working with people, wanted a job that involved socialising and were motivated by a desire to help others. Shannon, a White British student, explained about wanting a career in nursing or midwifery:

Shannon: I don’t know, I think I’ve always grown up in a sort of mindset ... I’ve always, I mean, I was looking after my mum, and then I moved, and then I was looking after my granddad ... Like even in college, when I went to Germany, I was basically playing bloody nurse, cos everyone was sick! [Laughs] It’s just like an instinct and impulse, ‘I have to help, I have to help!’

Female participants were more likely than males to claim that they were aiming for jobs in these types of fields. This group was also dominated by those taking vocational courses.

The final group I classified as falling into a more ambiguous ‘Don’t know’ category. The three students in this group could name some occupations they were interested in but gave rather vague responses and jumped quickly from one occupation to another. Their comments were often book-ended by statements underscoring that they were still unsure. Several of the students also used phrases such as ‘being lost’. However, this was a very small group with perhaps only two or three students who really could not identify an area of work they wanted to go into.

Not one of the students I interviewed aspired to enter traditional working-class occupations. This is important because an assumption guiding policy seems to be that poorer students are more likely to aspire to enter low-paid jobs; this assumption is not supported by my admittedly limited data. Two further points are worth mentioning here. The first is that the occupations they discussed were broadly realistic: there was almost

no talk of fantasy jobs that would bring them great wealth or fame. The second is to do with misalignment. Researchers have suggested that misalignment between educational and occupational aspirations may have a negative impact on successful transition from the education system to the labour market (Sabates et al. 2011). In my sample there seemed to be few such cases of misalignment.

## **5.12 Conclusion**

This chapter has been descriptive and introductory. The main focus of the chapter has been on introducing the students who formed my sample and describing their backgrounds and aspirations, and giving a sense of who they were. This chapter has offered a partial answer to the first of my qualitative research questions: what are the reported educational, occupational and broader aspirations of the students I interviewed? I have shown that the educational and occupational aspirations of the students were generally high and also drawn attention to some of their specific characteristics. Across the next three chapters, I engage in a selective but thorough analysis of my qualitative data. The advantage provided by my qualitative data, in comparison with my quantitative data, is that it offers greater texture and phenomenological insight into young peoples' aspirations and their social worlds; this offers a powerful complementary perspective to my quantitative data.

## Chapter 6

### Aspiration as a family affair

#### 6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced my qualitative data and summarised the background characteristics and aspirations of the students in my sample. It is now time to engage in a more detailed and theoretically motivated analysis, the purpose of which is to examine some of key sources of influence on the educational and occupational aspirations of my interviewees. I am therefore attempting to answer the second of my qualitative research questions: what social, cultural and economic processes appear to be important for shaping their aspirations? The focus of this chapter is the dynamics of family life and how parenting characteristics had an important influence on the development of my interviewees' aspirations. I also consider how a broader range of influences such as gender, ethnic identity, and beliefs about the labour market also mattered. In doing so, I adopt a contextual and multi-factorial perspective on aspirations that evaluates a range of interlocking processes and factors. However, I foreground the importance of family life.

I do so because the family is the primary socialising agency in young peoples' lives. Furthermore, it has long been recognised that the family and the home environment play a central role in child development and are central pathways through which educational inequality is reproduced (Meluish 2010; Lareau 2011; Majoribanks 2003; Siraj and Mayo 2014). For the young people I interviewed, family life was an essential formative

influence and the crucible in which their identities were formed. The family, like many other institutions, created sets of obligations, rules and roles, and relationships between parents and my interviewees were often reported to be characterised by asymmetric levels of authority. My focus on the family is still consistent with adopting a multi-factorial or ecological approach to aspiration. I found that a range of mechanisms were important for making sense of the students' aspirations, but I explore how these broader factors worked through and were mediated by family life.

The interviewees revealed a great deal about how their parents influenced their lives and, in particular, how they shaped their aspirations and plans for the future. Almost none of the parents were reported to be neutral on these topics: they had clear beliefs and preferences about their children's educational and occupational choices, which were closely tied to their broader vision of the life they wanted their children to live, and the sort of person they wanted them to become. The transmission of aspirations and expectations was part of the day-to-day interactive order in which students' participated. Conversations about education and the future happened over the dinner table, on the way to college, in living rooms and in countless other social interactions that happened between students and their parents. They drew attention to times when this process was transparent: when deliberate and focused 'life' conversations about educational and occupational goals took place; their comments about their parents also revealed that more subtle forms of socialisation took place where assumptions and attitudes about family formation, what a good job was, and what a desirable level of educational attainment was were woven into the fabric of the students' everyday lives. What became clear was that thinking about the future was a family affair.

The majority of students reported that their parents placed a strong instrumental and normative emphasis on achieving educational qualifications; they saw education as essential to achieving upward social mobility. My interviewees drew attention to the types of practical, emotional and intellectual support their parents were able to give; they also discussed if and how parents were involved in learning activities. Although almost

all of the young people I interviewed spoke about being supported and nurtured by their parents, my data reveals important differences in parenting practices and the resources they could draw on. In this chapter, I explore how this mattered for my interviewees' aspirations. I argue that parents were able to transmit their aspirations and expectations to their children through their ability to monitor, guide and sanction the behaviour of their children. This process was supported by participation in wider community associations and social networks. Such community ties supported parents in promoting the value of educational attainment and ambitious aspirations.

This chapter engages with ideas of Lareau (2011) and Siraj and Mayo (2014) to make sense of my interviewees' aspirations. These scholars highlight the importance of parenting styles and strategies for shaping young people's outcomes. They are also interested how these vary by social background, particularly social class. For example, Lareau draws attention to how middle-class parents are more likely to engage in what she calls 'concerted cultivation', where parents, by extensively regulating their children's activities and investing their resources, are able to promote the educational success of their children. In contrast, working-class parents, who have fewer resources, are more likely to socialise their children according to a 'natural growth' model of parenting. These parenting strategies generate different dispositions towards education and the labour market, and they also help to explain why middle-class children are more likely to be successful at school. Siraj and Mayo (2014) draw attention to how parents of academically successful parenting engage in 'active cultivation' and provide high quality home learning environments. Importantly, 'active cultivation' appears to explain why children from some disadvantaged families are still able to 'succeed against the odds'. This chapter speaks to these issues by looking in detail at family socialisation and how the parents of my interviewees attempted to promote their particular aspirations.

While I find this research 'good to think with', much of it is focused on differences between working- and middle-class families. However, my participants and their families do not fit neatly into either of these groups. Not only are many from ethnic minority

backgrounds, in important respects they occupy a place on social and economic boundaries: they are neither from the ‘traditional’ working classes nor from the professional middle classes. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that many had experiences of serious social disadvantage and lived in high poverty neighbourhoods. This picture is rendered even more complicated by the regular mismatch between the parents’ social class position and their levels of education: the latter was often higher than I expected, as was discussed in the previous chapter. As a result, there is no clear division between parents in my sample who engaged in concerted or active cultivation and those who adopted more of a natural growth strategy. What I find is a blend of approaches and styles that mixed elements from both; I would argue that many of the families in this study stood somewhere in between the natural growth model of parenting associated with working-class families and the concerted cultivation model of parenting associated with more middle-class families.

In the first part of this chapter I focus on what the occupational and educational aspirations of parent were reported to be. In the second part, I look at the specific ways in which parents attempted to mould the future of their children through a range of strategies: through adopting particular parenting styles, controlling interactions with peers, promoting particular ends as being desirable and generally shaping the rhythms of daily life. Although parents appeared to meet with some success in transmitting their aspirations it was not all one-way traffic: students were active participants in constructing their own trajectories and some actively rejected or contested their parents’ plans for them.

## **6.2 Parents’ educational and occupational aspirations**

In all of the interviews we talked about their parents’ backgrounds and also what sort of people they were; a particular area of focus was on what parents thought about their plans, and how involved they were in making educational and occupational choices. A wide range of students said that discussions about education, with a strong emphasis on pursuing higher education, were a common topic of conversation with their parents. Of

course, there was some variation in parental aspirations and the weight they attached to educational success. A small number of students said that their parents were not as enthusiastic about education (n=6), although they were not reported as being ‘anti’ education; there were also a number of parents who could be described as being particularly ‘pushy’ (n=9). For these parents not going to university was considered a highly undesirable outcome.

Most students reported that their parents attached importance to them doing well in school and wanted them to stay in the education system (n=17). Parents believed that university was not only available to those with the highest academic grades – average or even relatively low levels of academic achievement were not perceived as a barrier to pursuing higher education. Zaib, the daughter of a self-employed builder and a teaching assistant, described how her mother was enthusiastic without being pushy about her going to university, something that she herself had not achieved, ‘with my mum it’s ... “Education’s really important.”’ Zaib’s mother was actively involved in her choice of subjects and secondary school. Part of this enthusiasm stemmed from her mother’s own frustrated aspirations: ‘My mum always says, “I want you to live the life I never got, by going university and getting a degree and stuff”’. Michelle, a slightly more advantaged student whose parents ran a small business, spoke about her family context as being one in which education was promoted as being important:

I’ve always been brought up to value everything that I’ve been given and to sort of just be open-minded about education ... I listen to all the kind of music, and stuff like that.

Michelle contrasted her more middle-class family milieu, which valued education, with what she perceived to be more working-class cultural norms about not placing significant value on education. Similarly to Zaib, it was Michelle’s mother who was most involved in the education of her children. While not being explicitly ‘pushy’ she encouraged her daughter to look at prospectuses, went with her to open days and encouraged her to keep university as a goal when she wavered about wanting to attend.

A second group of parents ( $n=9$ ) were also reported to hold high aspirations but were less directly involved in guiding their children through the education system. What mattered most for them was that their children simply got an education; they were less concerned about the specific details. The impression these students gave was that their parents assumed that it was the school's responsibility to provide information and guidance about post-college plans. Abby, a seventeen-year-old male, originally from Afghanistan, described his father's views. Apart from general exhortations to study hard, 'He goes [his father] ... just do your education here, you know why you're here', Abby reported that his father had little to say about the content of his courses or the details of his post-college plans. Ismael, another male student, also discussed his family's desire for him to go to university; this wish was framed in very general terms. Ismael said about his parents, 'whatever I do ... I think they want me to go to uni. They want me to be able to provide for myself and not be living off the system'. So, within my sample there were parents who held high aspirations in conjunction with being actively engaged in the process of making post-college choices; and others who held high aspirations but were less actively involved in decision making. A possible source of this difference is that parents in the latter group had less familiarity with the UK education system and did not have the requisite knowledge to engage more actively with the education of their children. Thus, they were limited to providing practical support and encouragement.

There is also further heterogeneity in my sample: a group of parents were reported to hold particularly strong expectations and aspirations for their children to attend university ( $n=7$ ). Education was promoted as being absolutely essential to future success and not going to university would be interpreted as a failure by their parents. Youaude, a female student, whose mother had been to university said rather bluntly about her mother, 'My mum will not allow me not to go uni, so I have to go'. For Youaude, not going to university was made unthinkable by her mother: there was only one pathway she could consider. The parents of the more advantaged students, who had themselves been to university, had particularly strong desires for their children to go into higher education. This echoes my quantitative findings. One of the middle-class students, Chee, a young man with Chinese-Malay parents, talked about how his parents pushed him to

continue with his studies. He explained this as reflecting a particular cultural attitude that demanded high levels of educational achievement:

I think, Malaysia being an Asian country, the expectations are quite high ... and I think their parents push them to do that [to succeed at school].

His parents not only held high aspirations for him but carefully discussed with him possible options and tried to arrange work-experience placements. Kishan, another middle-class member of my sample, spoke in a similar way about what his parents wanted for him with regard to education:

My dad originally wanted me to be a science teacher like him, sort of be very academic and stuff ... Parents just sort of naturally want to help you, like tell you what to do sometimes.

Although his parents were comfortable with some degree of flexibility regarding what he studied at university, they were absolutely clear that they wanted him to attend. A clear pattern in my data is that parents who had been to university or were employed in more middle-class jobs had particularly strong preferences for their children to attend university. Superficially, their educational aspirations were very similar to the other parents' aspirations but the intensity with which they were held was distinctive.

In contrast, an even smaller number of students, perhaps two or three, reported that their parents were more ambivalent about them pursuing educational qualifications. Chris's parents fell into this latter category. According to Chris, his parents were relatively positive about him going to university but also presented a range of educational and occupational pathways as being open and valuable, including those that did not involve university. Neither of his parents had been to university – his father worked as a mechanic and his mother worked as an assistant manager in a retail store. Chris was planning to go to a local university to do a degree in nursing. His parents focused more on ideas of happiness and trusted him to 'make the right choice' for himself. He explained:

They're quite open-minded about it as well. They're comfortable as long as I like what I want to do in the future, if that makes sense. For example, if I wanted to be a rock-climber or a sky-diver in the future, they're fine about it, as long as I'm not being forced down that route.

This account suggests a relatively relaxed attitude to education in comparison to some of the students' parents; it is also different from middle-class parenting styles and culture which place a strong emphasis on higher education. Parents like Chris's hoped rather than expected that their children would do well at school. In theoretical terms, Chris's working-class parents appeared to adopt a natural growth model of parenting.

### **6.3 Ethnicity and gender**

When students discussed their parents' aspirations regarding education and jobs for them, it appeared they were strongly influenced by their ethnic identity and ideas about appropriate gender roles. Five students, all from ethnic minority backgrounds, stated that their parents wanted them to become doctors. Two female students reported this as a longstanding hope of their parents. Warda, who was taking a BTEC in Applied Science, said about her mother, 'She wants me to become a doctor. She's impossible, but yeah.' Adeofiola, who was taking the same course, said that her parents 'had it in mind that I was going to be a doctor, so they have been pushing me to that road of me being a doctor'. Despite pressure from her parents, she was not reaching the grades necessary to attend medical school. This was also true of Warda; this meant that their parents' aspirations were not sensitive to the reality of their child's academic achievement. Both said their parents struggled to adjust their expectations and they felt that this misalignment placed a great deal of pressure on them. My interview data showed that in addition to five students reporting that their parents wanted them to become doctors, seven students mentioned medicine as a possible career and a further four students said they had friends considering a career in this field. This equates to half of my sample making some kind of career reference to high status medical jobs. It seemed that parents' highly positive attitudes towards medicine shaped the aspirations of the young people I interviewed.

Yaseen, a highly successful male student, also said that his parents wanted him to become a doctor. He explained this preference in explicitly cultural terms, 'I think they would probably like me to do medicine, cos a lot of Asian people like to do that'. He argued that within 'Asian', and ethnic minority groups, there is often a great deal of status and respect accorded to doctors. Given the number of times medicine was discussed as a possible career it seems plausible that it carried a particular cultural meaning for members of my sample. Perhaps for many parents, being a doctor was the idealised successful career narrative that was available to them. Harding (2010), drawing on Schudson (1989), argues certain careers may carry 'cultural resonance reinforcing its perceived viability' (Harding 2010: 208). For the students I interviewed, being a doctor may be popular because there are a highly visible number of ethnic minority doctors and medical professionals in London. This may signal that it is an attainable career.

A number of female students (n=6) reported that their parents' occupational aspirations were closely connected to their ideas about appropriate gender roles. Several reported that their parents wanted them to go into 'respectable' jobs such as nursing or teaching; often this appeared bound up with concerns that their daughters would be able to get married at a young age. These traditional ideas about gender roles appeared to be related to their ethnic and religious identity and were particularly powerful in the lives of two young women from British-Pakistani backgrounds. A BTEC student, said about her mother's occupational preferences, 'My mum's always said, "Go into teaching ... Go into kids, I'm sure you'd be good with kids."' It seemed to be assumed that women would adopt responsibility for child care and running the family household; parental aspirations were therefore focused on jobs that would provide flexibility around parenthood. Fayza, who was the oldest student in my sample at almost 19, had lived in the UK for the last seven years. Through a painstaking process, she had learned English and progressed onto a Level 3 Applied Science course. She spoke about wanting to go university and become a nurse or midwife, both occupations that are dominated by women 'I really want to go university, maybe do Midwifery or something like that, Nursing, and just have a normal life.' Even though she had rather conventional aspirations, this was still unacceptable to her parents who wanted her to leave the

education system entirely. She reported that her parents' views on jobs were quite clear: she should not have one: 'I'm a girl, I should stay at home, cook, clean, get married rather than come to college, studying, working.' Although this was an extreme position for parents to take, it was still the case that a number of female students' parents wanted them to adopt traditional gender roles and to be employed in gender stereotypical occupations. Interestingly, rather than conforming to her parents' wishes, Fayza left home (with the support of her teachers), found a place to live and continued with her studies at college.

Parents' gendered aspirations, and the cultural processes associated with them, were brought into sharp focus by another female British-Pakistani student. Her dream was to join the air force and become a pilot. This interest had been sparked by joining the Cadets just prior to taking her GCSEs. Her parents disapproved of Cadets so she attended in secret; what they wanted for her was to have a respected job that carried social status within her cultural community. This links to the ideas discussed in the previous section, that parental aspiration leaned towards professional jobs such as medicine because of their social status:

in Pakistani culture, if your daughters or sons are ... doctors or teachers, everyone will think, 'Oh my God, they're really good,' like they're a good family.

They refused to accept her own aspirations of becoming a pilot and pushed her towards a more conventional job:

And she would [be] like, 'Yeah Maryam, when you get married, you're gonna be away from your family so many times. How you gonna have kids? How is this gonna happen? How is that gonna happen?' And it's just like ... 'why can't you become a teacher?', like she loves teachers.

Similarly to Fayza, and some of the other female students in my sample, family members had distinct views about what women should and should not do. Her mother was concerned that becoming a pilot was not socially respectable and would disadvantage her in finding a husband and raising a family. Having said all this, it is worth noting a number of the female students' parents did not hold such conservative attitudes towards gender roles. This suggests that attitudes regarding gender may have been in a state of

flux, where traditional and more progressive ideas about gender roles are both present (Modood 2004)

#### **6.4 Transmitting aspirations**

There were a range of overlapping processes that seemed to be significant for how parents tried to pass on their ambitions for education and employment. One of the most direct ways in which parents promoted education was to simply stress, on a regular basis, that education was important and worth investing in. Shelina, a female student said about her parents, 'But in terms of education and stuff, they do push me a lot, so it's ... education'. Parents were reported to emphasise, and perhaps exaggerate, the benefits of investing in education, and the underlying message was almost in zero-sum terms: if you got an education you made it in life; if you left school, you failed. Hisham, an A-level student, who wanted to study sports science at university, spoke about how his parents wanted him to go to university so he could get a good job:

Cos my parents, they want me to be different. They want me to work ... that's why they want me to get an education, to do something else. Something to do with my brain, where I can go and get money.

He told me that his parents regularly spoke with him about his career plans and were highly supportive of him applying to university. Toheeb, another male student, also commented that his parents underscored the potential benefits of attending. He listened closely to his parents and had other family members who had been to university and were now in employment:

I just keep listening to them [about] going to university like ... the positive things you do, you get from going to universities, like good jobs and that.

Both of these students' parents, and a large number of parents in my sample, were reported to adopt a 'human capital' approach to education: it was seen as an investment of resources that developed the right skills and capacities to flourish economically (Becker 1981). Although not all parents were reported as being as forceful in promoting the value, and particularly the economic value, of education, most parents at least implicitly endorsed the importance of investing in education. This was noticeable through their behaviours: helping with A-level choices, reading prospectuses, taking time

off work to attend open days, and making sure their children stayed on track by checking on homework completion. One student remarked, 'My parents like you know, they ask me, at least like once a week ... "Yeah, how's college going, how's uni [plans]?"' Bakhtawar, who was taking a BTEC in Applied Science and planning to become a nutritionist, talked about how her father's commitment to education could be seen through how he reassured her about debt: 'My dad says it's not your problem how I pay the fees. Your job is to study and study well'. Parents transmitted their aspirations, in part, by arguing for education as a normative and instrumental good. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that most appeared to have internalised some of their parents' aspirations as their own.

The parents of my interviewees believed in education. My focus here is not to examine if this faith was justified. What is pertinent is that parents based this faith on the belief that social mobility was a real possibility, and that the opportunity structure was open for their children in a way that it was not for them. However, the interview data suggests that students' parents did not assume this would be easy. Warda, whose family was originally from Tanzania, and who was being raised by her unemployed mother, drew attention to how her mother focused on the signalling benefits of higher education:

I know people look up to you. 'Oh she went to uni, she's got a degree, she's smart.' My mum's always going on at me about this, saying that, well, life has become tough nowadays, has changed, it's not like it used to be.

On the one hand, Warda's mother recognised that getting a job and achieving social mobility was hard. On the other hand, however, her mother also argued that if she worked hard, and got a good education, then success was down to her. Hard work was a particularly prized quality; half of the students cited this as an essential ingredient to success. A male student had taken this message on board, 'I need to work right now, so that it can pay off at university. Like if I do all the hard work right now, I think it'll benefit me'. Although parents and students thought that structural causes, such as poverty, mattered for the likelihood of achieving social advancement, they particularly stressed the importance of individual level traits.

Parents own exclusion from the labour market was also used to explain the aspirations they had for their children. A female student, Shannon, remarked that they wanted her to get a degree and a good job so she could have the things ‘they never had’. Ismael, a male A2 student, talked about his mother’s hope for the future: ‘My mum always says, “I want you to live the life I never got, by going university and getting a degree and stuff.”’ What is striking about the parents in my sample is that despite not achieving high levels of social mobility and educational attainment, they were not fatalistic about the future. Quite the opposite – the impression provided by the interviewees was that their parents were hopeful for the future and saw the UK as a place where their dreams for their children could be realised. They may have been unusually optimistic in comparison to other disadvantaged groups.

Partly, this hope was situated in the immigrant experience. As I have suggested at several points so far, this optimism may also be reflective of the social make-up of the ‘new East End’ (Butler and Hamnett 2011). I would argue that this theoretical backdrop offers a useful way of making sense of at least some of the high aspirations expressed by parents and their families in this chapter. An undeniable feature of my data is that many parents were reported to believe that upward mobility and entry into professional jobs was a viable option for their children, although they also recognised a range of barriers. I would argue that my data is broadly consistent with the arguments of Butler and Hamnett (2011). However, an important caveat should also be noted – this was also not straightforwardly just an immigrant narrative – white-British students from more working-class backgrounds also remained positive about the future.

Parents’ optimism about the future appeared to be reflected in many of the students’ desire to achieve socio-economic advancement. Rather than expressing occupational aspirations that reflected the class or labour market position of their parents, the overwhelming majority of students spoke of wanting jobs that would be higher in the occupational structure. Toheeb, a male student originally from Nigeria, embodied the thinking of most of the students when we discussed the future:

Toheeb: Probably like, when I'm older, probably have like a decent job, look after my family, and my mum and that. Yeah, pretty much be in a better position than my mum, right now ... Cos it has to be like that, cos I can't be earning the same money as my mum ... That's not it man, that's not the way forward.

Toheeb's mother had a degree and worked as a special educational needs teacher. However, his comments seemed to be broadly representative of the social mobility goals of the other students, even those who had experienced greater economic deprivation. This raises a challenge to existing theories which stress that disadvantaged students focus largely on achieving occupational outcomes that reflect their parents' social class. These perspectives fail to do justice to the levels of optimism and ambition reflected in my sample

## **6.5 Parenting practices**

Parents did not simply try to persuade their children that attending university was a good idea. They deliberately adopted a range of attitudes and practices that they thought would encourage educational success; parenting behaviours were therefore important in understanding how parents promoted high aspirations. Aspirations were reinforced and transmitted through imposing standards of behaviour, with a particular focus on the importance of hard work. Parents were reported to engage in assertive and interventionist parenting practices; this meant enforcing attendance at school, making sure homework was completed, and setting rules about how time at home could be spent. Many of the interviewees acknowledged that their parents adopted such an approach to parenting. One student reflected on her father's role in the household, 'He likes to be the boss. Even in my house, it's like he ... checks, ticks off every little thing, like banks, everything'. Rubel, who grew up in a single parent household headed by his mother, explained about her approach to parenting:

She was very strict of the people around. And I realise now why is she being strict. And I realised that my friends' mums were very lenient. They would let them go out, come back late, stuff like that. And I realised the difference, after a while you realise.

He credited his mother with keeping him focused on college and not spending too much time in the local neighbourhood. Rubel explained that she tried to instil in him the

importance of hard work and to avoid peer groups that might distract him from his studies; he went on to explain how he thought it had paid off – he had done well in his AS exams and was now applying to Russell Group universities. The comments of numerous students suggested that assertive parenting was connected to parents' desire to promote educational success which could be achieved if the right individual dispositions were cultivated.

Within my sample there was also variation in parenting styles. Not all parents adopted such an approach. Many students reported that their parents were supportive without being domineering; they struck a balance between letting them decide for themselves while still providing support and guidance. Interestingly, several of the more advantaged students' parents, who possessed more cultural capital, gave the impression that their parents adopted a more permissive approach to parenting: they stressed the importance of education and employment but the students reported being encouraged to make their own choices and focus on personal fulfilment. A plausible explanation for this difference is that middle-class parents were more likely to take it for granted that their children would invest in education without direct pressure from them (Devine 2004). The presence of economic, social and cultural resources that provided educational advantage may have rendered adopting a stricter parenting style less necessary.

Conversely, parents in my sample who had fewer resources at their disposal may have stressed discipline and hard work particularly strongly because of the absence of other resources. Across the interviews, I found that parents who exclusively focused on hard work and strict parenting were less likely to have knowledge and experience of the UK education system. This had consequences for how effectively they could transmit high aspirations to their children and give them the guidance they needed to bring them to fruition. Several of the students mentioned that while their parents wanted them to do well at college, work hard, and one day go to university, they did not understand the processes involved. Ahsan, who wanted to study medicine after his A-levels, explained that he could not talk to his parents about university:

Not my parents that much cos they never went to university, so they're not ... they don't really know about UCAS, they don't really know what you need for certain subjects, like for certain areas you might need work experience or like they don't know if it makes sense, they don't know about university as a whole.

Winifred spoke about how frustrating it was that her mother could not support her in making effective educational choices because she did not understand the various options available to her, 'My mum doesn't get it so I don't talk to her, no'. Parents like Ahsan's and Winifred's, while doing what they could to nurture their children's educational goals, could not give the more specific advice that their children needed. This offers further support to Lareau's (2011) claim that non-middle-class students are at a distinct disadvantage because they lack the knowledge necessary to successfully navigate through the education system. Fortunately, for students like this in my sample, the college provided an overlapping network of support and advice. However, a worry is that the advice of tutors would not provide the same level of advantage as having parents who could take a more hands-on approach to educational decision making. In my sample, there was a clear difference between parents who could provide concrete advice and those that provided more abstract moral support.

## **6.6 Peer groups, neighbourhoods and networks**

Students regularly commented on their parents' concerns in two important areas: peer groups and neighbourhoods. A range of students reported that their parents took steps to ensure that they did not mix with the 'wrong' peer groups and spend time in risky neighbourhood environments. This was achieved through imposing curfews, driving them to social events, insisting they spend time at home and screening prospective friends. Michelle explained that her mother did not impose a curfew but insisted, 'Just don't go out on your own'. Another talked about how he understood why his parents imposed a curfew and why they were worried about him spending time in the local neighbourhood. He provided an almost stylised model of how young people get involved in gang culture:

Yeah, I think sometimes people, they don't have a curfew with their parents, and they can just stay out the whole time. They stay out and then other people stay out, and they all start staying out. And there's like the generation of teenagers and there's older people in their late teens and twenties, and they're like the gangsters from the previous generation. And the new generation will get to know the old generation, like the whole gang.

By limiting time spent in local neighbourhoods and encouraging students to spend time at home, parents could more easily monitor behaviour; it could also help them protect their children from what they might perceive as undesirable neighbourhood influences. Although not explicitly justified in terms of promoting educational success, it was still tied to parents' strategies for making sure they were 'on the right track' which meant focusing on college and preparing for university entrance. Only a couple of students gave the impression that their parents did not impose certain rules on how they spent their time. A female student spoke about intense levels of family organisation that ensured virtually no time was spent in the local neighbourhood:

But all of us, we have to be home before 10 o'clock. At home, no matter what ... My dad doesn't allow me going out at that time of night. He drives me to college and sometimes he has to come and pick me up when I'm too late. Or else my cousin or my brother, he comes and picks me up.

As the above quote makes clear, she was limited in her social interactions outside of her dense family ties; she was expected to go to school and return home and be almost always under supervision. While at times these conditions could be stifling, it also served to protect students from some of the negative realities of living in high poverty neighbourhoods; it also meant they had strong attachments to family members.

By being able to monitor and control patterns of social interaction outside of the home, parents were able to promote their plans for the social and educational success of their children. There were also social contexts outside of the family that appeared to support parents in transmitting high aspirations to their children. A quarter of my sample also talked about parents being involved in community associations such as the local church or mosque. Similarly to research conducted on working-class families by Horvat et al. (2003), I found that extended networks of family and friends offered resources that could be drawn upon. This was noticeable around childcare but also extended to advice

regarding careers and education. For example, Shelina, who lived in Tower Hamlets, an ethnic enclave dominated by the Bengali community, spoke about how her mother drew on her wider connections:

Basically there's a lot of family member around. Not family, but family friends and all that. For example, cos if one of us is sick and my mum's not here, we can just go to one of our family friends.

These connections proved invaluable to Shelina's mother because her husband had died several years earlier. A range of other students also spoke about how family friends played an active part in their lives and talked to them about school.

Such social ties reinforced the idea, or social norm, that holding high aspirations, going to university and performing well academically, was important. This was because parents were concerned with the social status that could be derived from having educationally successful children. Social norms are enforced through the way communities reward or sanction the behaviour of individuals. This involves issues to do with social status, and has an emotional dimension in that feelings of pride, respect and shame are often essential to how social norms operate (Elster 2007; Sayer 2005). Two students were particularly insightful on these issues; both spoke about their parents' concern that they do well because of what people in their wider communities would think:

I don't know, it's just every single thing comes down to his status and his respect. Like even at uni, he's always like, 'You have to do something that's good, cos then other people, they're gonna be like, "Your daughter's doing this", or "Your daughter's doing that."'

Ahsan: Education...it represents you as well. If someone is a doctor, everyone would be like, 'This person, he looks qualified. Obviously he's a doctor, so he must be really smart.' Whereas if you just work as, I don't know, you're just like a bathroom cleaner or something in a local store, you won't get like ... some people won't think you're qualified or anything.

Middle-class occupations, which could be achieved only through obtaining a university degree, were stressed as carrying the most prestige. They signalled respectability. Ahasan believed that entering into a working-class occupation would carry with it a negative social judgement. Not being academically successful could easily be a source of embarrassment, a failure not only of the child but also of the parent; achieving qualifications acted as a marker of 'successful' parenting. This added an extra layer of

pressure for some of the students who were expected to go to university. It was through these broader social relations and concerns that parents were able to transmit high aspirations and a positive disposition towards education. It may also help explain why many parents, particularly the parents of ethnic minority students, encouraged their children to make traditional decisions regarding choice of subjects and careers.

For example, most of the students I interviewed wanted to study a subject that was 'practical' in focus such as medicine or nursing and would give what they thought would be for them the best chance of getting a job afterwards. It is also important to draw attention to what is not being chosen. Not a single student was considering taking a degree in the 'traditional' humanities or social sciences such as English, history, philosophy, political science, sociology or economics. Although the profile of my students may imply a degree of self-selection away from these subjects it is still striking that these subjects were entirely absent from their discussion of degree subject choice. There may be a partly cultural explanation for this – parents placed a strong emphasis on medicine and law because of their high social status within certain communities – especially south-Asian communities. Several students commented on the pressure to pursue these sorts of careers. This may create disincentives or even sanctions for those taking subjects in the humanities which lack the same prestige (in some cultural contexts). The humanities and social sciences may also be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as risky choices because they are not obviously tied to a particular career. Conversely, more applied subjects were perceived as being the best way of ensuring employability once they had left university and entered the labour market. A further plausible explanation is that humanities-based subjects may be perceived as being unwelcoming subjects for non-traditional, ethnic minority groups.

## **6.7 Parents, debts and choices**

Family life creates strong emotional bonds between its members and is often hierarchical in nature; parents, for the most part, have more power and authority than their children. This leads to the emergence of reciprocal duties and obligations. As such, there are often

strong expectations of appropriate behaviour. In the case of education, parents often draw on these ideas, and closely adjacent ones, to shape behaviour and instil the motivation to invest in education. Some everyday examples may bring this into focus. We can easily imagine situations where parents encourage their children to pursue education because 'it will make your family proud' or because 'we do so much for you'. These types of arguments can easily be used to promote an achievement orientation and high aspirations.

This could be seen in my sample when students' discussion of the future was tied up with a narrative of parental sacrifice and that they 'owed it' to their parents to do well at school (n=5). The presence of a sense of duty and obligation towards parents proved very effective in promoting high aspirations and a strong work ethic. For example, Hisham whose family was originally from Uganda, talked about his parents hopes that he would have a successful career and the sacrifices they had made to give him the chance of a better life in the UK:

My parents want something from me, so they have done so much for me, to be here, that means a lot. So I have to pay back, it's like a pay back to them. I know you can't pay your parents back, but to me I take it as a favour, so I have to do something to make them happy.

His plans to go to university seemed to be tied to his sense of duty towards his parents. His father had not been able to secure a well-paid job but accepted his relatively low social status in the UK on the grounds that a good education would benefit his children. Hisham did not see his parents' expectation as an imposition but something he wanted to do so he could 'pay them back'. Going to university was his way of keeping his end of the 'opportunity bargain' with his parents. This provided him with a strong sense of motivation to focus on his studies and try and live up to the aspirations his parents had for him. A female student reported something similar:

Adefiola: Sacrifices. The reason he is in this country is because of us. Because he wants us to have a better life than he has, and he thinks that by doing that, he's stayed in this country to encourage us to do that.

Both Hisham's and Adefiola's comments showed how ideas about responsibility towards their parents worked in motivating them to invest in education and hold high aspirations.

Parents were not the only family members that contributed to the transmission of high aspirations. Siblings, aunts and uncles were also important. This was particularly the case for students whose parents either had not been to university at all or lacked a detailed understanding of how the UK education system operated. Thus, the family could still often act as a resource for students even when parents didn't have the skills or the knowledge to provide advice regarding education. A number of students mentioned family members that effectively functioned as 'high status role models' (Archer and Francis 2006). They served a useful function for my interviewees because they signalled that family members with broadly the same set of characteristics had been educationally successful and were therefore able to support parents in transmitting ambitious goals. A moderately successful student, who was under quite intense parental pressure to attend university, spoke about how her successful family members influenced her mother's attitude towards her university subject choices:

My second cousin is a doctor, and his sister is a lawyer. My uncle ... he has his own businesses. A lot of them do business... I don't talk to them. My mum just tells them, and they're like, 'No, can't do that.'

This influence was therefore at one step removed but no less powerful. Her mother placed a great deal of weight on their views because they were both family members and successful. For more middle-class students, family and broader social ties could be used not only to shape but also to realise aspirations. Typically this is because middle-class parents use contacts to gain advice about careers, information about job openings and provide experience in fields through internships (Devine 2004). Chee, a solidly middle-class member of my sample, told me about how his close family members took an active interest in his education and career:

So, I guess, my business auntie, she's like the one who really pushes us with school work and university, and even stuff outside like she is ... come round, asking her friends and people in business she knows, for like a summer job for me, sort of thing.

Chee's auntie not only encouraged him to hold ambitious aspirations but sought to provide him with opportunities and experiences that will set him apart in the labour market and help him realise his aspirations. Even though he was more interested in a career in computing rather than business, he still recognised that this type of work

experience was, 'something good to put on the CV'. These sources of advantage are systematically less present for children from high poverty and working-class backgrounds. Students in my sample whose parents had not been to university or were not employed in more professional occupations were less likely to mention these types of useful family contacts.

### **6.8 Parents and university**

It was clear from my interviews that parents and family life had a major impact on the decisions that my interviewees made. They shaped the sorts of universities they considered applying to, courses of study, possible careers and the sort of life they wanted to lead. The majority of students who spoke about wanting to apply to university made only small distinctions between the statuses of universities that they would consider applying to. The higher achieving students were more likely to draw attention to the status hierarchies of universities and distinguish between Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities. Few parents were reported to place a high premium on attending high status institutions. A number of students were aware of how this might shape their life chances; for example, one of the male students talked about how the type of university people attended shaped their employment prospects:

Rubel: It depends what uni you go to. People say nowadays you get degrees and you know, they don't get a job. I was thinking about it, and I was thinking, that's right, people do get degrees and they don't get a job. But I was thinking, what uni do they go to? And what grade did they get at the uni. For example, if you're gonna go to Oxford, and you get like a 2:1 from Oxford, I'll be so surprised if you don't get a job.

However, comments such as this were relatively infrequent. The most common response was that it was simply getting a degree that really mattered and that the type of institution was of very minor significance. The lack of emphasis on institutional type may be associated with the fact that most students came from backgrounds with less knowledge of the higher education system than middle-class families who may be more aware of the importance of such distinctions (Reay et al. 2005). Thus, a striking absence in my interviews was that parents were reported to pay little attention to the *type* of university they wanted their children to apply to.

When we discussed their educational aspirations and the possibility of attending higher education, what was salient was not the prestige of the university but the proximity of the institution to their home and family. The importance of choosing a 'local' university was a central organising principal for their educational aspirations. This supports existing research that suggests students from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds are far more likely than middle-class students to choose universities that reduce the amount of distance, social and geographic, that they may have to travel (Crozier et al. 2008). This was reflected in their educational aspirations: London-based universities were commonly discussed as likely destinations. This was a further important way in which family mattered for my interviewees.

The predominance of comments regarding 'going local' when students discussed possible universities draws attention to how class, ethnicity and gender interacted in shaping their educational aspirations. The reason for considering universities close to home was a mixture of trying to save money, pressure from parents and wanting to maintain their existing cultural and social ties. Only three students spoke of wanting to move relatively long distances in order to attend university. Yaseen, a successful A2 student remarked, 'I'd prefer to stay at home, cos like, it'll be cheaper. Like you get home-cooked food and don't have to worry'. He thought that 'on campus it might be fun, socially and stuff', but that the advantages of staying at home outweighed those of moving onto campus. Chris, an A2 student who was going to undertake a nursing degree, was representative of many of the students' concerns with minimising the cost of higher education:

WB: Can you tell me more about how you came to choose the universities?

Chris: Again, based on proximity to my house, cos I'm really into the idea of economising again, if I want to start a family so financial stability, and as I said, I recently bought a car, so I'm trying to save up for insurance during summer as well.

He intended to commute to university so he could stay at home in order to save money. Chris's desire to reduce the amount of debt incurred through attending university was often shared by other students I interviewed. There were five students who made explicit reference to concerns about top-up fees and over half of the students were worried

about the overall costs of pursuing a university degree. For example, Hisham, a male A-level student remarked, 'I don't want to live with a loan, cos I'm not secure when I have the loan. It's on my mind every time'. These concerns were much more prominent for students who came from families with few financial resources. For students like Chris, their aspirations and decisions were conditioned by a lack of resources, a strong aversion to debt, and a desire to maintain strong family ties.

Decisions to attend institutions were also influenced by gender. For the female students deciding to 'go local' was more to do with cultural constraints and parental pressure rather than simply a lack of financial resources. Some of the female students reported that it was expected of them to stay at home and that moving away from the family home was simply not an option:

Maryam: I've applied to Brunel. I've got all my offers from Brunel, Greenwich, Westminster and Hertfordshire. But my Dad doesn't want me going Brunel, because it's far. That's the main reason.

Female students, particularly those from religious families, were restricted in the educational choices that they could make when compared to their male counterparts. This stemmed in part from strong assumptions about traditional gender roles and appropriate social contexts for young women to be exposed to. This was not simply a case of 'adaptive preference' formation (Elster 2007), where female students accepted that their options were curtailed. Several female students tried to subtly challenge these gender norms and were often curious to experience life on a university campus.

## **6.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored the relationships between aspiration and family life. The family, I have argued, was of central importance in understanding the interviewees' aspirations. What is clear is that parent-child relations were important to the students' educational plans and choices. Aspirations were strongly shaped by the cultural and social life of the family; they were also shaped through strict parenting styles that protected their children from unwanted neighbourhood effects. It appeared that some

differences in parents' aspirations, and their ability to transmit them, stemmed from differences to do with religious identity and the availability of financial, cultural and social goods. Lareau's (2011) and Siraj and Mayo's (2014) important work on parents and parenting practices has provided a useful analytical framework for making sense of the aspirations of my participants. Although their work is not focused explicitly on aspirations, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the analytical tools they offer can fruitfully be applied in this domain.

The findings in this chapter raise some further interesting issues in relation to the existing literature. An important and robust finding is that working- and middle-class families have different home environments and engage in different parenting styles. Typically, this is characterised as middle-class parents engaging in concerted cultivation and working-class parents following a natural growth model of parenting. Both of these approaches seem to present in my sample. I would argue that members of sample stand in between these two worlds; there seems to be a blend of approaches to parenting and education. This may be because many of my interviewees occupy a position at the intersection of class and social boundaries – they are, for the most part, neither traditional working-class nor middle-class students, although some are. I would argue that this goes some way to explaining their aspirations but also why few had the resources many middle-class families take for granted. As such, Siraj and Mayo's distinction between 'active' and 'concerted cultivation is useful here. I return to these issues into the discussion chapter in a more detailed analysis of how my data relates to the secondary literature.

# Chapter 7

## In search of security

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I shift my analytical focus. I examine how and why the students I interviewed thought about the future in the way they did. In doing so, I adopt a more interactionist approach, that is, I argue that their aspirations can be understood if we focus on how they were sustained and developed through the meaning that students attached to them. I therefore begin to answer the third of my qualitative research questions: what meaning do educational aspirations have for the students I interviewed? By focusing on the meaning-making process and how students made sense of their lives, I continue to develop a richly textured, ‘thick description’ of their aspirations (Geertz 1993).

The data I presented in the previous chapter revealed that parents tried to transmit high aspirations to their children. They believed that obtaining educational qualifications was the best way for them to secure social mobility and were optimistic about the future. In this chapter, I want to qualify this claim somewhat and argue that in addition to optimism there was also a sense of uncertainty, as well as a sense of being faced with risks. My interviewees were cautiously optimistic, sensitive to the challenges they faced, and aware that a desire to achieve social mobility had to be coupled with a pragmatic concern with preserving their current economic situation.

I argue that the meaning students attached to their aspirations was tied up with their ideas about social mobility in general and a desire to avoid social disadvantage in particular. I show that the majority of students held a particular orientation to the future

– I call this an ‘achieving security’ orientation. This can be thought of as an overarching cognitive framework within which students organised their potential decisions and actions regarding the future. It was composed of experiences, beliefs and attitudes that formed part of what cultural sociologists would call a frame or worldview (Harding 2010; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008; Wilson 2009). By an achieving security orientation, I mean a desire to eliminate financial hardship and negative experiences associated with socio-economic disadvantage; their desire to avoid these experiences helped to explain their educational and occupational aspirations.

This orientation was patterned by social background. It was particularly salient for disadvantaged students, and those who had experienced poverty, but less so for students from more advantaged backgrounds. However, my focus is on how this disposition was broadly shared across my sample rather than on differences between groups. I argue that this provides a useful heuristic for understanding how social experience shapes aspirations. I also make a stronger claim: this orientation was motivationally important for how students approached decisions regarding education, the labour market and family formation. I begin this chapter by briefly discussing research not commonly drawn on in education research and the sociology of education in the UK; I do so because it offers helpful resources for making sense of aspirations. My argument is partly fashioned through a synthesis of work from social psychology and recent scholarship in the field of urban poverty; these distinct fields have areas of conceptual overlap that support my analysis. First, they share a focus on how social situations and interactions shape values, preferences and decisions. Second, they all make a contribution to our understanding of how conditions of scarcity and socio-economic disadvantage influence how people think about the future. They offer support to my argument that achieving security was central to how many of the students in this study thought about the future. Thus, part of the distinctiveness of my analysis is the way I bring these previously unconnected findings together into an overarching analysis of aspirations.

The majority of students I interviewed had experienced some form of social and economic disadvantage. Although there were a few advantaged, middle-class students in my sample, they were a relatively small minority. My interview data suggests that these background experiences shaped their sense of self and produced a distinctive psychological orientation to the future and decision making. The idea that conditions of material scarcity produce a distinctive psychology has become the focus of innovative new research in social psychology; it has been argued that experiences associated with poverty mean that disadvantaged populations are likely to understand the world around them in terms of uncertainty, threats and the need to be vigilant in the face of continual challenges to their well-being and sense of personal security (Fiske and Markus 2012; Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). Middle-class children, who have a range of resources and support structures available to them, are much more likely to have an understanding of the world as ordered and controllable (Atkinson 2013). Complementary points have been made by scholars examining how students from differing class backgrounds evaluate risk differently (Jackson 2007). There is some overlap here with the social-psychological literature on self-regulation and people's ability to plan for the future. In this chapter, I bring these insights together and apply them to the study of aspirations.

My analysis of students' aspirations draws on the work by Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) and Young Jr (2004). These American scholars have made important contributions to the study of urban poverty and their research is complementary to the social-psychological literature above. Both scholars have examined the relationship between social background and orientations to the future, including aspirations, and the idea of security. Sanchez-Jankowski's multi-sited ethnography of deprived neighbourhoods in New York and Los Angeles offers a cultural analysis of life in poor neighbourhoods. He argues that two distinct value orientations to life are present. One focuses on excitement and the pursuit of pleasure. The second focuses on 'maximizing security'. He argues that in this orientation:

The individual seeks to live his or her life in a way that will maximize financial security and reduce economic hardship, personal injury and physical discomfort. The result is a more guarded and measured lifestyle focused on employment, saving money and staying out of harm's way. (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008: 20)

He argues that such a value orientation is central to understanding the behaviour of many people who live in high-poverty neighbourhoods. He claims that this orientation provides a set of values that helps people to define what they 'should' or 'shouldn't' do; he also argues that it is deeply connected to how people come to understand what counts as responsible or irresponsible behaviour (ibid: 18). This orientation therefore has an important normative dimension. Interestingly, he holds that the 'maximizing-security' orientation is not connected to a particular class but is shared by many of the participants living in the neighbourhoods he studies. He argues that the 'maximizing-security' orientation shapes behaviours, interpersonal relationships and orientations to the future such as desires and dreams (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008: 23-24).

Young Jr's study of disadvantaged African-American men in Chicago engages in a similar style of analysis. However, his focus is more squarely on how these men understand their life chances and their educational and occupational aspirations. Similarly to Sanchez-Jankowski, he argues that in making sense of their occupational aspirations it is necessary to 'understand that this search for security and stability stand at the centre of their attitudes to work' (Young Jr 2004: 173). This reflected a desire to achieve what they currently did not have 'a sense of autonomy, power and material comfort' (Young Jr 2004: 160). For both of these scholars, people's aspirations are conditioned by their experience of socio-economic disadvantage in the family and the local neighbourhood. As far as I am aware, this is the first time that this research from the U.S urban poverty literature has been used as a framework to make sense of the aspirations and future orientations of students in the UK.

In this chapter, I draw on the interrelated literatures just discussed and make the following argument: the majority of students focused on achieving security and comfort because of their experience of material scarcity and socio-economic disadvantage. However, these structural conditions *shaped* rather than *determined* their orientations to the future. Rather than adopting all the theoretical architecture associated with the literature above, I simply retain the core idea that achieving security underpinned the majority of my interviewee's educational and occupational aspirations. It was a key goal they wanted

to achieve that shaped how they approached decisions regarding education and the labour market. Although this argument is informed by the literature above it was not imposed by it. Instead, it emerged as a major theme from my ongoing analysis of the data. I do not adopt Sanchez-Jankowski's terminology of 'maximizing security' but opt for 'achieving security' as an orientation to the future. I avoid using 'maximizing security' because it would give the impression that this underpinned *all* of the students' aspirations and choices. While this was a central concern for the students I interviewed it was not as all-encompassing a framework as Sanchez-Jankowski's term implies. And, as I noted in the previous chapter, this was also coupled with a sense of optimism about the future.

## **7.2 An emergent theme**

As my analysis progressed it became clear that many of the students shared very similar concerns such as being able to provide for their families; not struggling to pay bills; wanting to have enough money to enjoy some small luxuries; and concerns about being unemployed. Students often used phrases such as 'wanting things to be stable'; 'not having restrictions'; not having to 'struggle' and 'fight' or just 'get by'. For the students these seemed to be variations on the same theme – one that I have called achieving security. Almost two-thirds (n=17) of the students I interviewed spoke directly on these issues. There were over 50 references to this theme.

## **7.3 Background experiences**

In making the case that achieving security was central to how many of the students thought about the future it is necessary to keep in view the social and economic circumstances in which they lived. As the previous chapters make clear, the majority lived in disadvantaged neighbourhoods – some in the most economically deprived neighbourhoods in the country. Although I have presented evidence and argued that many members of my sample occupied an intermediate class position – not at risk of

high levels of social exclusion or poverty but far from being middle-class – it was still the case that many had experienced social and economic disadvantage. Furthermore, given the employment and class profile of the students' parents it was unsurprising that many of them were struggling financially even if their parents were working. Many were regularly exposed to social deprivation and conditions of scarcity in the home and surrounding neighbourhoods.

Students often described such environments as being characterised by uncertainty and as highly stressful. We know from research that high levels of stress have adverse effects on health and on our decision-making capacities (Tough 2013). It should hardly be surprising that an underlying goal was to avoid material and psychological hardship. A wide range of students provided first-hand accounts of either living in poverty, being exposed to high poverty neighbourhoods such as those around the college, or had close social connections to those experiencing significant levels of social and economic deprivation. Some students had to make financial contributions to their household. One student commented:

Shannon: I was just looking for a job, cos I really needed the money. Obviously my grandparents are surviving on their pension. And I hardly see my mum, really, and I want to help out as much as I can, with my family.

Another student stated bluntly that his inability to form concrete plans about the future stemmed from of the immediacy of the challenges he was facing:

Awais: Well, right now I'm surviving.

His plans and ability to realise them were restricted by the pressures and practicalities of everyday life which constrained his capacity to see far beyond his current situation. A male student planning to go to university spoke about the psychological costs of growing up in poverty:

Rubel: I've realised, for example, you're young, everyone has new toys and stuff and that, and you're the only kid who doesn't have a toy. You feel a bit left out. I'm not saying like ... of course I'm grateful, I'm happy, I'm content. Like with what my mum's done, she's tried her best. You can't complain, how can you?

Being aware of and observing differences in parental expenditure on goods led to feelings of status inferiority. Although not many of the students had to support their

families as Shannon did, or reported feelings of social and financial exclusion like Rubel, many of the students I spoke with regularly expressed concerns about their families having insufficient money and resources.

Students' discussion of disadvantage was often related to their home environment and local neighbourhood. Several students made direct reference to the fact that they lived in very overcrowded houses, often with multiple siblings in the same bedroom, and that the houses themselves were in poor condition. A female AS student explained that:

Warda: The building that I live in is terrible ... There's no double-glazing so it's really cold, and it doesn't help that we have floorboards instead of carpets. So it gets really cold, like during the night, and I just wanna get into my bed, I don't want to get out of bed, don't wanna do no work.

This report of poor quality living conditions was not isolated; four other students spoke about how cramped and often cold housing interfered with their capacity to study. The conditions just outside the home were also a concern for students. Graffiti on walls and broken glass and rubbish bags on the street were all discussed as signs of social disorder that affected the quality of their local environment. James, a white working-class student talked about how public drug consumption was common on his estate when he was growing up, 'loads of the idiots on the estate used to kind of stay in that place anyway, smoking weed, whatever they used to do'. These physical and social markers were discussed as reducing the quality of life in the local neighbourhood. For some of the participants, especially the female students, they were sometimes reported as being threatening. This led to less time being spent in the local neighbourhoods and made some more cautious about interacting with strangers. As I argued in the previous chapter, parents made deliberate attempts to regulate their child's interactions with the local neighbourhood.

A majority (n=15) of students who adopted achieving security as an important goal came from highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. These spaces have distinct patterns of social interaction that are radically different from solidly middle-class areas of the city. A

female student commented on the social dislocation and crime that characterised the neighbourhood she lived in:

Bakhtawar: Like a guy, a young boy, he was killed down near our house, just cos there was another guy who had a knife on him, and he goes to him like, 'Give me your phone.' He had a blackberry on him. And he refused to give it him, and he got killed there. On the spot.

Drugs, violence and various types of low level crime were common in these neighbourhoods. Roughly three-quarters of the students had either direct experience of being mugged or had a family member who had. This meant that students adopted a series of informal rules about how they moved through the urban landscape such as walking around estates, avoiding certain roads and developing a sensitive awareness of potential threats as they moved from place to place. Observing and experiencing neighbourhood disadvantage created a strong desire for some students to move away from their home neighbourhoods in the future.

#### **7.4 Achieving security, avoiding poverty**

What was striking across the interviews was the importance attached to a range of concepts, claims and phrases that I have labelled 'achieving security'. This was how they framed their goals for social mobility and they thought it would be achieved through investing in education. The desired final destination, that would provide security, was a salaried job in the lower-middle and professional classes. Seventeen students made reference to these issues. For the students, achieving security meant having a stable home environment, being able to support ones family, not experiencing the stress associated with poverty and having sufficient resources to enjoy some minor luxuries. A student who grew up on a local housing estate was particularly concerned about providing for his family:

Muzzy: Secure and happy, well it's different from now, my aim for when I'm at least thirty is to at least have a proper stable ... know what, I will never have a stable job but at least enough money to support a family, wife and kids, because you know I kind of wanna have that at least when you're thirty.

Another student remarked on what she wanted in the future:

Asma: I'd like a stable career and like you know ... Earn enough to provide for myself and probably my family.

This achieving security orientation was tied up with notions of family, career and personal fulfilment. The desire to achieve security appeared to reflect some of the things that were currently absent from their lives and stemmed, in part, from a desire to lessen uncertainty and risk.

The students' vision of the 'good life' reflected what many of us would consider the minimal requirements for well-being – a sense of control, not feeling anxious about paying the bills and having some material comforts. A range of other students focused on the importance of minimising uncertainty and not having to expend cognitive energy worrying about every small expense. This was reflected in multiple students' comments about not wanting to always be 'struggling' or 'just surviving'. Underpinning much of these discussions regarding the future was an awareness of how stability and security would help them achieve their goals and would also be a product of realising them. A male AS level student, who was raised alone by his mother, commented on how growing up in a high poverty environment made him feel:

Rubel: But I don't want my kids to like feel, be the kid that's been left out with the toy, or feel like I'm not there for them. I don't know, it's a personal experience. How do I say? When one guy has all the nice clothes. I don't want my kid to feel left out, basically. I want them to be proud, I want them to be the same.

Similarly, Michelle a BTEC student remarked on her fears on not having adequate financial resources:

Michelle : One of my fears is not having, like not having enough money to sort of keep bills going, and sort of living out on my own, and having to live in a hostel or something, and it's not because I find that disgusting or anything, just a personal reason. I wouldn't want to put myself in that situation because it's horrible in a psychological way, not just you know, 'Oh, they're dirty, they don't you know ... eugh, look, tramps,' and that sort of stuff.

What both of these passages have in common is that they focus on the negative psychological consequences of living under conditions of material scarcity. Importantly, they both reflect a concern with the negative evaluations they feel other people would

make of their lives because of their lack (or imagined lack) of financial resources. Thus, avoiding poverty was also about avoiding negative social judgements that may induce feelings of shame or embarrassment (Lamont 2000; Sayer 2005). These concerns were also reflected in the importance students attached to social status and respect when talking about their occupational aspirations.

## 7.5 Security and educational aspirations

The desire to substantially increase feelings of security and control over their lives was tied to their educational aspirations; they generally assumed that obtaining educational qualifications would help them achieve these goals; they understood qualifications as insurance against poverty and uncertainty. The students acted on the basis of a set of beliefs and assumptions, more formally a *theory*, about the role education played in the social mobility process. There was a clear sense that they appreciated how educational qualifications are related to increased opportunities:

Hisham: I think you don't really go anywhere now without a degree.

Youaude: Don't you have more job opportunities? You do. Like someone that doesn't have a degree ... I know you can be overqualified, but ... I don't know, I think it's just better, to be honest.

These conventional beliefs were central to how the students thought about their educational choices. Very few students thought they would be as economically successful without a degree and questioned the utility of gaining further qualifications.

Such assumptions were based on the belief that achieving an undergraduate degree would improve their chances of getting a well-paid job. It would do so by distinguishing themselves from non-degree holders who they believed they would be competing against in the labour market. Almost all students, irrespective of their economic background, linked their aspirations to what they believed were the benefits of obtaining an undergraduate degree and the economic costs of having few formal qualifications. They stressed how qualifications would help them get good jobs and would place them at a distinct advantage over those that left education without a university degree. A small

sample of responses should be sufficient to underline this point. Two female students explained about the value of having a degree:

Adefiola: It's a bonus. If you have that education, it gives you that security that you will do well. I'm not saying that if you don't have that education you won't do well, but it has that security that gives you a bonus, an extra star, that you're gonna do well in the future.

Asma: Well, there's a better chance I'll get a better job, and it would just give you ... it gives you, like I said, that stability, like you've got like a good job. If I was to now do an apprenticeship and start working, cos jobs are cutting down, I might not be able to get a job and then ... whereas with the other one, with a degree, the degree is more of a higher status than an apprenticeship.

These comments are representative of how the students understood the role education would play in helping them to achieve social mobility. Adefiola's comment on education providing an 'extra star' and 'security' reflects a common belief among the students that a degree would mean they stand out from others. This assumption may be slightly problematic. Students were much more likely to focus on how a degree would distinguish them from non-degree holders rather than focus on how it would distinguish them from other degree holders. There also appeared to be tendency for students to overestimate the returns to education and underestimate the opportunities and wages available to non-degree holders. Although I did not ask students to directly estimate them it was clear from their comments that they assumed obtaining an undergraduate degree would lead to a relatively well-paid occupation. One student, who was considering *not* going to university still argued:

Maryam: Without it, you have to start from really, really bottom, and you have to make your way up. But if you've got a degree, you can just go straight into whatever you want.

Her belief, shared by many other interviewees, that having a degree provides passage to 'whatever you want' is highly inaccurate and reflects a certain naivety on the students part about the returns associated with educational qualifications. Beliefs about the advantages provided by educational qualifications pervaded their talk about going to university.

Some scholars have argued that students from disadvantaged backgrounds exit the education system early because they opt for strategies that maximise security and minimise risk (Breen 1998). Conversely, the students in this study largely opted to pursue higher education precisely because they thought gaining qualifications was the best way to provide financial security. An undergraduate degree was discussed as a type of insurance that most assumed would virtually guarantee a desirable position in the labour market. Again, they operated on the assumption that a qualification with a practical focus made it more likely that they would achieve a stable lower-middle or middle-class job. Thus, their educational aspirations and choices while ambitious were also conditioned by pursuing the goal of security. This can be seen by two students whose educational aspirations were to attend university and gain a qualification in nursing or midwifery. Both justified and explained these decisions by wanting a stable and secure future. They both argued that nurses and midwives were always in demand, making them less vulnerable to periods of economic recession, and are sufficiently well paid to meet their financial needs. One student taking a BTEC course in Applied Science stated:

Shannon: I just want a stable future really. I want to aim to go to uni, and to study midwifery, specifically. And if not, nursing.

She argued that nursing or midwifery would provide 'balance' to her life that was currently missing; in her current situation she felt that she was 'juggling knives'. Her educational aspirations were therefore directly tied to her goal of achieving security. Education was seen as a vehicle with which to combat risk, get opportunities and avoid financial hardship.

Operating under a very similar logic, Chris, an A2 student, made the same set of justifications for his educational choices. He justified his choices almost exclusively on the grounds of stability and made nine separate references that were coded under 'achieving security'. His decision to undertake a degree in nursing was strongly influenced by his concerns about youth unemployment in a time of recession:

Chris: Recession, deficit, lack of employment, especially for under 25's ... Less and less people are employing people without these qualifications.

He chose his degree and proposed career specifically on the basis of not wanting to be at risk financially. He continued:

Chris: A stable environment. Financially stable. You don't need to worry about job loss or anything, because nurses are always required. I want to study nursing at university as well, so it's just a really stable, healthy environment to work in.

Chris was debt averse and so wanted to live at home so he could commute. The threat of an insecure labour market and concerns about unemployment meant he chose a university course that would be directly linked to developing skills and a specific career that would be less sensitive than other jobs to any changes in the structure of the economy.

Most of the students remained optimistic about the future – they perceived opportunities as being open to them. However, for several students their experience of poverty and chaotic family environments appeared to lead to a narrowing down of options that they felt they could explore. Two students in particular spoke in a much more constrained way about what they wanted to achieve with regard to education and beyond:

Fayza: I don't want to go very, very far, but I just want to keep to the simple limits so I can enjoy my life, and then do work, and go university education.

Abby: A nice job, don't do anything illegally. And yeah, carry on, find a girl that really likes you, wants to live with you ... You know, I don't want to get shot in the head ... I don't want to get involved in the gang ... I don't want to put my family in trouble.

Arguably, both of these students reflect the 'levelled aspirations' described by Macloed (2009) in *Ain't No Makin It*. Their experience of social and economic disadvantage meant that they prioritised straightforward goals that they perceived to be attainable. While both stated that they wanted to attend university they framed their goals in terms of things to be avoided rather than things to be achieved. For these two students their experience of socio-economic disadvantage had the dual effect of making them want to pursue qualifications to escape their current situation but also placed major restrictions on the options they considered. Particularly noticeable when interviewing these two

students, was the lack of control they had (and perceived themselves to have) with regard to their futures.

## **7.6 Achieving security and occupational aspirations**

I now turn to focus on the students' occupational aspirations. The data in Chapter 5 showed that almost all the students aspired to jobs that were either solidly middle-class, such as being a lawyer, or lower-middle-class jobs such as nursing. None of the students identified traditional working-class jobs as their preferred occupational destination. As with educational qualifications the students who prioritised achieving security voiced strong preferences for careers that would help them achieve this goal. They tended to focus on relatively achievable occupations that they perceived as always being in demand. Although I have used the term job it may be more accurate to describe what they want as a career. They prized this over a job because it was seen as being more permanent. They associated low wage jobs with not being able to provide the basics in life such as paying the rent and putting food on the table. I found, similarly to Young Jr's research, that the 'search for security and stability stand at the centre of their attitudes to work' (Young Jr 2004: 173). Very few of the students spoke about wanting to live in luxury or accumulate large amounts of wealth; instead they wanted something more straightforward and something many middle-class people take for granted: a reasonably well-paid job that they found rewarding.

These issues emerged when the students spoke about their occupational aspirations. An important area of focus was on how having a steady income would relieve them of stress, allow them to enjoy their lives outside of work and be able to support their families. In his study of young African-American men Young Jr. found that what was important to them was not simply getting a job; what mattered was the benefits associated with it; 'They often claimed that getting a benefits package was more important than the nature of the work itself' (Young Jr 2004: 165). I too found that it was the goods associated with jobs that were often highlighted as to why they were so desirable. This point was highlighted by a female student who said she would probably

‘do something in the sciences’. While she did not name a specific job she was absolutely clear about how working in the field would provide financial and social benefits. Although she didn’t use the word security it was clear that this is what she wanted her career to provide, ‘Being comfortable, having a house, not being in debt, like being free’. A male student’s occupational aspirations echoed these concerns:

Muazzy: I want to become good in my job, be respected, and earn a living. At least if I can support a family I’m happy with it, that’s what my main aim is.

A range of students I spoke with expressed similar sentiments to Muazzy; they were concerned about earning enough from their jobs to receive status and respect. Relatedly, they wanted to avoid being the subject of negative social evaluations associated with being poor.

Poorly paid jobs were characterised as undesirable precisely because they failed to provide financial well-being and security. This was clearly captured by a male Pakistani student. He commented on how working in a local store would be insufficient to support a family:

Ahsan: You want money that can help you, and you want a bit more extra money, as like a savings, or help someone, or like ... just a bit more money. Cos like if you work in a local store, I don’t think you can even feed your family, that much. You won’t have like to feed your children or anything. You can’t.

Like many of the students he raised concerns about the pressure created by not having enough money. He argued that realising his aspirations of becoming a lawyer or dentist would help him avoid this situation and that the salaries associated with these middle-class professions would remove the stress associated with material scarcity:

Ahsan: [having a well-paid job] relaxes you from anything like having, like being under pressure from anything ... You’re not struggling in your life.

The threat of being in poverty or not having sufficient financial resources appeared to be a strong motivating factor with regard to career choices. Kimberley, a white working-class student who was being raised by her mother, spoke about wanting to avoid low-paid, insecure jobs that paid by the hour. We discussed about what a good job meant to her:

Something with a salary not a wage. Something ... I don't know. Not working in Starbucks [Laughs].

Instead of wanting to work in the service sector, Kimberley talked about wanting to be a police officer. She contrasted the security and opportunities associated with this career choice over working in Starbucks:

It's a pretty good career to get into. Especially at a young age, you can like really climb the ladder and everything. I reckon it would be quite exciting as well, like something different every day.

Interestingly, there seemed to be a difference between her attitude towards education and jobs and her mother's. She reported on her mother's attitude towards the future, 'My mum really doesn't care – as long as I'm doing something that I wanna be doing and I'm happy, she doesn't mind'. This did not appear to be an attitude shared by her daughter. Kimberley, along with a range of other students, talked about wanting jobs that allowed for career advancement. When discussing their occupational aspirations students often explained how they thought salaried jobs would provide enough financial security to enjoy a range of experience and goods outside of work. This was how they regularly defined what a 'normal life' was like:

Chris A: It's like ... just ... have like a stable job, be able to like do things that I enjoy, like go on holidays and stuff, and just earn enough to do that. That's like normal, I guess.

Over two-thirds of the students spoke about the importance of leisure activities such as eating a meal in a restaurant, going to the cinema or being able to take a holiday. They were also clear that these activities could only be enjoyed if they were employed in occupations that provided enough extra income.

## **7.7 Securing the future for your family**

The quest for security was often focused around issues of family. Students' families provided shelter and security; security played an immediate role in sustaining well-being and promoting feelings of safety:

Bakhtawar: I don't have any danger when I'm with my family or my friends, so it's like I'm in a safe place. And when you are in a safe place, you are free to do anything, and when you are free to do anything, what you get is happiness.

Unsurprisingly, a priority for this student was to maintain strong relationships with her family. Discussions about family were also distinctly future oriented: interviewees saw being able to provide security for their prospective families as absolutely essential. These concerns were also clearly shaped by gender. The young women I spoke with were much more likely to raise concerns about having a reliable partner and enough resources to start a family. Deborah was the one of the most disengaged students I interviewed but she became much more animated when we talked about marriage and family life. Starting a family was an important priority for her but she was adamant that she needed to have the resources in place to look after her children:

Deborah: I wanna just be able to provide for my kids and my mum. I just, I don't want to struggle. Like I don't want to have to worry about paying for bills and like maybe spoiling myself a bit, I wanna be able to do them both. I want to be happy as well.

Yoaoude, another female student explained:

I like children. I like them. But I wouldn't have children if I couldn't look after them. If I didn't have enough money to look after them, I don't know ... I don't like that.

Being able to provide for one's family was an important theme when students talked about what they wanted for the future but was particularly salient for the young women I interviewed. Getting an education and well-paid job was important because it created the conditions in which students would be able to look after their families. It was important for students like Deborah and Yoaoude both to have families at a young age but also to make sure it occurred within a stable and secure environment with a committed partner. Interestingly, they expressed no concerns that early family formation might make pursuing careers potentially more difficult.

Yaouade's concern about achieving security for her family was directly related to her desire to secure upward social mobility. She was one of the very few students to use the terms social class when discussing her ambitions. It was not that she desperately wanted to be middle-class, what she most wanted most was the goods associated with this class position:

Yaouade: I want to be middle-class, actually ... Cos your children will go to the best ... it's not really for me, it's for my children. I want my children to go to the best schools, best unis, like have that opportunity to ... even if they don't take it, but have the opportunity to, you know, go to the best unis. That's what I want but it's up to them.

For Yaouade making sure her children have the opportunities that she never enjoyed provided an influential backdrop to her thoughts about the future. She clearly links having resources and opportunities with a person's position in the class structure. Not achieving a significant amount of social mobility, she fears, would expose her children to the risks of not being able to obtain high levels of educational attainment and attend elite institutions.

## **7.8 Education, opportunity and hard work**

A strong pattern in the interviews, which I have drawn attention to on multiple occasions, is that almost all thought that social advancement was conditional on getting a university degree; this is why the majority of students expressed such ambitious educational aspirations. Fred, a male student remarked, 'I guess like if you don't have education then no one's really gonna be looking at you'. Another student, Rubel, talked about the relationship between opportunity and education:

Rubel: It opens up the doors. And all you do is have to walk through them and work hard. That's it. For me, that's what I believe in.

His use of 'walk through' reflects his belief that social mobility is largely determined by effort and the choices people make. Despite being disadvantaged in a range of domains, very few of the students invoked structural disadvantages or discrimination to explain success. Rubel argued that if he walked through the doors opened up by education then he would be able to avoid the poverty he experienced as a child and enjoy the safety provided by a professional job.

In order to achieve security for themselves, students did not just emphasise the importance of getting qualifications; they stressed the importance of individual characteristics necessary for personal advancement. They focused on qualities such as

hard work, not getting distracted and taking advantage of opportunities where they presented themselves. Although many students did have their lives shaped by various dimensions of disadvantage they overwhelmingly discounted this as an explanation for why people do not get ahead. Security was to be achieved, in no small part, through the application of hard work. Ahsan, who was aiming to study medicine at university argued, 'I just need to work really hard, put my head down, and not focus on anything besides education'. This set of assumptions about hard work also provides the students with an explanation for why people fail – personal shortcoming such as laziness and a lack of parental support. Muzzy, a male A-level student interested in music and sound engineering was particularly critical of people who did not invest in education and work hard:

Muzzy: I've seen people who I thought, 'You should be really dumb,' and they used to just go with ease, they left a year later with Cs and Bs. It's pure laziness, I think everyone's got potential to get good grades, but they just need to put work into it.

There was something paradoxical about these criticisms because he talked about how he was not that interested in college or being a high performing student. He also stated that he chose this particular college only because it was close to his house; 'I went to Leyton because I couldn't be arsed to travel'. Nevertheless, Muzzy's comments reflect the attitudes of many students who explained failure in individualised terms. This orientation to the future contained a normative dimension because it framed how the students defined responsibility and morally praiseworthy behaviour. What was perceived as being morally praiseworthy was hard work and the assumption was that this trait would almost guarantee educational and social success. I develop this line of argument in the next chapter.

## **7.9 Aspirations, education and neighbourhood sorting**

A further theme that emerged was that of where they wanted to live and what they wanted their social environment to be like. Thus, aspirations were also related to ideas about neighbourhood and 'residential strategies' (Butler and Hamnett 2011: 105). A number of students discussed moving out of their current place of residence as part of

the social mobility process. This supports Butler and Hamnett's claim that there is a 'strong and persistent link between aspirations, educational and spatial mobility' (ibid: 105). In my interview data, this took the form of citing features of their neighbourhood environment that they disliked and wanted to change in the future. Asma, a female student talked about wanting a stable career and also linked this to a desire to experience residential mobility. Before she did so she spoke negatively about the areas she lived in, 'It's not really a safe area ... like there's been a lot of police for drugs and stuff'. She then explained that she wanted a good job and 'my own house and stuff – and like a normal life. Probably move out of this area, hopefully'. Thus, her desire to move into a better neighbourhood, and achieve security, was part of her broader desire to secure social advancement. She argued that this was best achieved by going to university because it would provide her with a more opportunities. 'I'll get a better job, and it would just give you ... it gives you, like I said, that stability'. For Asma, moving into the suburbs embodied the idea of achieving success and escaping crime and poverty in the inner city.

Historically it is the middle classes that have sought security in the suburbs. I would argue that moving out of deprived inner city neighbourhoods was also a goal for some of my interviewees and was woven into their broader discussion of their aspirations. Two female students provided insight into the relationships between place and aspiration. Kimberley spoke about wanting to move out of East London in general rather than simply moving to areas in the outer suburbs. 'I want like, I wanna live in a nice area. So probably not East London! In general, it's not that nice'. In our discussions a 'nice area' seemed to serve as shorthand for a middle-class neighbourhood. Summaiya also talked about wanting to move. She had lived in Leyton all of her life and shared her house with her parents and four siblings. In addition to living in cramped conditions, she spoke about persistent crime and not feeling safe in her neighbourhood, 'sometimes it just feels unsafe, like you know how people think, "Oh" when you see people walk around in groups and stuff'. She was aspiring for a career in medicine and had pharmacology as a 'back-up' plan. In addition to wanting a job that would move her and her family into the middle classes, she hoped that it would also involve a physical move:

out of a disadvantaged inner-London borough and into a safer, greener and wealthier area:

More space, kind of thing. Our road's not small, but it seems kind of space is not that big, and it's like you walk out and it's just houses, kind of thing. Like maybe greenery, more space.

For students like Summayah and Kimberley, moving out of the East End, and out to the suburbs, is tied to their ideas of the good life and they believe that it would provide a safer social environment. In this way there is a spatial dimension to how they talked about their educational and occupational aspirations. Interestingly, only four students discussed wanting to leave London permanently. For the rest, it seemed taken for granted that the capital would be their long-term home. There may be two reasons for this. First, members of my sample were particularly keen to maintain strong family ties. As a consequence, their educational and occupational choices reflected this desire. Second, the dynamic labour market of London may have been a pull factor – having opportunities (or at least perceiving opportunities) so near to home may make remaining close to where they grew up more attractive. The desire to move to better, more advantaged neighbourhoods was not universally shared by my sample. It is also not the case that they all disliked where they lived and were desperate to escape; a wide range of students spoke about the benefits of living in East London and spoke about how it formed an important part of their identity.

#### **7.10 Students not concerned with stability**

This chapter has largely been concerned with students who adopted what I have termed an achieving security orientation to the future. As the findings above make clear this was a central principal for how many thought about the future and it provided them with reasons for following particular courses of action. It was therefore of fundamental importance for understanding the aspirations of the majority of students in this study. However, this orientation was not shared by all of my interviewees. Seven students made no reference to issues of stability, security or other concerns relating to finances. Five students made passing references to financial concerns such as top-up fees but without it being an important feature of how they discussed the future. A tentative explanation for

why they were less concerned with security may be that they came from relatively stable family backgrounds and had greater resources to draw upon. For example, a female student called Shelina reported that her family and community ties were particularly strong and offered her support. Rather than focusing on security, in our discussion she focused on having fun at university and wanting an interesting job because of 'that sense of fulfilment you get'. Students in this group were less economically disadvantaged, had stable family lives, did not live in the most highly deprived neighbourhoods and were intending to go university. Two students of particular analytical importance were the most identifiably middle-class.

These students were well aware of the advantages of going to university but identified a broader range of motivational concerns and generally seemed more confident about their prospects for the future. For example, Yaseen and Ismael, two male A-level students, were relatively successful at college, spoke with confidence about getting a job after their degree, and thought their good grades would help them. It could be that their relative success gave them confidence with regard to the future and they were less worried than their less academically successful peers. Another student was particularly focused on 'following her passions'; for her this meant engaging with issues around her sexual and gender identity, 'I think the dream or the goal or whatever it may be is to obviously ... I don't know. For me now, everything is centred on like sexuality'. Another student who did not adopt an achieving security orientation had occupational aspirations that revolved around fun, leisure, status and fame. Another said, 'I'd love to be either a socialite ... I know, it sounds stupid but ... They're people that are involved in entertainment. Like presenting or modelling'. She was one of only two students who identified celebrity culture as being admirable and aspired to status and fame.

The lack of focus on issues of security was particularly noticeable for two of the solidly middle-class students – Chee and Kishan. Both of their parents had undergraduate degrees and were in very well-paid occupations. Out of all the participants, Kishan was almost certainly from the wealthiest family. He was the only student I interviewed who

had both parents employed in professional middle-class jobs. He was aware of his position of relative advantage and stated, 'For me money has never really been an issue, just because of my background'. He discussed the psychological difference between having money and being poor:

I mean if you don't have money, you're constantly worried about when you're gonna get things and if you're gonna get them. If you've got money then you don't have to worry about that and you can just have fun basically.

While most of the other students had acutely felt a lack of resources in their lives, Kishan had no such worries about financial security. His choices regarding the future were much less constrained than the other students because of the range of resources his family could mobilise to support him. He focused on doing things that were 'fun' and placed a high premium on having an intellectually stimulating and creative job. Chee and Kishan both wanted to work in the media industries in either film or game design. Rather than focusing on a career that would provide a good income they were more focused on achieving a career that would allow for personal fulfilment and creativity. For example, Chee stated:

For media, I think my creativity is one of my strong points, I guess. Like when I was a kid I used to like drawing and all sort of things, so I think, also getting it from my dad, just designing.

He explained his career and educational aspirations in terms of pursuing his intrinsic interests. Kishan also focused on following quite an unusual career path. He wanted to work on digital film production and directing. He perceived his choice of career as being relatively risky and explained that this made his parents nervous:

Kishan: I think, is the uncertainty, cos I'm telling him about my plans for the future and basically some of it is 'wing it' cos that's all you can do with film. It's not like 'I know that with this degree I can get this job', cos that's not how it works. It's 'I know that if I've created this and show someone it and someone likes it, that's how I get my job.

The fact that it was a risky occupational pathway did little to dissuade him because, he claimed, it was what he really wanted to do. For both Kishan and Chee their aspirations were more closely tied to ideas of realising their creative talents and were far less concerned with any practical constraints they thought they might face in the future. They both had the advantage of having parents who could use their financial resources, social

ties and knowledge to help them enter these fields. Their relative position of financial advantage means they are also able to offer further support if things went ‘wrong’ in the pursuit of these goals. Thus, students who had less exposure to material deprivation, and had more resources within the family, appeared less likely to hold an achieving security orientation that conditioned their aspirations. This supports the idea that middle-class students are more likely to focus on personal fulfilment and happiness rather than achieving security when they talk about the future (Devine 2004).

A further, more subtle, finding can be drawn out from my discussions with the more advantaged students. In the literature a great deal of attention is given to how parents directly mobilise their resources in order to increase the chances of their children succeeding – wealthier parents can buy access to better schools, neighbourhoods and extra-curricular activities (Reay et al. 2005; Vincent and Ball 2006). While this is important, I want to highlight another, more indirect way, in which parental resources can matter for how students’ aspirations are formed and realised. Parental resources provide an insurance function against risk. The careers Kishan and Chee want to pursue, games design and film, can be characterised as risky because they are fields associated with large levels of income variance. The presence of parental resources is important for them; not only can it be mobilised directly through expenditure, but it creates a supportive social context in which risky occupational pathways can be explored. This is a powerful source of advantage that is rarely explored in the literature on aspirations. Students who lacked these familial resources did not have the luxury to explore more unconventional educational and occupational choices.

## **7.11 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have focused on the meanings that students attach to their aspirations. Drawing insights from a range of sources, I have argued that the majority of students adopted a particular orientation to the future which I have called an ‘achieving security’

orientation. This appeared to provide a strong motivational basis for their choices regarding education and jobs. I have demonstrated that achieving security was central to what students wanted to achieve in the future. They acknowledged how competitive the labour market was, particularly during a time of recession, and saw gaining qualifications, especially a university degree, as a way of achieving social mobility and managing risk. Their concerns with security often meant they leaned towards careers that they thought would be in demand, like nursing and midwifery, and involved developing practical, transferable skills. Similarly, university choices were often justified on the grounds of supporting them in achieving this goal. Thus, the effect of social background on these students did not necessarily take the form of lowering aspirations but did make them sensitive to the precariousness of their situation given their lack of resources. I also explored the views of the more advantaged students in my study. Students who had parents with more resources and more stable family environments were less likely to frame their aspirations in terms of achieving security. Instead, they framed their aspirations in terms of pursuing their interests, achieving personal fulfilment and having an intellectually rewarding job. I argued that the presence of economic security provides a framework within which they can pursue risky occupational goals without the constraints imposed by material disadvantage. In this chapter I have drawn on work from the US urban poverty literature, in particular the work of Young Jr and Sanchez-Jankowski. This has provided a framework within which to analyse the concerns of my interviewees and has offered a fresh perspective on how to make sense of the aspirations and goals of disadvantaged young people in the UK.

## Chapter 8

### Aspiration as a moral project

#### 8.1 Introduction

This is the final empirical chapter. I continue to focus on how aspirations were used by the students to forge their identities, and on the meaning they attached to them as they began their transition into adulthood. In the previous two chapters, I have paid close attention to how aspirations were closely connected to ideas about achieving social mobility. However, this does not fully explain the nature of their aspirations. In addition to these more instrumental motives, it is also necessary to broaden my analytical framework and consider a further set of concerns. This requires paying close attention to the expressive function that aspirations played for my interviewees. My data shows how aspirations were related to students' ideas about individual growth, personal development and, importantly, morality. Indeed, I think aspirations can usefully be interpreted as a moral project.

In this chapter, I argue that normative beliefs and desires were central to how they framed their aspirations – students regularly drew on concepts of duty, responsibility, obligation and respect when they talked about the future. Normative reasons were discussed as counting in favour of pursuing particular educational and occupational pathways. I argue that students understood holding, and asserting, high aspirations as part of a project of moral development and self-actualisation. By expressing high

aspirations, students constructed a sense of self-worth and made claims that they were worthy of status and respect. For example, this can be seen when students discussed education as facilitating the development of character, and when they articulated altruistic occupational goals. My analysis in this chapter builds on the idea that aspirations had a 'performative' quality in that they were used to legitimize students' social identity (St Clair 2011). My approach to aspirations is related to a broader claim: we construct our identities through the use of evaluative concepts. Our ideas about right or wrong, praiseworthy and blameworthy behaviour, and the process of moral evaluation more generally, shape, and are shaped by, our sense of self – they help us define who 'we' are. I argue that we can see this play out particularly clearly in relation to the educational and occupational aspirations of my interviewees.

My data suggests that the expression of high aspirations by students created social distance between themselves and other young people; thus, their talk about ambitious educational and occupational goals was a way of managing peer social hierarchies. In emphasising that they valued education, and held high aspirations, students distanced themselves from their less academically focused peers who were positioned as morally inferior. This was often done by emphasising the importance of personal characteristics such as hard work, and contrasting this with how negative characteristics, such as laziness, led to educational, social, and economic 'failure'. Their aspirations helped them define who they were – a 'good' student and 'good' individual, and who they were not – a 'bad' pupil and 'bad' individual. The use of moral language and judgements with regard to their aspirations was part of how they created distinct boundaries between themselves and those they perceived as being below them in the social structure. A novel feature of my analysis in this chapter, therefore, is that I take aspirations to be a cultural tool that students used to define the boundaries of group membership. This is a key way in which this chapter makes an original contribution to the literature on aspirations.

This chapter is, therefore, about how these young people 'did' aspirations. They did not see success in education as something that could be taken for granted but as something

that had to be worked at – an endeavour that required character and the *right* choices to be made. I do not want to suggest that creating a positive self-identity, a sense of self-worth and moral integrity was unique to these students – this type of identity work is pervasive across social groups. What marks these students out is that they did this identity work through education. Their specific educational aspirations may be more highly moralised compared to other working-class students who didn't go on to college; their aspirations may also be more moralised than those of middle-class students who may take education success for granted and not requiring special (moral) qualities.

## 8.2 Context and argument

In making this argument, I am particularly indebted to Frye's recent study of a group of young women and their aspirations in Malawi (Frye 2012). I introduced her ideas in the literature review chapter but it is worth recapping them here. She argues that a problem for existing accounts of aspirations is that they cannot explain the consistently high aspirations of many disadvantaged social groups. She provides an account of aspirations that seems better able to accommodate this fact. Frye argues that they become intelligible if understood as 'moral claims rather than as rational choices' (Frye 2012: 1566). Her interview data with young women revealed that aspirations were 'assertions of identity' and that they served 'as models for self-transformation' (ibid: 1567). Despite being aware of the huge barriers they face, the young women maintained high educational and occupational aspirations because they 'associate unwavering ambition with a virtuous identity' (ibid: 1608). The aspirations of the young women in her study were not simply a reflection of past experiences, and available resources, but reflected the sort of people that they hoped to become.

Frye interprets the young women as engaging in a type of identity work when they were using morally evaluative language and explaining how they would achieve their goals: they were constructing, and presenting to others, an account of the type of person they wanted to be – one worthy of moral praise and recognition. This was particularly salient in their discussions of their educational aspirations. This use of normatively evaluative language served a range of purposes for the young women. First, it was a way for them

to assert an autonomous identity that justified their ambitious educational goals; second, aspirations were used to distinguish them from their peers who were not pursuing education:

In other words, respondents describe their peers who left school earlier than they did as morally inferior to them and thus establish social distance between themselves and their non-schooling peers. These women are articulating a social hierarchy based on effort and striving, a more finely graded metric than the economic hierarchy of educational credentials used in the workplace. (Frye 2012)

Adopting an identity of ‘one who aspires’ was a way of establishing social distance between themselves and those who did not pursue educational qualifications. It allowed them to assert moral superiority over their less educated peers and position themselves as being similar to other people who see the value in investing in education. As we shall see, a very similar process appeared to be at work for my students.

The second source I draw on is Lamont’s (2000) comparative study of working-class men in both the United States and France; the aim of the study was to understand how working-class men define their sense of self and how they construct their class identity. This helped shed light onto how they engaged in a type of ‘boundary work’ where they sought to distinguish themselves from people above and below them in the social structure. This was achieved in part because they assessed the world in fundamentally moral terms. She argues that:

Morality is a structuring principle in the worldviews of American workers, black and white. Through it they define who they are and, perhaps more important, who they are not. It is also important in maintaining a sense of self-worth and dignity. In particular, hard work, personal integrity, and traditional morality allow workers to pit themselves against others and help them compensate for their low-socio-economic status. (Lamont 2000: 51)

Definitions of worth were a key way in which workers in different social contexts made boundaries along class and racial lines; although she also notes that in addition to creating boundaries, moral criteria can ‘also serve as tools for bridging group boundaries’ (Lamont 2000). In this chapter, I take the ideas described above and apply them to the aspirations of the participants in this study.

### 8.3 Data analysis

My analysis of the data proceeds in three parts. First, I focus on how students explained their educational and career choices in non-instrumental terms. Instead, they regularly focused on ideas of personal growth and development. Second, I show how the expression of aspirations in morality evaluative language was a way in which students constructed a positive sense of self, one who was morally praiseworthy, and asserted that they were worthy of respect. Third, I focus more specifically on how aspirations were used to construct group boundaries and manage peer social hierarchies.

Rather than focusing exclusively on how education would help them get ahead, students explained their aspirations in terms of personal growth and closely related concepts. My data clearly shows that these motivating concerns formed a core part of the narrative surrounding their educational and occupational aspirations. Over two-thirds of the interviewees (n=19) talked about education and work as being a means to 'growing as a person', being 'independent', and learning how to 'take care of yourself'. What was particularly noticeable in the interviews was the consistent focus on broader issues of what it meant to be a good person, how people should behave and the sort of choices people should make about what to do with their lives. Tohheb, a male student on a A-level programme, captured some of these concerns clearly:

I don't exactly know what I wanna do, but I know like the kind individual I want to be.

Although he was not entirely sure about his plans regarding university or the labour market, he was able to articulate a clear vision of the sort of person he wanted to become. These ideas of personal growth and self-development were expressed by a wide range of students; it provided an organising principle around how they thought about the future. Another student, reflecting on what she thought she would gain from travel, education and work, focused on how it would broaden her horizons:

I think it'll just make me grow up even more as a person. Sort of just see what the bigger world is like and being on your own as well, sort of having to take care of yourself, which is something ... so I think living on my own, organising everything – washing, cleaning, all that stuff.

Students placed a high level of value on making choices that would allow them to access a range of social experiences they took to be important. These more general orientations to the future reflected not just a desire to achieve a particular educational qualification, or a position in the labour market, but a desire to become a person they thought embodied certain virtues and had certain capacities – such as autonomy. This was central to their descriptions of the sort of identity they wanted to develop. Students saw their futures in terms of becoming a well-rounded, educated and caring person.

A range of students talked about making choices that facilitated their growth as individuals, and often education and careers were the vehicles through which this could be realised. One student remarked about the importance he and his family attached to being a ‘good person’. Ismael, a male student, talked at length about his parents’ focus on this and behaving in a pro-social way: ‘My mum always emphasised, like drilled into me, “You will be a man of character. Be a good person, do good in your life.”’ Education and work was often discussed by students and their parents as being part of a broader project, where the ultimate goal was to realise their (and their families) normative vision of the good life. Developing particular qualities was seen as particularly important; for example, self-reliance was often held up as key component of good character. One student discussed at length the positive feelings associated with thinking your success was down to personal endeavour:

I don't know, I guess getting self-satisfaction knowing you'd worked for it in your life, and you didn't ... some people thrive off it I guess. They know they didn't get money from their parents or whatever, they kind of worked for it. (Hisham, A2 student)

Deborah stated that she hoped going to university would mean that she would not have to rely on her parents for financial support:

Not dependent on other people. Like right now if I want anything, I'd have to go to my parents, and ask them for money or whatever, but like, depend on myself. If I want anything, work for it, get it yourself.

As the above quotes make clear, hard work and independence are particularly valued by this student. For most students, going to university was presented as the key transition point into full adulthood. When talking about the future almost all of the students went far beyond talking about education and careers; many were concerned with developing as an individual, stated that they were motivated by non-instrumental goals and focused on

the importance of character development. Their model of the successful subject who is worthy of respect, which was regularly invoked by the students, was an ideal type of the Western, democratic citizen: responsible, self-reliant and yet still willing to contribute to public goods.

University was often discussed as a place where these qualities could be developed. For example, five of the students made explicit reference to how going to university would provide an important set of new experiences and provide the opportunity to form new social ties. Kimberley, a white working-class student, drew on the common theme of how going to university would mean she could make close and long-lasting friendships:

A lot of people make like lifelong friends at uni, they meet such a diverse group of people. Everyone I've met who's been to uni has said that it was like the best time of their life, it is brilliant.

While Kimberley was aware of the financial returns to obtaining a university degree, she also justified her aspirations in terms of a much broader set of goods she would get by going to university. A female student discussed that she would particularly value being at university because at 'uni maybe it's completely up to you, if you want to do something or not'. She felt that acting independently would make her choices and actions more authentically her own. I do not want to suggest that somehow these non-instrumental concerns somehow dominated or were always more salient than concerns with social mobility. Nor do I want to suggest that expressing these concerns meant that they would translate into actions, or that such stated reasons made them morally praiseworthy, 'good' individuals. What I do want to argue is that these concerns *were* an important part of how they explained their plans for the future and they were discussed as powerful motivating factors and were essential for understanding the meaning they attached to their aspirations. Therefore, theoretical perspectives that fail to give meaningful weight to these factors tend to give a one-dimensional view of aspirations and educational decision making.

#### 8.4 Oughts and others

In this section, I continue to develop the idea that students systematically understood their aspirations in non-instrumental terms. I develop further the claim that students framed important aspects of their lives and decisions in moral terms. I show that aspirations were an important part of how students constructed and presented their identities to the outside world: they were a tool through which students claimed a 'moral, virtuous identity' and helped them build a powerful, justifying narrative that validated their actions (Frye 2012: 1533). A number of students drew attention to how their aspirations flowed from their pro-social preferences. Very few of the students placed a large amount of emphasis on acquiring wealth; and even those that did were quick to suggest that they would use what financial resources they got to support public goods. What was much more common was that they stressed other regarding commitments; students talked about wanting 'to make a difference', 'change things for the better', 'help out' and 'do some good'. The importance attached to these goals was couched in terms of duty, compassion and respect for people; this was particularly true for the female students planning to go into professions such as nursing. Thus, aspirations can be seen as a way of asserting a caring vision of the self; this was partly how they defined what it meant to be a morally praiseworthy individual.

This desire to help others was a strong pattern in my data. When talking about their occupational aspirations, and therefore the qualifications necessary to pursue them, almost three-quarters (n=21) of students made at least some reference to the importance of helping others and engaging in socially beneficial behaviours. This was expressed through the choice of careers they were considering (e.g. teacher, nurse, nutritionist and doctor); discussing norms of appropriate behaviour in interpersonal interactions (e.g. helping people when they are down or not engaging in conspicuous consumption); and expressing a general orientation to do social good (e.g. by giving to charity). Rubel stated that he had duties to help other people. He saw this in terms of positive duties – it was not enough simply not to harm others but a duty to actively help those in need:

If someone needs help you help them. If someone's on the floor ... you give them a hand, you don't kick them on the floor. Never do that. You've got to pick them up.

Two female students also focused on the importance of helping others through their work:

Summaiyah: It's just like basically the satisfaction of hopefully making a good change to someone's life and changing something that maybe they couldn't do themselves, like helping them or something that they could never do, that you could help them with. Something like that.

Warda: With me, I'm not really the type of person that likes to spend, and you know, money. If I have money, obviously I'm gonna do a wise thing like help the orphans or build a house for the orphans to be helped out.

Warda asserted that money was not a prime motivation for her and that being 'wise' meant putting her resources to good use. As the above quotes show, these students stated that they were motivated, at least in part, by a desire to help others, not only through their careers but in their everyday lives. Norms of good behaviour and fairness were central to their underlying conceptions of appropriate conduct. This appeared to provide an important framework within which they discussed their choices regarding education and careers:

Not even just in your job but like all the time, you should help other people. It's just morally right. So many people have helped you, and you'd want people to help you if you were stuck so treat someone else how you'd like to be treated.

I'm not sure, but come to a job, where I know each moment I'll be working towards something good or I'll be helping someone or generally be doing good, kind of thing. That's my ideal.

The value of helping others, 'working towards something good' or as Daniel puts it doing things because they are 'just morally right' was often a crucial part of how they explained why they wanted to do the things they did.

Many of the students I interviewed explained their occupational aspirations in other regarding terms. It became apparent from talking to them that this provided a regulative ideal for decision making. Again, what we see is that students drew on the language of 'helping others' to explain their choices. Kimberley and Shelina said:

I think I'd like to help people... just like being a teacher...you can help people.

Also, some people might think it's a bit weird, but I like to kind of take the burden off other people.

For many students these beliefs about the importance of helping others and the value of altruism provided a guiding orientation to their aims; these judgements helped constitute their conceptions of what they wanted from the future. Let us take stock for a moment and ask a question. What was going on here? Why did students focus on the normative dimension of their aspirations? Building on both Frye (2012) and Lamont (2000), I suggest that holding high aspirations was a way in which many of the young people I interviewed constructed a positive sense of identity and self-worth. Like the young women in Frye's study I found that the students perceived education as 'an odyssey with strong moral implications' and that holding high aspirations was a way of 'asserting themselves and [being] forward thinking and morally worthy' (Frye 2012: 1622). Furthermore, by stressing the altruistic nature of their aspirations and downplaying the importance of wealth and status, which may be out of reach for many of them, students were able to draw on an alternative definition of success and self-worth.

### **8.5 In search of respect**

Students' aspirations were tied to how they evaluated others and how they thought others would evaluate them. Holding high aspirations was important to almost all of the students because they thought it a precondition of gaining respect and admiration in the eyes of others. Wanting to go to university and get a well-paid job was perceived by the students as a normatively desirable goal – it is what they perceived hard-working and productive members of society did. During my analysis I observed a strong concern among the students for receiving esteem and respect from others because of their educational and occupational choices. As I argued in Chapter 6, this was also tied to a desire to avoid others making negative evaluations of them, inducing feelings of embarrassment or shame. In particular, students attached significant weight to the views of their parents and to a lesser extent their peers, and were concerned that they would judge their decisions favourably. A large majority of students stated that they wanted to achieve the approval of their parents through their choices.

Two students discussed how both qualifications and doing a cognitively demanding job would lead people to make positive evaluations of them. Part of the motivation for

pursuing these goals was that of gaining recognition from other people for what they had achieved. Fred, a young BTEC student, mentioned the signalling effects of educational qualifications – he thought degrees carried currency in the world because they are thought to effectively signal intelligence and this carries with it social prestige. Another female student, who was interested in becoming a pilot, focused on how being successful in a career made it more likely that she would be judged to be doing something meaningful because she would be responsible for the well-being of others:

Maryam: Because if you have respect, then you know that people like you for what you are not for how you look. So whatever you do, for example, I'm a pilot ... Because it's a really, really dangerous job, it's a risk. You're taking like so many people with you.

She associated danger and assuming responsibility as a core component of why some people are given respect and others are not. A wide range of students also claimed that they received praise from significant others because of their accomplishments and plans. This introduced a powerful incentive to express ambitious educational aspirations for students even if they were not high achieving. This is because:

[E]ducational aspirations are framed as expressions of personal virtue, through asserting themselves as focused on optimistic career goals, even those with little chance of attaining higher level credentials can derive social benefits from their aspirations. (Frye 2012)

High occupational and educational aspirations were important for the students because they generated respect from peers, teachers and parents. A female student, when discussing her plans for the future, stressed that a prime motivating factor was to make her parents proud:

And I want to make my dad proud. I want to make my mum proud. I want to set a good example for my sister.

Parental pride, and the status derived from having ambitious educational and occupational goals, was important even if the student was not academically successful. Students were concerned with not only attaining positive evaluation of their behaviour but also of avoiding negative judgements. For example, a small group of students spoke about their fears that their parents would be disappointed if they didn't attend a good university and move into a middle-class occupation.

There was almost nothing to suggest an anti-school or anti-achievement ethos among the overwhelming majority of the students. In the interviews, many of the students expressed pride in holding ambitious goals and, even in the face of ongoing challenges, the majority still expressed optimism about the future. In an important way, holding high aspirations was a way of fending off cognitive dissonance associated with the limitations that their position in the social structure placed upon the chances of them realising their goals. For students experiencing various types of social disadvantage, this was a powerful source of motivation – their problems could be interpreted as being part of a wider struggle or test of their personal virtues.

## **8.6 Aspirations, hard work and hierarchies**

In this third section, I continue to build my argument that the aspirations expressed by my interviewees were a means by which they created boundaries and distinctions between social groups, especially those not committed to achieving educational success. They did so by deploying a range of morally infused language when making evaluations of other people and especially when they talked about the future. Aspirations played an important role in how the young people in this study engaged in ‘boundary work’ where they tried to define who they were and who they were not (Lamont 2000). This was achieved by stressing how they held different virtues, values and character traits compared to their less educationally oriented peers. The drawing of moral distinctions had two components; both were related to one another. First, students stressed the importance of certain actions and attitudes, such as determination, in achieving ambitious goals. In showing that they either held or were developing these traits students were able to position themselves as morally superior to peers who placed less value on pursuing educational qualifications. The second part of this process was how these positive qualities were then sharply contrasted with negative individual traits, such as laziness, that the students used to explain why people ‘fail’. In both of these cases, students were able to position themselves as being morally superior to others, even if they were not very academically successful, because they remained committed to traditional ideas of educational achievement and achieving a ‘good’ job.

Social distance was created through a focus on traits that were thought to be causally significant in explaining inter-group differences in levels of success. One of the most regularly invoked traits was that of hard work and closely related terms such as diligence, focus, persistence and determination. Almost all my interviewees emphasised the importance of hard work to individual success. Chris talked about the qualities he would need to be successful on his undergraduate nursing course: 'I need to be very consistent, persistent; it's just gonna be a lot of hard work'. These ideas were central to how he understood what it meant to be a good student and were discussed as a requirement for success. The two examples below provide a flavour of the significance attached to hard work and closely related concepts:

Fayza: Yeah, to do something you have to work hard. But you can't just give up, you can't cos I would've give up, stayed at home, not come to college ... To become something you really have to do something.

Kimberley: Keep my head down and stop letting myself get distracted.

Such discussions were striking in the density of adjacent terms relating to how to achieve educational success; they mentioned four in particular – hard work, persistence ('you can't just give up', focus ('don't get distracted'), and being consistent. Similarly to Lamont I found that hard work was 'associated with other positive traits such as being responsible and caring for others, as if it were part of a package that characterises "good people"' (Lamont 2000: 25). In this case high aspirations can also be seen as part of this package. In her study of working men, Lamont (2000) found that they often highlighted the personal qualities needed to get by in life, they 'attach [importance] to self-reliance and long-term planning as elements of responsible behaviour' (Lamont 2000: 25). In a very different context I find something analogous. For the overwhelming majority of students, explanations for success centred on attitudes and patterns of behaviour rather than just innate ability; inequality of outcomes was consequently explained in broadly meritocratic terms where hard-working people got the success that they 'deserved'. By identifying traits such as hard work as necessary to pursuing their aspirations students were simultaneously able to construct an explanation for why they were 'successful' and others were not. Being

aspirational was thought to be more important than having such ascriptive characteristics as academic ability or family wealth.

In addition to focusing on the necessary conditions for success, students managed peer social hierarches and sustained them through normative evaluations of other people's behaviour and stressing how they were different. Failure to achieve academically and economically was stigmatised by being presented as a moral failure and a failure to take responsibility for one's life. By focusing on their own high aspirations, and interpreting the failure to pursue education in moral terms, students are able to create social distance between themselves and other members of their peer group. This was particularly noticeable when a female student discussed what she perceived as a sense of entitlement among some students about university. Michelle explained:

Everyone seems to think that 'I deserve a university place' – well why? You know, you can't be bothered to work, why do you deserve a uni place?

Like many of the students, she was proud of the fact that she had remained in the education system and worked hard. Michelle contrasted herself as someone who valued 'everything', particularly education, with those who 'wasted time in school'. What was noticeable about her response was how she moved from an evaluation of a specific outcome – not being entirely successful at school – to a much more general evaluation of being a person who had failed. This process of social categorisation placed her as the moral superior in her peer social hierarchy and explains why 'she looked down' on those who pursued non-academic pathways.

This was a particularly clear, but by no means unusual, example of how students used morally evaluative language to place people in certain categories and thus create social boundaries. This was often not done dispassionately but described in quite damning terms. A male A-level student claimed that people have a duty to work:

Like if you can't work, you actually can't work. I don't know how, maybe if you're disabled or something, or you just generally can't work. But if it's just laziness, then that's just appalling.

In addition to focusing on laziness, a range of students also linked this to notions of everyone having potential. While in some sense this was egalitarian because they rejected

the idea of inherent differences in ability between individuals, it still made success entirely dependent on traits that individuals could be held accountable for:

I guess some people are lazy... I think everyone's can get good marks at school.  
(James, BTEC student)

These comments were reflective of a broader set of commonly held assumptions about personal responsibility and the role effort played in the educational attainment process. It was perceived as being self-evident by the majority that educational failure was worthy of moral censure. Strong normative judgements were made of people who failed to live up to popular ideals of hard work. As Lamont argues, this translates into the drawing of strong boundaries against 'people below' them and is an act of symbolic and real exclusion (Lamont 2000: 131). By focusing on ideas of personal responsibility students felt justified in judging and censuring others. Furthermore, by explaining differences in educational outcomes in such individualised ways, and drawing on ideas of moral failure, students thought of educational and social inequality as both natural and legitimate. Students, often drawing on popular ideas of meritocracy, were often unsympathetic to their peers if they were not successful.

## **8.7 Religious identity and aspirations**

An important feature of my sample was that almost half of my students identified themselves as belonging to a religious group (n=13). The religion most strongly represented was Islam but a range of students described themselves as Hindu or Christian. Therefore, my sample, by virtue of its religiosity, was far from representative of the wider UK population. As was made clear in the previous chapters, religion and ethnic membership was important to my interviewees' sense of identity. I argued that students' ethnic and religious identities both promoted academic success but also constrained the educational and career pathways they could pursue. My data suggests that for many of the religious students, and particularly the Muslim students, their religious identity shaped aspirations through promoting particular visions of the good life and norms of behaviour. The focal point of their comments was on creating a consonance between their identities as a good Muslim, which entailed certain normative

commitments, and the educational and occupational pathways they thought were compatible with this. This provided a strong set of principles for guiding their choices; it provided a powerful source of motivation that was essential for understanding the decisions many of the students took and the meaning they attached to their aspirations. Given the benefits and costs associated with being seen to be an upstanding member of their religious community it should hardly be surprising that their religious identity played an important part in how they thought about the future.

In asserting their religious identity through their aspirations, students revealed the close connections with their ideas of being a 'good Muslim' with being a 'good pupil'. In discussing their futures, many students with religious convictions, not just Muslim students, framed their choices through the normative demands that their religion and religious communities placed upon them. Often this took the form of having strong pro-social convictions such as 'helping others' and clear deontic rules that they must follow in order to receive praise and recognition from other members of their religious group:

Rubel: With me it's all about content, and generally living my life according to my religion. If you see good, you do good, you act upon it. And if you see something wrong, then you try to prevent it, or like aid it, somehow help.

For Rubel, religion was a core part of his identity and informed his whole worldview. The relationship between religion, identity and aspirations was discussed at some length by one particular student. Throughout our discussion of his plans for the future, he regularly invoked the importance of following his religion closely:

Yaseen: So I think my religion ... makes me a better person. It teaches us every aspect of life – morals, ethics, how to brush our teeth, how to wash ourselves, how to have a shower, how to even go to the loo. How to eat, everything you can imagine, it's religion. And a lot of the stuff in religion, it's like between ethics and moral right and wrong.

He drew attention not only to how his religion provided guidance for mundane activities relating to personal hygiene but also made a direct connection between religion and ethics – it provided a guide to how he should evaluate actions as either being right or wrong. This provided a powerful influence on how he thought about his educational choices and possible careers. He continued:

Yaseen: Not even just in your job but like all the time, you should help other people. It's just morally right, and so many people have helped you, and you'd want people to help you if you were stuck so treat someone else how you'd like to be treated, and like also from a religious point of view, my religion tells me to help other people.

This passage, and our conversation, made it clear that his aspirations were deeply tied to his religious beliefs. They provided him with duties to help others through his career and in his day-to-day life. I would argue that it is impossible to understand his aspirations without paying attention to the importance he attaches to being a good Muslim. Rather than being concerned with pursuing positional advantage or seeing education in largely instrumental terms, he appeared much more motivated by being consistent to the values associated with his religion. For many of the students I interviewed, religion was both a significant source of meaning and motivation. Yaseen went on to explicitly link his educational and occupational aspirations with his religious beliefs.

Yaseen: In our religion it says that we have to ... we can't just be like just staying at home and just eating and stuff, we have to go out there and do stuff, and so like having a job will mean you're doing something. Especially like if I'm going into medicine, then I'll be helping people and doing something that's good. Like if you save a life, that's like saving the whole of humanity. So if I'm a doctor and I save lives, it'll just be wonderful. You don't even need the wage.

Although Yaseen was particularly vocal about the link between aspirations and religion he was far from unique. A range of students talked about how they felt their religion demanded that they made particular life choices. With regard to choice of university, students also wanted to attend other institutions where there were a large number of students from their own religious denomination. Thus, I found that religion was part of what made their aspirations moral rather than rational.

## **8.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the normative dimension of young peoples' aspirations. I began by briefly placing the argument of the chapter into its theoretical context; I then examined the interconnections between students' aspirations, ideas of character and its development, and their sense of self-worth. This was followed by looking at how moral concepts, language and evaluation was central to how they created distinctions

between themselves and others – holding high aspirations was shown to be an important part of this process. My main argument has been that holding and expressing high aspirations was part of how students both fashion a positive sense of identity and position themselves within peer social hierarchies. Such moralised aspirations acted as an important source of motivation and I found that students attempted to ‘fashion their present selves to cohere with an idealized future’ (Frye 2012).

Understanding the world and the actions of others in moral terms seems to be a pervasive feature of human experience (Sayer 2011). It helps us define who we are and creates categories that help us organise our relationships to others; in this chapter I have tried to show how aspirations are related to this. In doing so, I have been able to further develop an answer to the third qualitative research question: what meaning do students attach to their aspirations? The data in this chapter suggests that aspirations assumed great significance for the participants because they are fundamentally understood in moral terms. Holding and pursuing high aspirations was understood not simply as part of being a ‘good’ student but also as part of being a ‘good individual’ – one who is morally praiseworthy, providing them with reasons for pursuing particular courses of action. High aspirations were also a way in which students positioned themselves as superior to their less educationally focused peers or more like other young people on whom they wanted to model themselves.

In making this argument, I have provided a distinctive take on the aspirations of my interviewees. Rather than focusing on how aspirations were related to available opportunities, ‘capitals’ or related to others resources, my focus has been on the expressive function that aspirations had. Like Frye, I find that aspirations can fruitfully be ‘interpreted not as rational calculations, but instead as assertions of a virtuous identity, claims to be “one who aspires”’ (Frye 2012: 298). I also found that ideas of moral behaviour, in the context of aspiration, played an important role in ‘boundary work’, that is, they were important in establishing differences and similarities between individual and group identities. In the next chapter, when I draw my findings together,

I argue that analyses that fail to take into account this perspective on aspirations are likely to be missing something important. In particular, they are likely to have a narrow understanding of what motivates young people to make the choices they do and is, therefore, likely to be psychologically unrealistic.

## Chapter 9

### Discussion

#### 9.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I have analysed and discussed a range of data relating to young people's aspirations in England. In this chapter, I provide a more sustained theoretical discussion of my arguments and evidence, and in doing so, draw the various strands of my project together. I begin the chapter by discussing the broader context within which my study is placed and highlight how young people's aspirations tell us about certain dimensions of social change in the 21st century. I then briefly discuss how we can fruitfully analyse differences in aspirations between advantaged and disadvantaged students. This is followed by a discussion of how my data supports an ecological approach to the study of aspirations; I qualify this claim by emphasising the importance of family life when analysing how aspirations are formed. In the next section, I argue that my data draws attention to certain weaknesses and blind-spots in how aspirations are currently studied, and as a consequence, our understanding of them remains partial and relatively crude.

In this chapter, I am attempting to make my positive case for how we *should* think about aspirations in light of my findings. I suggest what a good theory of aspirations should include if it is to be empirically plausible. This modest attempt at theory construction provides an answer to the second of my main research questions: how theoretically

should we understand aspirations? This question has received less attention from researchers who have more generally focused on establishing the connections between aspirations and educational and occupational attainment. Unfortunately, this lack of focus hampers us in developing a comprehensive account of how aspirations shape choices, behaviours and outcomes. A further consequence of this absence is that it has let some rather unsatisfactory approaches remain central to the field for the simple reason, as the old adage goes, you can't beat something with nothing.

## **9.2 Aspirations at the start of the 21st century**

In broad terms, my sources of data are complementary and connected because they tell us about young people's aspirations at the start of the 21st century; a time when the message of 'university for all' is widely promoted by policymakers and teachers in the UK. For good or ill, attending university is now taken to be the defining marker of productive youth development. Over the course of fifty years, the UK has shifted from being a country where university was the preserve of a relatively small strata of society to being a place where over half of all young people will go on to achieve some form of degree level qualification.

Partly this is because the twin pressures of globalisation and technological change have convinced policymakers that expanding higher education is essential for maintaining the country's competitiveness and that young people need to be educated to work in the 'knowledge economy' (Ball 2008; Brown et al. 1997; Lauder et al. 2006). My findings relate directly to this broader story of social change. Not because I examine the transition rates or educational attainment of young people but because I examine their educational and occupational aspirations against this backdrop. My data suggests that, broadly speaking, young people have internalised the idea that investing in education is essential for getting ahead in contemporary societies. Therefore, although if we look at transition rates we are not yet in an era of 'university for all', we have certainly moved into an era when high aspirations for university now appear to be the norm.

The majority of young people in England report that attending university is their preferred destination after they have completed compulsory education (Attwood and Croll 2011). Whatever the facts of the matter are about how much young people *enjoy* investing so heavily in education, it cannot be denied that most young people appear committed to pursuing further educational qualifications. By way of contrast, the EPPSE study suggests that very few young people want to leave the education system at the earliest opportunity and enter the labour market. My qualitative data cannot be used to directly evaluate this broader pattern. However, it does provide some complementary insights. It suggests that even those considered as ‘non-traditional’ students, those with few financial resources, and those with only modest levels of achievement, increasingly see university as a realistic prospect. The students that formed my small and purposive sample perceived education as being critical for competing in a dynamic and congested labour market. I would argue that the evidence presented in this thesis is suggestive of how young people increasingly see university as *the* optimal strategy for achieving social advancement.

My sources of data further overlap in that they point towards a potential problem. Young people’s aspirations for university appear to be tied to their aspirations for achieving professional, middle-class occupations. Many are likely to be disappointed when they enter the labour market because aspirations appear to be running a long way ahead of available opportunities. As it stands, the demand for middle-class jobs far outstrips supply. This problem has been made particularly acute in recent years because of the recession and growing income inequality. Worryingly, a striking expectation among my interviewees was that if they went to university they would almost certainly be able to achieve safe and secure employment as adults; this appears to be overly optimistic. There is a tension between encouraging high aspirations and the reality that contemporary labour markets are not able to accommodate all of those seeking middle-class jobs. This is why recent scholars have talked about the breakdown of the ‘opportunity bargain’: significant numbers of young people who are willing to invest in

education, and thus keeping up their side of the ‘deal’, will not enter the middle classes – the historical pay-off for getting a degree (Brown and Lauder 2011).

Rather than facing up to this reality, policymakers continue to promote high aspirations and focus on the benefits of going to university, such as increased earning power. This may be good advice. But, they are less forthcoming about the economic challenges young people face in competing for jobs when so many of their peers also have university degrees and labour markets are becoming increasingly polarised. The policy problem my data helps highlight is not one of low aspirations. Instead, the key challenge is this: how can we build a society that creates the conditions in which young people’s reasonable hopes about getting an education and, in turn, a job that provides the means to live a secure and dignified life, have a chance of being realised?

### 9.3 Theorising differences

My data are interconnected not only because they reveal that young people have high aspirations but also because they shed light onto how aspirations *differ* between groups of students. Throughout this thesis, I have shown that there are non-trivial differences in aspirations by sociologically relevant background characteristics. Of particular importance, given the social and political context in which this thesis is written, are the differences I identified based on parental income, education and social class. My data offers support for the claim that there are at least *some* differences along these lines.

Advantaged students were more likely to express high aspirations and preferences for attending university compared to working-class and poorer students. How should we make sense of this? In much of the literature, and in parts of this thesis, emphasis has been placed on analysing these differences in terms of ‘high’ and ‘low’ aspirations. Furthermore, in the current policy discourse those who do not express strong university preferences are assumed to have low aspirations. I want to suggest that a related but more nuanced approach would be helpful. I argue that my data offers support for the

claim that there is more *heterogeneity* among less advantaged students in the pathways they are willing to consider after post-compulsory education. Conversely, more advantaged students are more resolutely focused on a single goal: attending university.

Let me expand on this point. There was little *variability* among advantaged students in my study. University appeared to be the ‘default’ choice and the only pathway that the vast majority of advantaged students gave serious consideration to. This offers further support to the existing literature that stresses that for middle-class students, university is simply a ‘natural’ part of their trajectory towards adulthood and parents intensely socialise their children towards this goal. Parents did not simply hope or want them to attend – they *expected* them to. Students reported that these strong expectations had an important effect on their parents’ behaviours. For some of the more advantaged students not going to university was simply unthinkable; it would have been interpreted as a failure. We should therefore recognise that the range of options that they considered was in fact relatively narrow.

In contrast, my qualitative data suggested that disadvantaged students considered a broader range of options after finishing compulsory education; although it should not be forgotten that similarly to the more advantaged students, university was still the destination of choice. However, among the non-middle-class students a different cultural model could also be observed, one in which a wider number of post-college pathways were discussed as being possible and socially acceptable, including not going to university and directly entering the labour market.

I suggest that the greater variation in aspirations among non-middle-class students could be because they are more likely to have interacted with significant others, such as peers, parents and wider social ties, who have not been to university but are still living successful lives in the students’ eyes (Harding 2010). If relatively disadvantaged students are more likely to come into contact with different models of achievement then some

may conclude that they can be successful without going to university. The overall effect may be to lead them to keep a broader range of future options open. Rather than focusing on 'low' aspirations, which can have pejorative overtones, it might instead be that variability among disadvantaged students in their desire to pursue education stems, at least in part, from the fact that non-university choices and pathways are not stigmatised in the way they are by middle-class parents and families. This may offer an explanation for differences between advantaged and disadvantaged students that does not resort to a deficit model of non-university choice.

A further way of theorising differences in aspirations is to recognise that they are, in some important respects, sensitive to the means people have for realising them. Although below I criticise this 'resources' based model of aspirations for being too narrow, there is a crucial way in which it tracks something important. For example, the caution and relative lack of optimism I observed among some students appeared to be related to the socially and economically deprived contexts they faced. This made developing university based aspirations more difficult and may be because the challenges in their day-to-day lives made planning for the future significantly harder. Several of the students found it impossible to think and plan for the future because their present circumstances were so chaotic.

A focus of my qualitative data but *not* my quantitative data was on ethnic identity and its relationship to aspirations. As I explained in Chapters 3 and 4, the EPPSE sample was not large enough for detailed statistical analyses to be carried out on ethnic minority participants. This was unfortunate because potentially there are non-trivial differences in aspirations by ethnic background. The ethnic identity of my interviewees appeared to have an important impact on how they thought about the future. For some, their aspirations were tied up with a narrative of moving to the UK for a better life; also there seemed to be social and cultural resources that parents could draw upon to promote high aspirations in their children. For example, I described how some of my interviewees reported how social ties outside of the family offered help that their parents could draw

upon to deal with the day-to-day challenges of raising children in a disadvantaged urban environment. This small sample of students from East London offered a window onto a particular sub-population of the 'high aspirations' generation. It suggests that among certain disadvantaged populations there exists a strong cultural attachment to university that persisted even in the absence of financial resources. We should therefore understand that cultural processes matter for the formation of aspirations and that they are not *reducible* to material and social resources.

At various points in this thesis I have suggested that my interviewees are part of the 'new East End'. They are drawn from an ethnically diverse part of the capital that has a range of immigrant populations. Butler and Hamnett (2011) argue that among these groups there is an increasing sense of optimism and a commitment to education which they believe offers a meritocratic pathway to social mobility. My data offers partial support to this perspective. On the one hand, my interviewees did appear to be hopeful and optimistic. On the other hand, when I had dug a little deeper into their aspirations I also found that they were cautious and worried about the future. My focus on the 'new East End' draws attention to how local conditions can shape how young people think about themselves and the future. It suggests that subtle features of locality are important for understanding aspirations; this could clearly be seen in the qualitative data. Unfortunately, nationally representative studies are less able to pick up on these factors. I would argue that this underscores the benefits of adopting a mixed methods approach to studying aspirations that also focuses on specific areas in detail.

#### **9.4 Aspirations: An ecological approach?**

A further way in which my data are connected is that they both suggest that young people and their aspirations should be understood in ecological terms. It is now well known that numerous social settings exert a powerful influence on young people's capacities and outcomes (Sampson 2012). A range of macro-social structures such as schools, governments and social institutions matter, as do other micro-social settings such as the family home and the interpersonal relationships found within them. In order

to explain young people's development we must be sensitive to the 'social ecology of development': the numerous and interacting social environments in which individuals are embedded. While the social settings we inhabit shape us all, those experienced during childhood and adolescence are particularly powerful. Research by Bronfenbrenner and his collaborators suggests that the family, peer groups, neighbourhoods and schools are critical contexts that shape young people's development (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Evans 2000). The evidence from the EPPSE project offers broad support for this perspective. Both the qualitative and quantitative components point to effects on young people's educational and social outcomes that are attributable to these social domains.

Although I did not fully adopt Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development, I would argue that the idea of taking an ecological perspective of young people's aspirations is analytically productive. My data revealed that a wide range of factors and settings contributed to their formation. For example, my quantitative data revealed that processes associated with the family, neighbourhoods and teachers were all predictive of students' holding high aspirations. This was complemented by my qualitative data; it drew attention to the diversity of mechanisms that appeared to shape how young people approached decisions regarding education and the labour market. Given this diversity, my data supports the claim that we should understand that aspirations emerge from the dynamic interplay of these various social contexts. At the same time, we should also treat aspirations as emerging from the influence of these contexts and the agency of the young people themselves. Both the findings from the EPPSE study and my own qualitative data clearly show that young people are active participants in their social worlds rather than being passively shaped by them.

However, I should also qualify this claim. It should not be underestimated just how important family life and parental socialisation appeared to be for my interviewees. In broader terms, the family is the first and most important social environment that we inhabit. Family life is pivotal in shaping the cognitive and social development of young

people; it also influences young people's eventual academic and social attainment. This could clearly be seen in my data. Parents shaped their children's interactions with other people and institutions, provided support, guided behaviour and tried to socialise their children to value particular ways of life. With regard to aspirations, my qualitative data suggests that an ecological approach to aspirations needs to also recognise how influential the family is relative to other settings.

This insight draws attention to where my data are complementary: my qualitative data was well-suited to exploring the relationship between aspirations and family life but this could not be explored in detail by my quantitative data. In the quantitative part of my thesis, the home learning environment was not a statistically significant predictor of high aspirations, although my quantitative results also revealed that caring about their parents' views of subject choice was significant. I noted in Chapter 4 that the fact that the early home environment was not significant was partially unexpected because the EPPSE project found that it was a central developmental context. In particular, it helped explain why some disadvantaged children 'succeeded against the odds'. However, I cautioned against dismissing the home environment as an important context in which high aspirations were developed. This was because I suspected that the complex ways in which family socialisation works was not captured in my models.

In contrast, my interview data showed just how important the family and home environment was for understanding my interviewees' aspirations. In Chapter 6, I discussed at length parents' reported attitudes and behaviours; these shaped not only the educational trajectories of their children but also their sense of identity. A clear finding was that parents, for the most part, tried to instil high aspirations in their children; which the children in turn appeared to internalise. Parents were pivotal in socialising their children towards high aspirations. This could not be precisely drawn out by my quantitative data but is consonant with the general findings from the EPPSE study: parenting practices and the home learning environment are central to explaining why children are educationally successful. So, although my findings offer support for an

ecological approach to aspirations it also suggests that within this framework it is likely to be the family that is actually the most important arena in which young people's aspirations are formed.

My data provides support for Siraj and Mayo's concept of 'active cultivation' (2014). I would argue that 'parenting towards high aspirations' was an important way in which 'cultivation' operated amongst the families in my study. Similarly to Siraj and Mayo, it was not simply the case that the parents of my interviewees straightforwardly engaged in 'concerted cultivation'. Parents did not have the money, knowledge and social connections to support their children in the same way as middle class parents do. However, they engaged in 'active cultivation'. Often this meant offering support and encouragement in the absence of financial resources. Parents also sought to promote the academic success of their children by stressing the importance of education and attributes such as hard-work.

## **9.5 A critique of RAT and Bourdieu**

In this next section, I further discuss the upshot of my findings for the existing literature and how they challenge some of the dominant theoretical models of aspirations. I believe the strongest way in which my sources of data are linked together is that they can be brought to bear on evaluating the adequacy of the existing literature on aspirations. Thus, a core claim I make is that my project is a mixed methods one by virtue of the fact my data can engage with the same theoretical issues. The fact that my data allows me to test, evaluate and improve upon existing theory shows the intellectual value of my approach. My answer to the second research question – 'How theoretically should we understand aspirations?' – emerges from trying to overcome some weaknesses of existing theories. Thus, although I am broadly critical in my comments, they are also constructive in that they provide a useful springboard for my own positive argument about the best way to theorise aspirations.

In earlier chapters, I have expressed dissatisfaction with both RAT's and Bourdieu's approaches to the study of aspirations; the focus on Bourdieu is particularly important because his influence in educational research and the sociology of education is so pervasive. Interestingly, despite their superficial differences, these theoretical approaches share a good deal of common ground and my criticisms converge on two important problems. The first is that both adopt what I call a wholly 'resources based model' of aspirations. I argue that this approach struggles to explain why aspirations are generally high and is problematic because it tends to blur together distinct social processes that we should treat as analytically distinct. It is a weakness because it seems that a dizzying array of potential mechanisms tend to get subsumed into this more general framework.

My second major criticism is what I call the 'motivation problem' for these theories. Both consistently assume that the prime reason people have for acting is that they are trying to seek social advancement through their educational and occupational choices. It is an undeniable feature of these theories, and much of the work that emerges from them, that people's primary motivations are to do with social reproduction; language related to this goal pervades discussions of how young people and their families understand the world around them. There is some truth to the resource model of aspirations and the motivational account underpinning both RAT and Bourdieu's work. It is not my goal to entirely reject these ways of looking at aspiration but, more sympathetically, to suggest that they downplay or miss out certain aspects of aspirations that do in fact matter.

I begin with the resource-based model of aspirations. RAT analyses generally claim that aspirations (and related concepts such as wants or desires) reflect an evaluation of the costs and benefits of pursuing particular courses of action and the means people have for achieving them. As such, if people have fewer resources at their disposal and see pursuing certain educational pathways as 'risky' then their educational and occupational aspirations are likely to reflect these constraints. Bourdieu's view, and those that draw on him, are not dissimilar. The reliance on his notion of capitals generally leads to the

assumption that aspirations are, in important respects, a function of the amount of capitals that individuals and groups possess. According to Bourdieu, people's aspirations are also adaptive in the sense that if individuals do not think or believe that they are capable of achieving certain ends, they will cultivate dispositions that lead them not to want them in the first place.

At first glance my data does seem to offer some support for this general approach: aspirations are non-trivially stratified by social background and my interviews did suggest that social, cultural and financial goods mattered for students' ability to develop and then pursue particular post-college plans. However, the weaknesses of the resources based model are exposed by the fact that most of the children in the EPPSE sample want to go to university – even those we have good reason to think have few resources or opportunities. If aspirations were shaped by resources to anything like the extent these theories suggest then we should observe a much closer association than we actually do. Thus, while not being entirely wrong this perspective seems to have only weak predictive power. My interviewees who were from some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country still cultivated high aspirations even in the absence of the resources that these theories generally take to be important.

A related concern is that resources or capitals are too coarse as concepts. In sociological research, capitals are often used in an incredibly permissive sense, referring to almost any process that leads to intergroup differences; and when the three standard capitals are found wanting another type of capital (e.g. bodily capital) is simply created. By casting everything that shapes aspirations, from network composition, cultural practices, income and understanding of institutions, as simply being reflections of capitals or resources seems a rather blunt approach. A more nuanced approach that pays attention to the specific mechanisms would be productive here. The range of factors identified in my analyses as important for shaping aspirations, such as parental education, relationships with teachers, a desire to achieve security, and gender and ethnic identity, suggests a complex range of overlapping forces at work. Rather subsuming all of this under the

label of resources or capitals, a more disaggregated approach is called for. This would allow us to dissect the full range of factors that shape aspirations, and how these in turn shape outcomes, without adopting unnecessary theoretical baggage or grouping together mechanisms that seem only vaguely related.

My findings also draw attention to a second major problem which I call the ‘motivation problem’. Both RAT and Bourdieusian models of behaviour overwhelmingly focus on how people are motivated, almost exclusively, by a desire to achieve class reproduction: people are assumed to use their resources in the pursuit of economic and social advancement. The motivational picture is broadly one of individuals and groups pursuing their own interests. I do not deny that concerns about social reproduction *are* a concern for many people; my concern is that many analyses of aspirations, and educational inequality, often focus on this to the exclusion of other sources of reasons or motivation. When this approach is applied to the study of aspirations they are simply interpreted as a preference for pursuing positional advantage.

I was struck in my interviews at how poor and partial a job such perspectives did in making sense of these young people’s lives, how they understood the world around them, and what they wanted to do in the future. They cared about a range of things: jobs, money, friends, fairness – and they wanted to develop into a particular type of person – someone who is respected but also worthy of that respect. The ‘motivation problem’ is that the theories discussed above seem to have relatively little to say about the roles these concerns play in young people’s lives; as such they give a dramatically simplified and one-dimensional account of social life. I would argue that a great deal of current thinking about aspirations is hampered by having an unnecessarily restrictive view of motivation for action and failing to do justice to the meaning students ascribe to their aspirations. What I wish to defend, then, is the idea that this *is* what we need to do justice to.

## 9.6 Problems in the general literature

My discussion so far has been quite narrow: I have focused on two of the dominant sociological approaches to aspirations. However, I think my argument is also relevant to other less theoretically oriented work in this area. The problem here is not one of having a poor theory of aspirations but of almost not having one at all. A relatively large amount of quantitative work is a-theoretical and simply takes aspirations as a given – a construct to simply be used as an independent variable in the statistical analysis of secondary datasets. Such research is generally more concerned with policy oriented questions relating to the connections between aspirations and outcomes. As a consequence, less attention is given to the content of aspirations – what they consist in and whether it is as straightforward as just describing them as a preference. My data draws attention to the diversity and richness of young people's aspirations, as the above discussion makes clear; this means the term itself needs to be thought through and appropriately theorised.

I would argue that too much research works with a 'thin' conception of aspirations. A concern here is that explanations of how aspirations matter will be restricted because we do not have an understanding of how they are motivationally important and how they relate to people's sense of self. Having a richer or 'thicker' conception of what aspirations are would, I think, enable researchers to provide more realistic micro-foundations for their attempts to link aspirations to outcomes. For example, this richer conception of aspirations would be sensitive to the fact that they can usefully be theorised as a cultural tool that young people use to create a positive sense of self-worth in a society that not only stigmatises the disadvantaged but valorises university attendance as a normatively desirable goal. Such a conception of aspirations does, I propose, offer a plausible way forward for making sense of why aspirations are so high across all social groups, including the disadvantaged.

Furthermore, very few studies of aspirations pay attention to or even recognise that young people often experience the world and their choices in evaluative and normative terms. This is despite the evidence that such concerns are central to young people's sense

of self and provide meaning to their actions. I believe that any theory which fails to give weight to this is in danger of not having sufficient adequacy at the level of meaning. This is not a trivial point. Our theories should track what young people are actually like and what they care about. If we are building theories of social action which are so lop-sided and one-dimensional I suspect that important aspects of social behaviour will remain a mystery and our explanations will not be as successful as they could be. Understanding how young people make decisions about education and the labour market is about as big a social concern as we have – and yet we are still unsure about how students respond to the incentives, opportunities and costs of education. It is therefore imperative that we are working with a rich, and, if necessary, complicated account of what young people are like. I discuss in the next chapter what the upshot of this is for future research studies. For now, I only want to stress the importance of understanding aspirations in moral terms – young people approach their choices as something they *should* do. This offers a useful complement to my claim that educational and occupational aspirations are also tied to concerns with achieving security and managing risk.

## 9.7 Conclusion

Let me return to the question with which I began this chapter. How theoretically should we understand aspirations? First, we should recognise that analysing the aspirations of young people today tells us about patterns of social change. In particular, they tell us about how young people respond to and make sense of mass higher education during troubled economic times. Second, there is significant value in adopting an ecological approach to aspirations. This means looking at how young people are embedded in a range of interacting social contexts; we should be attuned to the fact that aspirations are shaped by institutions, impersonal macro-economic forces, and the most intimate human relationships. While adopting an ecological approach, we should place the family at centre stage: parents and family life appear to be pivotal in shaping young people's aspirations. Third, young people are also active in constructing and pursuing their plans for the future: they are not simply conditioned into wanting certain goals but actively *choose* to follow certain pathways. They weigh up options and think seriously about what they want for their lives. Fourth, I suggest aspirations can fruitfully be interpreted as

being a cultural tool that young people use to define their sense of self, create a positive social identity and distinguish themselves in peer social hierarchies. We need to recognise that aspirations can have a normative dimension: they embody judgements about the good and the sorts of person young people hope to become. This requires going beyond seeing aspirations as straightforward statements about education and jobs.

My theoretical conclusions emerge from the fact that the different empirical parts of my project are linked together. In this chapter, I have attempted to draw attention to these linkages. The theoretical pay-off for adopting a mixed methods approach provides the grounds for making the following methodological claim: for a project to count as mixed methods it is not a *necessary* condition that the data be drawn directly from the same sample population. I would argue that a study can be treated as mixed method if multiple forms of data are used to study the same underlying phenomenon. What matters is that the data *converge* onto the same object of enquiry. My study looks at the same concept – aspirations – my data speak to the same public policy issues and importantly both sources of data allow me to engage with the same set of important theoretical issues. Of course, it is important not to overstretch myself and claim that my particular research design is unproblematic. The fact that my source of data are from different sample populations did not necessarily work to my advantage. For example, the ability of the EPPSE project team to generalise from their findings and identify important social mechanisms came from the fact that the study was so well integrated. My inferences would have been strengthened if my own design was more fully integrated

## **Chapter 10**

### **Conclusion**

#### **10.1 Introduction**

This study has been about the aspirations of young people in England. The goal has been to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how aspirations are shaped, the meaning they have for young people, and how they may subsequently inform behaviours and outcomes. My choice of study has been motivated by two factors. Both are related to educational inequality. First, anyone who follows education policy with much attention cannot help but notice that aspirations have become a focal point in discussions about why educational inequality persists. It is therefore critical that social scientists engage with this important area of public policy. Second, social scientists have long recognised that motivations for educational and occupational choices are not straightforwardly related to behaviours. Therefore making sense of aspirations, and related constructs such as attitudes, beliefs, and values is important for the explanatory depth of our theories – a good theory of educational inequality has to have something to say about what people want and why they want the things they do. It is therefore crucial that we examine data on these phenomena. My thesis makes a contribution to this area of research.

## 10.2 Thesis overview

I began this thesis by attempting to provide an intellectual justification for my project. In Chapter 1, I highlighted the fact that aspirations have become increasingly central to debates around educational inequality in the UK and they have also been an object of enquiry in the sociology of education and the social sciences more broadly. I also provided an overview of the various research questions that would be guiding my thesis.

Chapter 2 focused on reviewing the relevant background literature. I began by sketching out some of the historical and political context around education reform in the UK. In doing so, I showed that the focus on aspirations is relatively recent but is tied to long-standing debates about the causes and consequences of educational inequality. After reviewing the relevant literature I concluded that although important research in this area abounded we still have a limited understanding of the full range of mechanisms that shape aspirations and how they matter for young people's outcomes. This provided a justification for my own project.

In Chapter 3, I described my research questions and design in detail. I explained that adopted a mixed methods design that drew on data from the EPPSE study and twenty-nine semi-structured interviews. I argued that adopting this approach allowed me to look at young people's aspirations in a broader perspective while also allowing me to focus in on the aspirations of a particular group of young people. I presented my research questions, described how the data was collected and how it was analysed.

Chapter 4 was the first empirical chapter. In this quantitative chapter I analysed a subset of data from the EPPSE project and focused on the aspirations of participants at the age of 14. I began with some basic descriptive statistics and showed that while there were indeed some differences by important background characteristics most students expressed high aspirations for achieving a university degree. I then presented the results of a series of binary logistic regression models that looked at the factors predicting high

aspirations. I concluded the chapter by emphasising how my data offered little support for the poverty of aspirations thesis.

Across the next four chapters I discussed the qualitative part of my thesis. Chapter 5 was concerned with summarising my interview data and providing an introductory overview of interviewees and their lives. The focus of Chapter 6 was on the dynamics of family life and how this was essential for making sense of students' aspirations and the development of their plans for the future. Most parents were also reported to see education as essential to achieving upward social mobility. I argued that they were able to transmit their aspirations and expectations to their children through their ability to sanction, monitor and guide the behaviour of their children. I suggested that aspirations can usefully be thought of as a family affair.

In the next two chapters, I shifted my analytical focus and looked more closely at the meaning that aspirations had for them. In Chapter 7, I argued that the majority of students held a particular orientation to the future – I called this an 'achieving security' orientation. Simply put, the young people I interviewed stressed that education was a means of avoiding financial hardship. My data suggested that an achieving security orientation was less common among students from more advantaged backgrounds. In the final empirical chapter, I continued to explore the meaning aspirations had for students. I suggested that moral concepts and language were a core component of how they talked about their aspirations and how they evaluated the actions of others. I argued that normative beliefs and desires were central to how they framed their aspirations. I suggested that aspirations can be analysed as a moral project.

In this thesis, I have critically analysed the dominant approaches to the study of aspirations found in the sociology of education and educational research. In the previous chapter, I discussed the consequences of my findings on this body of work. I criticised them largely on the grounds that the predictions that seemed to flow from their theoretical claims were not borne out. The focus of much of my criticism was on how

RAT and Bourdieu approach the study of aspirations and social behaviour more generally. An important focus of this thesis has been on evaluating and testing theories. I have done so because I believe there is much to be gained, in terms of bringing clarity to the study of aspirations and educational outcomes, by testing their component parts, especially their motivational and behavioural assumptions. I see the testing of theory against empirical data far preferable than adopting a particular theoretical 'lens' and simply taking its assumptions as given. This strategy is far more likely to lead us to develop the tools necessary to accurately describe and evaluate complex social phenomena. As a consequence of adopting this approach, I hope to have drawn attention to weaknesses in existing theories. The main issues are that they exaggerate the extent to which aspirations are straightforwardly related to social background and have made some unwarranted motivational assumptions. In addition to my critical agenda, I have also suggested how our thinking about aspirations should be extended if we are to understand young people's lives and the choices they make.

### **10.3 Policy implications**

The findings in this thesis have several implications for public policy. The data I have presented in the foregoing chapters leads to the following conclusion: we need to drastically rethink and challenge the terms of the debate around aspirations and their alleged relationship to educational inequality. As it stands, it is highly misleading to claim that a distinctive feature of disadvantaged young people is that they have low aspirations. Instead of being a useful analytical concept, which it can be for social scientists, aspiration seems more regularly to serve an ideological function for governments: it can be used to justify quite radical changes in public policy and provides a convenient explanation if the reforms that are introduced are not successful. The focus on aspirations by policymakers has at times taken the form of 'blaming the victim' for not taking responsibility for their lives. Both my qualitative and quantitative data expose how problematic – and to put it more forcefully, how bankrupt and pernicious this idea is. It is far more plausible that differences in educational outcomes persist because of broader patterns of social and economic inequality rather than the attitudes and preferences of

young people themselves. The focus should be on increasing the resources and opportunities available to disadvantaged young people.

My thesis has sought to contribute to this debate by looking in a very straightforward way at what young people's aspirations actually are. The importance of having a simple message should not be underestimated. If governments and ministers are not faced with easily digestible data about what the world around them is actually like they have a tendency to draw on information and ideas that confirms what they already think: this is what social scientists mean by confirmation bias. Or, they will ignore the evidence entirely and pursue their own intuitions. An important part of what social scientists can do, in terms of trying to hold governments to account, is to try and distil simple but important messages about issues such as social and educational inequality that are backed up with the best available empirical evidence. If politicians choose to ignore this then there is almost nothing we can do – but providing evidence about important social challenges and trends remains important. This thesis makes a modest contribution to this goal.

There are also some more specific policy implications. The empirical evidence in this thesis and elsewhere suggests that most young people are interested in going to university, and the presence of an 'anti-school' or 'anti-education' culture among the poor or working class is very small. Therefore, rather than seeking to raise aspirations, a more constructive approach would be to continue to invest resources in making sure disadvantaged young people can access the information and opportunities they need to give them the best possible chance for pursuing their educational goals. In concrete terms this means making sure teachers and advisors can give tailored advice to people with little experience of higher education, thus making sure that they understand the potential implications of A-level subject choices, university subject choice, and the complicated hierarchies of UK higher education. This means being clear about the returns to education but also that these returns are not guaranteed. Young people deserve a more honest assessment about the role education plays in society rather than

being told, rather misleadingly, that educational qualifications are straightforwardly the engine of social mobility.

#### **10.4 Weaknesses**

Like all research projects there are ways in which my study could have been improved. It was unfortunate I could only adopt a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal perspective on aspirations. At the start of the project I had hoped to have access to later phases of the EPPSE study; unfortunately this was not made available to me by the Department for Education. The advantages of longitudinal designs are that they are well suited for evaluating change over time and are better able to look at the causal ordering between variables. Adopting a longitudinal approach would have allowed me to explore any reciprocal relationships between attitudes and dispositions towards schooling and levels of educational attainment. Thus, longitudinal studies would place us on firmer ground in understanding the relationship between aspirations, social background and outcomes. Thankfully, studies such as the British Cohort studies and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LYPSE) are well placed to investigate this. In the future, I hope to be able draw on these studies to investigate in more detail the interplay between aspirations, behaviours and outcomes.

My interview data also was not longitudinal. All of my participants were only interviewed once. Although this generated a large amount of rich data it would still have been preferable to interview them on at least one other occasion. However, as I observed in Chapter 3, given the limitations of time, this would have been impossible. Ideally, I would have re-interviewed them after they had all made their post-college decisions and again after they had left. The advantage of this strategy is that it would have enabled me to see if their aspirations developed over time, how they related to their actual choices, and in retrospect how the young people I interviewed evaluated their educational and occupational decisions.

Although I spoke to some of the teachers of the college as gatekeepers and informants, a further possible weakness of my study is that I only had the perspectives of students. Given the importance I ascribe to family life in Chapter 6, my data would have been complemented and extended by interviewing the students' parents. This would have allowed me to explore in more detail how parents were involved in the lives of their children, particularly in regard to shaping educational and occupational choices. These complementary perspectives would have placed the claims of the students into a broader context; and would also suggest whether the students' claims were accurate. Clearly, this would have allowed me to build a richer portrait of their lives and dig deeper into the theoretical concerns of this thesis.

My mixed methods design is unusual in that my data are drawn from different sample populations. In this thesis, I have defended this as a viable mixed methods strategy and I believe that the analytical pay-offs for doing so have justified this choice; such an approach has also helped me develop a broad range of skills as a researcher. However, the problems this creates are fairly obvious. By drawing on data from different sample populations, the data specific to each component of my thesis could not be directly used to empirically evaluate the findings of the other. This is the advantage offered by more integrated mixed methods designs, such as the EPPSE study, which can move back and forth between components to iteratively test and develop research questions and hypotheses. Having a more integrated and unified design would also have strengthened the inferences I was able to draw.

## **10.5 Future research**

The findings in this thesis open up a range of directions for future work. An important avenue for research should be the development of more sophisticated and granular measures of young people's aspirations and other concepts relating to young people's attitudes, beliefs and preferences regarding their future. This thesis has shown the value

of asking students to report on the importance they attach to achieving a university degree. However, my findings show relatively small amounts of variation in responses to such questions; this may suggest that they fail to discriminate between significant differences in how young people think about the future and the value they attach to particular courses of action. Furthermore, as university attendance is likely to become even more popular over the next decades, responses to university based aspirations may yield even less variation in responses.

I would argue that there is a need for new survey questions and instruments specifically designed to capture substantive differences in aspirations. A concern with the survey instruments in many of the major cohort studies is that the questions have remained generic and only designed to capture the broadest differences in aspirations. For example, simply asking how important is it to you to get a university degree? Or, do you expect to attend university? While in some respects helpful, such questions are unlikely to yield responses that help us to evaluate in detail between group differences in how and what young people think about the future. Thus, I am arguing for the benefits of collecting data which is specifically designed to address the research questions at hand over the approach of using whatever data is available. We need more fine-grained data about the intensity with which aspirations are held and how young people make decisions between competing alternatives. Getting students to rank the desirability of possible post-compulsory education plans would provide greater information about how individuals from different backgrounds give priority to competing options. This could fruitfully be complemented by asking students to evaluate the returns to education they expect and how they weigh up the costs of particular educational and labour market pathways. Thankfully, research in this area has already begun (Breen et al. 2014; Morgan 2005). This will help us move beyond the coarse measurement techniques often found in large-scale surveys.

I believe that mixed methods, longitudinal studies offer the most promising way forward in studying aspirations. Such an approach would provide an excellent opportunity to

examine the mechanisms through which aspirations are developed, particularly in the family, and how they go on to shape life chances. Adopting a mixed methods approach would not only allow researchers to look at statistical relationships and provide a ‘big-picture’ perspective but also offer the opportunity to ‘drill-down’ into the life-worlds of young people and families. An ambitious approach is required. It is important to follow young people not only through the education system but also onto the labour market. One of the findings emerging from Jay Macloed’s ethnography *Ain’t No Making It* was that the young people who had invested in education experienced anger and frustration when they still remained excluded from the labour market. Given the economic challenges facing young people in the UK, it is important to study whether their aspirations are realised and how young people respond if they are not. The EPPSE study would provide the ideal framework within which to explore these questions. If it were possible, I would aim to extend and analyse the quantitative and qualitative components of the EPPSE project in order to continue studying aspiration and educational inequality in ‘hard times’ as the young people who formed the sample transition into adulthood (Clark and Heath 2014).

An important goal for future research should be to examine how imagined futures are related to conceptions of the ‘good life’ and we should also study more closely the role that normative concepts and values plays in young people’s lives. It is uncontroversial, I hope, to claim that such commitments and values are often central to people’s lives, they engage them in projects and provide meaning to them. Young people’s normative commitments provide insights into their motivation and tell us a great deal about how they understand the world around them. In my own interviews, I found that asking broader questions such as: ‘What does it mean for your life to go well?’ generated incredibly rich data. Current research virtually ignores these aspects of how young people think about the future. Furthermore, more data on perceived opportunities and barriers is required. US studies have shown that focusing on these concerns tells us a great deal about how disadvantaged populations make sense of social mobility and opportunity.

## **10.6 Final reflections**

This study has made a contribution to the study of aspirations and educational inequality more broadly. It suggests that the challenge in the coming decades will not be one of persuading young people of the value of education. Educational inequality is a pervasive social ill in the UK that is much more likely to result from the uneven distribution of opportunities and resources than the aspirations of young people. The young people who took part in this study were hopeful for the future. The task at hand is to build a society and education system that helps rather than hinders them in pursuit of their goals.

## Appendix I

Main code-book for qualitative analysis

| Theme                                        | No. | Code                          | Example quote                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Life history:<br>family, parents<br>and home | 1   | Parent's<br>education         | Other than that she didn't go university or get a degree or anything.                                                                                      |
|                                              | 2   | Parent's<br>occupation        | My mum's a community nurse. My dad's a driving instructor.                                                                                                 |
|                                              | 3   | Siblings                      | Got an older brother, I've got two older sisters, and then I've got a younger brother.                                                                     |
|                                              | 4   | Relationship<br>with parents  | I live with my grandparents, because my mum and my dad are in the police force, so it's quite difficult for me to live with them                           |
|                                              | 5   | Relationship<br>with siblings | ...got my sister and my brother-in-law as well, in one house. So it gets quite loud! But it's alright.                                                     |
|                                              | 6   | Family<br>home                | The building that I live in is terrible. Basically the window outside the house is broken, and the house is terrible.                                      |
|                                              | 7   | Ethnic<br>background          | Obviously mum and dad are from Asia, Pakistan, or Kashmir, somewhere.                                                                                      |
|                                              | 8   | Religious<br>identity         | 'What my dad always says to me is, 'What use is a religion if it doesn't make you a better person?' So I think my religion is to make me a better person.' |

|    |                            |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9  | Experiences at school      | So like, I got bullied in the first year I was there. It was like a whole case of, you know, popular group and everyone suddenly sort of clicks.                                    |
| 10 | Relationship with teachers | Most of the teachers I had were really great. They provided after school workshops and stuff, for anything we didn't feel comfortable with, and I had a really great tutor as well. |
| 12 | Enjoyment of school        | I was always like chatting to teachers, doing my art work. That's probably why I excelled at that subject most.                                                                     |

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Main code-book for qualitative analysis (cont.)

| Theme                                              | No. | Code                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Routine experiences: home, peers and neighbourhood | 1   | Peer groups and friends   | My friends, they were actually a mixture. There was a girl who was half-Turkish and half-Pakistani. There was one Bengali, and there were two other Pakistani girls, there was a Black girl, and then I had so many girls from Africa and Ghana and stuff. |
|                                                    | 2   | Home learning environment | ...we have to share with my other brothers, like three, and it's really, really hard for me to study as well. Cos when I go home it's like a different environment. You know, all the kids there...'                                                       |

|   |                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3 | Definition of neighbourhood               | It's an environment where everyone gets along with each other, yeah. Like in the word 'neighbourhood'? The thing that comes in my head is like little cottages.                             |
| 4 | Relationships with neighbours             | My neighbours, they're both Bengalis. We live in the middle, and there are two Bengali families around us, and they're actually really nice.                                                |
| 5 | Use of local institutions                 | Nothing, honestly. I think they have a youth club. Cos there's a youth centre, but I don't hear nothing happening.                                                                          |
| 6 | Perception of neighbourhood crime         | A lot of people in here, they walk with... they're walking down the road, they have knives on them, they have guns on them, so they do anything for... to like get a little amount of money |
| 7 | Experience of crime                       | I went through this phase where I got mugged four times in the same month.                                                                                                                  |
| 8 | Knowledge and experience of gang activity | Yeah, my friend who used to go to my primary school. He's in a gang now.                                                                                                                    |
| 9 | Perception of neighbourhood safety        | It's nice, yeah. It's weird, like I always feel really safe on my road.                                                                                                                     |

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Main code-book for qualitative analysis (cont.)

| Theme                                                   | No. | Code                            | Example quote                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| College, life, educational and occupational aspirations | 1   | Choosing college                | The main reason was the distance from my house – it was the closest one.                                                                                                          |
|                                                         | 2   | Choosing subjects               | I changed my mind so many times, cos for a while I wanted to do travel and tourism, and then I realised that was like a B-TEC                                                     |
|                                                         | 3   | Parent's attitudes to education | They just like were scared and they think like it's enough, I'm a girl, I should stay at home, cook, clean.                                                                       |
|                                                         | 4   | Parent's and jobs               | They were very open-minded, they weren't the type of parents that they wanted me to become something like a doctor or a lawyer                                                    |
|                                                         | 5   | Advice from peers               | Some of them, the ones that are with me, I talk to them about like... I even ask for their advice as well, like, 'What do you want to do? Do you think this will be right for me? |
|                                                         | 6   | Advice from siblings            | And then my sister was just like giving me advice, telling me how she went through the same thing. She failed all of her A-levels but then went to uni.                           |
|                                                         | 7   | Advice from teachers            | But the woman that interviewed me kind of went, you know... like she knew nothing about me, she made judgments just on the little sheet of numbers about me.                      |
|                                                         | 8   | H.E aspirations                 | If it helps me, then I'll go; if it don't, then there's no point, it's just a waste of money.                                                                                     |

|    |                              |                                                                                                                                               |
|----|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9  | Benefit of H.E (jobs)        | If you're going for a job, the chances of people having a university degree – if it's a good job, not just like Tesco, sort of thing          |
| 10 | Benefits of H.E              | I think it'll be a chance to find who I am really.                                                                                            |
| 11 | Advice from family friends   | Before, I never really knew where I was going, but now, cos one of my brother's friends, he's a doctor, and he was telling me about...        |
| 12 | University choice (status)   | Cos some universities have higher ranks than other.                                                                                           |
| 13 | University choice (distance) | Again, based on proximity to my house, cos I'm really into the idea of economising again, if I want to start a family so financial stability. |

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Main code-book for qualitative analysis (cont.)

| Theme                             | No. | Code                | Example quote                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------|-----|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The future: jobs, family and life | 1   | Career aspirations  | Probably, I would like to be a teacher as well. Cos I really enjoy it, especially I'd like to be a Maths or History teacher. |
|                                   | 2   | Relationships       | hopefully married, stable job, religiously strong, and... that's it to be honest.                                            |
|                                   | 3   | Family and children | Because I don't want to be an old mum. I want to be a young mum. Like if my children are safely at                           |

school, I want to be in my thirties at least.

|    |                    |                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4  | Ideal job          | I don't want a job that's boring, sorry. I want a job that's like, you know, I'm in a good environment...                                                              |
| 5  | Being well-paid    | Doctors... the wages are really good...Cos anywhere in the world you can work and still get paid good money, and you can actually find jobs. Yeah, to become a doctor. |
| 6  | Status             | I know people look up to you. 'Oh she went to uni, she's got a degree, she's smart.'                                                                                   |
| 7  | Security/stability | Just, again, financial stability, you know. And if I want to start a family, then you know, it just provides a certain amount of income as well.                       |
| 8  | Life goals         | ...the main purpose of life is to live happily.                                                                                                                        |
| 9  | Helping others     | Yeah, there's still poor people, but I'm just saying, I hope I grow up, become a good person and help people up.                                                       |
| 10 | Leisure time       | Going on holiday relieves you of stress, And then being able to go on holiday, being able to relax, it's just like a bonus.                                            |

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Main code-book for qualitative analysis (cont.)

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| Theme | No | Code | Example quote |
|-------|----|------|---------------|
|-------|----|------|---------------|

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|                                 |   |                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Navigating<br>personal mobility | 1 | How to<br>succeed<br>(hard-<br>work)        | I just need to work really hard, put my head down, and not focus on anything besides education. Cos if I want Medicine, it's not gonna be easy to get Medicine. That's the dream...                                                                                                    |
|                                 | 2 | How to<br>succeed<br>(extra-<br>curricular) | Employers, university. Mainly cos of like the three separate skill and physical and whatever. It looks really good cos you've committed yourself to something for a period of time. (Duke of Edinburgh Award)                                                                          |
|                                 | 3 | Problems<br>facing<br>young<br>people       | Recession, deficit, lack of employment, especially for under 25's, increasing demand for degrees, HND's.                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                 | 4 | Top-up<br>fees                              | I would've definitely thought twice about going, but once I listed the advantages and disadvantages, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. Just achieving an education, it comes at a price doesn't it? But it's worth it at the end.                                           |
|                                 | 5 | Advantages<br>of<br>university              | I would've definitely thought twice about going, but once I listed the advantages and disadvantages, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. Just achieving an education, it comes at a price doesn't it? But it's worth it at the end.                                           |
|                                 | 6 | Why<br>people 'fail'                        | Most of them are just lazy. I've seen people who I thought, 'You should be really dumb,' and they used to just go with ease, they left a year later with C's and B's. It's pure laziness, I think everyone's got potential to get good grades, but they just need to put work into it. |
|                                 | 7 | Explaining<br>inequality                    | they're quite hard-working in Asian countries, and I think their parents push them to do that.                                                                                                                                                                                         |

- 8      Importance      She has no income, she doesn't get pocket money or  
of money      anything. Her parents are living off unemployment  
                         benefit, disability benefit in fact. So that's literally her  
                         only source of income, she's just not coping without  
                         EMA.
-

Appendix II Characteristics of Year 9 students (valid sample)

**Table 1.3: Selected employment and disadvantage characteristics for the valid sample of Year 9 students included in the dispositions analysis compared to the overall sample**

|                                                               | EPPSE Dispositions sample Year 9 (n=1766) |      | EPPSE sample at start of primary school (n=2754) |      | Full EPPSE sample (n=3172) |      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------|--------------------------------------------------|------|----------------------------|------|
|                                                               | n                                         | %    | n                                                | %    | n                          | %    |
| <b>Income indicator Year 9</b>                                |                                           |      |                                                  |      |                            |      |
| Free school meals                                             | 228                                       | 12.9 | 548                                              | 17.9 | 562                        | 17.7 |
| No Free school meals                                          | 1463                                      | 82.8 | 2267                                             | 73.9 | 2314                       | 73.0 |
| Unknown                                                       | 75                                        | 4.2  | 254                                              | 8.3  | 292                        | 9.3  |
| <b>Employment status of mother during pre-school period*:</b> |                                           |      |                                                  |      |                            |      |
| Not working                                                   | 770                                       | 43.6 | 1521                                             | 49.6 | 1572                       | 49.6 |
| Working part-time                                             | 580                                       | 32.8 | 868                                              | 28.3 | 890                        | 28.1 |
| Working full-time                                             | 295                                       | 16.7 | 456                                              | 14.9 | 463                        | 14.6 |
| Self-employed/combination part-time & self employed           | 86                                        | 4.9  | 129                                              | 4.2  | 130                        | 4.1  |
| Unknown                                                       | 35                                        | 2.0  | 95                                               | 3.1  | 111                        | 3.3  |
| <b>Total Multiple disadvantage*:</b>                          |                                           |      |                                                  |      |                            |      |
| 0                                                             | 447                                       | 25.3 | 637                                              | 20.8 | 644                        | 20.3 |
| 1                                                             | 505                                       | 28.6 | 761                                              | 24.8 | 781                        | 24.6 |
| 2                                                             | 340                                       | 19.3 | 594                                              | 19.4 | 613                        | 19.3 |
| 3                                                             | 168                                       | 9.5  | 379                                              | 12.3 | 391                        | 12.3 |
| 4                                                             | 117                                       | 6.6  | 247                                              | 8.0  | 257                        | 8.1  |
| 5+                                                            | 80                                        | 4.5  | 202                                              | 6.6  | 213                        | 6.7  |
| Unknown                                                       | 109                                       | 6.2  | 249                                              | 8.1  | 273                        | 8.2  |
| <b>Salary of family during KS1:</b>                           |                                           |      |                                                  |      |                            |      |
| No salary                                                     | 279                                       | 15.8 | 589                                              | 18.5 | 569                        | 17.9 |
| £2500-15000                                                   | 289                                       | 16.4 | 484                                              | 15.8 | 485                        | 15.3 |
| £17500-27500                                                  | 293                                       | 16.6 | 411                                              | 13.4 | 411                        | 13.0 |
| £30000-35000                                                  | 198                                       | 11.2 | 271                                              | 8.8  | 271                        | 8.5  |
| £37500-66000                                                  | 347                                       | 19.6 | 470                                              | 15.3 | 470                        | 14.8 |
| £67500-132000+                                                | 141                                       | 8.0  | 173                                              | 5.6  | 173                        | 5.5  |
| Unknown                                                       | 219                                       | 12.4 | 691                                              | 22.5 | 793                        | 25.0 |
| <b>Salary of family during KS2:</b>                           |                                           |      |                                                  |      |                            |      |
| No salary                                                     | 227                                       | 12.9 | 384                                              | 12.5 | 384                        | 12.1 |
| £2500-15000                                                   | 282                                       | 16.0 | 415                                              | 13.5 | 415                        | 13.1 |
| £17500-27500                                                  | 195                                       | 11.0 | 264                                              | 8.6  | 264                        | 8.3  |
| £30000-35000                                                  | 192                                       | 10.9 | 254                                              | 8.3  | 254                        | 8.6  |
| £37500-66000                                                  | 373                                       | 21.1 | 470                                              | 15.3 | 470                        | 14.8 |
| £67500-132000+                                                | 224                                       | 12.7 | 272                                              | 8.9  | 272                        | 8.6  |
| Unknown                                                       | 273                                       | 15.5 | 1010                                             | 32.9 | 1113                       | 35.1 |

*\* Taken from first parent questionnaire*

**Table 1.2: Selected social class characteristics for the valid sample of Year 9 students included in the dispositions analysis compared to the overall sample**

|                               | EPPSE Dispositions<br>sample Year 9<br>(n=1766) |      | EPPSE sample at start of<br>primary school<br>(n=2754) |      | Full EPPSE<br>sample<br>(n=3172) |      |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------|--------------------------------------------------------|------|----------------------------------|------|
|                               | n                                               | %    | n                                                      | %    | n                                | %    |
| <b>Social Class Mother *:</b> |                                                 |      |                                                        |      |                                  |      |
| Professional Non Manual       | 99                                              | 5.6  | 122                                                    | 4.0  | 126                              | 4.0  |
| Other Profess. Non Man.       | 406                                             | 23.0 | 595                                                    | 19.4 | 605                              | 19.1 |
| Skilled Non-Manual            | 622                                             | 35.2 | 1026                                                   | 33.4 | 1053                             | 33.2 |
| Skilled Manual                | 110                                             | 6.2  | 206                                                    | 6.7  | 213                              | 6.7  |
| Semi Skilled                  | 295                                             | 16.7 | 591                                                    | 19.3 | 607                              | 19.1 |
| Unskilled                     | 64                                              | 3.6  | 140                                                    | 4.6  | 142                              | 4.5  |
| Never Worked                  | 116                                             | 6.6  | 247                                                    | 8.0  | 261                              | 8.2  |
| Unknown                       | 54                                              | 3.1  | 142                                                    | 4.6  | 165                              | 5.2  |
| <b>Social Class Father *:</b> |                                                 |      |                                                        |      |                                  |      |
| Professional Non Manual       | 181                                             | 10.2 | 237                                                    | 7.7  | 242                              | 7.6  |
| Other Profess. Non Man.       | 382                                             | 21.6 | 556                                                    | 18.1 | 569                              | 17.9 |
| Skilled Non-Manual            | 225                                             | 12.7 | 364                                                    | 11.9 | 375                              | 11.8 |
| Skilled Manual                | 421                                             | 23.8 | 734                                                    | 23.9 | 747                              | 23.5 |
| Semi Skilled                  | 198                                             | 11.2 | 348                                                    | 11.3 | 355                              | 11.2 |
| Unskilled                     | 40                                              | 2.3  | 82                                                     | 2.7  | 85                               | 2.7  |
| Never Worked                  | 14                                              | 0.8  | 35                                                     | 1.1  | 36                               | 1.1  |
| Unknown                       | 305                                             | 17.3 | 713                                                    | 23.2 | 763                              | 24.1 |
| <b>Family Highest SES*:</b>   |                                                 |      |                                                        |      |                                  |      |
| Professional Non Manual       | 211                                             | 11.9 | 275                                                    | 9.0  | 281                              | 8.9  |
| Other Profess. Non Man.       | 502                                             | 28.4 | 759                                                    | 24.7 | 776                              | 24.5 |
| Skilled Non-Manual            | 555                                             | 31.4 | 946                                                    | 30.8 | 974                              | 30.7 |
| Skilled Manual                | 230                                             | 13.0 | 444                                                    | 14.5 | 452                              | 14.2 |
| Semi Skilled                  | 180                                             | 10.2 | 391                                                    | 12.7 | 406                              | 12.8 |
| Unskilled                     | 27                                              | 1.5  | 76                                                     | 2.5  | 79                               | 2.5  |
| Never Worked                  | 31                                              | 1.8  | 84                                                     | 2.7  | 88                               | 2.8  |
| Unknown                       | 30                                              | 1.7  | 94                                                     | 3.1  | 116                              | 3.7  |

*\* Taken from first parent questionnaire*

### Appendix III Correlation Matrix

|                     | Gender  | Mother's<br>ed | Fam.<br>salary | H/work  | Teacher-<br>student | Academic<br>self. | Employ. | KS3     | Parent's<br>views | HLE     |
|---------------------|---------|----------------|----------------|---------|---------------------|-------------------|---------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| Gender              | 1       | .00            | -.033          | .162**  | -.043*              | -.063**           | .002    | .071*   | .034              | .145*   |
| Mother's ed.        | .00     | 1              | -.71           | .056*   | .054                | 0.67**            | .153**  | -.134** | -.083             | -.094*  |
| Fam salary          | -.033   | -.071**        | 1              | .084*   | -.002               | .123**            | -.361*  | .375*   | .154*             | .217*   |
| H/work              | .162**  | .056           | -.002          | 1       | .00                 | .083*             | -.031   | .138**  | -.100*            | .055*   |
| Teacher-<br>student | -.043   | .054**         | .123**         | .154**  | 1                   | .001              | .099    | -.049*  | -.134             | -.26    |
| Academic<br>self    | -.063** | .067           | -.361**        | 0.83**  | .439*               | 1                 | .007    | .439**  | .007              | .047    |
| Employ              | .002    | .153**         | .375**         | -.0.3   | -.133*              | .007              | 1       | -.230** | -.125*            | -.176** |
| KS3                 | .073**  | -.134**        | .154**         | .138*   | .310*               |                   | -.230.  | 1       | .259**            | .261*   |
| Parent's<br>views   | .034    | -.083          |                | -.100** | .007                | -.176*            | .261    | .259*   | 1                 | .106*   |
| HLE                 | .145**  | -.94*          | .217**         | .055    | -.0.26              | 0.47*             | -.176*  | .261**  | .106              | 1       |

Appendix III(a) Table summarizing the factors and items for Key Stage 1 HLE (from KS1 parent questionnaire)

#### The Key Stage 1 (KS1) home learning environment (HLE)

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>KS1 HLE Factors and the items (from the KS1 Parent Questionnaire) loading on these factors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>Home Computing</b><br/> The Child plays on computer by themselves<br/> Respondent plays computer games with the child<br/> Respondent uses computer with the child in educational ways </li> <li> <b>Parent-Child enrichment outing/activity outside home</b><br/> Respondent visits library with the child<br/> Respondent does sport/physical activity with the child<br/> Respondent goes on educational visits with the child </li> <li> <b>Parent-child one-to-one interactions at home</b><br/> Respondent plays with the child using toys/games/puzzles<br/> Respondent reads to the child<br/> Respondent listens to the child read </li> <li> <b>Expressive play</b><br/> The Child plays 'make believe' or pretend games<br/> The Child paints/draws/makes models<br/> The Child enjoys dance music and movement </li> </ul> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Appendix III(b) Summary statistics of main variables in the analysis

| Variable                      | N    | Min-Max   | Mean  | S.D   |
|-------------------------------|------|-----------|-------|-------|
| Gender                        | 3178 | 0-1       | .48   | .50   |
| Mother's education            | 3022 | 1-7       | 3.23  | 2.33  |
| Income                        | 2379 | 0-5       | 2.03  | 1.64  |
| Ethnicity                     | 3168 | 0-1       | 0.39  | .19   |
| H.L.E                         | 3006 | 1-5       | 2.02  | 1.17  |
| IMD                           | 3115 | .90-78.8  | 30.41 | 18.96 |
| Employment levels             | 3160 | -1.45-5.7 | 0     | 1     |
| Teacher-student relationships | 1573 | -4.2-2.9  | 0     | 1     |
| Parent's views                | 1745 | 1-3       | 2.86  | .67   |
| Homework                      | 1748 | 1-4       | 2.19  | .85   |
| Academic self-concept         | 1473 | -6.62     | 0     | 1.41  |
| Attainment (KS3)              | 2618 | -3.76-2.1 | 0     | 1     |

#### Appendix IV Model with prior attainment Key Stage 2

| Factor                                      | Model 3 |     |      |
|---------------------------------------------|---------|-----|------|
|                                             | B       | S.E | O.R  |
| Gender (ref. group Male)                    |         |     |      |
| Female                                      | .25***  | .12 | 1.28 |
| Mother's education (ref. group 16 Academic) |         |     |      |
| None                                        | .11     | .16 | 1.12 |
| Vocational                                  | .20     | .13 | 1.23 |
| 18 Academic                                 | .23     | .17 | 1.26 |
| Degree                                      | .41*    | .17 | 1.51 |
| Higher degree                               | .71*    | .30 | 2.03 |
| Family salary (£67.5+)                      |         |     |      |
| £None                                       | -.69*   | .35 | .50  |
| £2,500-17,499                               | -.89*   | .31 | .41  |
| £17,500-29,999                              | -.93*   | .30 | .39  |
| £30,000-39,999                              | -.85**  | .31 | .43  |
| £40,000-67,499                              | -.67*   | .27 | .51  |
| H.L.E (ref. group low)                      |         |     |      |
| H.L.E Medium                                | .03     | .16 | .94  |
| H.L.E High                                  | .06     | .10 | 1.03 |
| IMD                                         | .04*    | .01 | 1.04 |
| Employment levels                           | -.48*   | .18 | .61  |
| Teacher-student relationship                | .21**   | .07 | 1.23 |
| Parent's views (ref. group Not imp.)        |         |     |      |
| Important                                   | .10     | .16 | 1.10 |

|                                |        |         |      |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------|------|
| Very important                 | 1.29** | .25     | 3.64 |
| Homework (ref. group <30 mins) |        |         |      |
| 30-60 mins                     | .02    | .12     | 1.02 |
| 60-120 mins                    | .36*   | .16     | 1.44 |
| 120 mins+                      | 1.15** | .33     | 3.14 |
| Academic self-concept          | .26*   | .05     | 1.25 |
| Attainment (KS2)               | .22*   | .07     | 1.25 |
| Constant                       |        | -.636   |      |
| -2 Log likelihood              |        | 3401.03 |      |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>      |        | 20.65   |      |
| *p<0.05; **p<0.01; p***<0.001  |        |         |      |

## Appendix V Models with imputed, partially and fully imputed data

| Factor                      | B       |          |          | S.E     |           |            | O.R     |          |          |
|-----------------------------|---------|----------|----------|---------|-----------|------------|---------|----------|----------|
|                             | non.imp | part.imp | full imp | non.imp | part imp. | full. imp. | non imp | part imp | full imp |
| Gender (ref Male)           |         |          |          |         |           |            |         |          |          |
| Female                      | .42*    | .34*     | .25***   | .15     | .11       | .12        | 1.52    | 1.41     | 1.28     |
| Mothers ed. (ref 16 A.)     |         |          |          |         |           |            |         |          |          |
| None                        | .41     | .30      | .11      | .24     | .17       | .16        | 1.50    | 1.36     | 1.12     |
| Vocational                  | .23     | .25      | .20      | .21     | .17       | .13        | 1.26    | 1.29     | 1.23     |
| 18 Academic                 | .27     | .36      | .23      | .25     | .20       | .17        | 1.31    | 1.43     | 1.26     |
| Degree                      | 1.14*   | .63*     | .41*     | .42     | .19       | .17        | 3.12    | 1.88     | 1.51     |
| Higher degree               | 1.14*   | 1.07*    | .71*     | .52     | .31       | .30        | 3.14    | 2.93     | 2.03     |
| Family Salary (ref £67.5+)  |         |          |          |         |           |            |         |          |          |
| None                        | -.87*   | -.55     | -.69*    | .41     | .32       | .35        | .42     | .57      | .50      |
| £2,500-17,499               | -1.05*  | -.77*    | -.89*    | .39     | .30       | .31        | .35     | .47      | .41      |
| £17,500-29,999              | -.97*   | -.83*    | -.93*    | .39     | .31       | .30        | .38     | .44      | .39      |
| £30,000-39,999              | -.84*   | -.74*    | -.85*    | .39     | .30       | .31        | .43     | .48      | .43      |
| £40,000-67,499              | -.85*   | -.72*    | -.67*    | .37     | .28       | .27        | .43     | .49      | .51      |
| H.L.E (ref. group low)      |         |          |          |         |           |            |         |          |          |
| H.L.E Medium                | .14     | -.02     | .03      | .18     | .13       | .16        | 1.15    | .97      | 1.03     |
| H.L.E High                  | .22     | -.11     | -.06     | .24     | .19       | .10        | 1.24    | .90      | .94      |
| IMD                         | .04*    | .03*     | .04*     | .01     | .01       | .01        | 1.04    | 1.03     | 1.04     |
| Employment levels           | -.38    | -.50*    | -.48*    | .21     | .06       | .19        | .68     | .61      | .61      |
| Teacher-student relation    | .24*    | .17*     | .21**    | .08     | .06       | .07        | 1.27    | 1.19     | 1.23     |
| Parents views (ref Not imp) |         |          |          |         |           |            |         |          |          |
| Important                   | .19     | .15      | .10      | .15     | .12       | .16        | 1.21    | 1.16     | 1.10     |
| Very important              | 1.52*** | 1.37***  | 1.29**   | .30     | .22       | .25        | 4.59    | 3.93     | 3.64     |
| Homework (ref <30mins)      |         |          |          |         |           |            |         |          |          |
| 30-60 mins                  | -.20    | -.04     | -.02     | .18     | .15       | .12        | .82     | .96      | 1.02     |
| 60-120 mins                 | .03     | .34*     | .36      | .20     | .16       | .16        | 1.03    | 1.40     | 1.44     |
| 120 mins +                  | 1.07*   | .82*     | 1.15*    | .45     | .31       | .33        | 2.90    | 2.28     | 3.14     |
| Academic self-concept       | .26**   | .27***   | .26*     | .08     | .07       | .05        | 1.29    | 1.32     | 1.25     |
| Prior attainment (KS3)      | .21***  | .27***   | .22*     | .10     | .41       | .07        | 1.23    | 1.32     | 1.25     |
| Constant                    | 1.155   |          |          |         | -.81      |            |         |          | -.636    |
| -2 Log likelihood           | 1229.43 |          |          |         | 1959.67   |            |         |          | 3401.03  |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>   | 23.4    |          |          |         | 21.3      |            |         |          | 20.65    |

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001

## Appendix VI

## Hosmer and Lemeshow tables from main analysis with impute data

| Hosmer and Lemeshow Test (Block 1) |      |            |    |      |
|------------------------------------|------|------------|----|------|
| Imputation Number                  | Step | Chi-square | df | Sig. |
| Original data                      | 1    | 12.806     | 8  | .119 |
| 1                                  | 1    | 1.113      | 8  | .997 |
| 2                                  | 1    | 3.299      | 8  | .914 |
| 3                                  | 1    | 3.114      | 8  | .927 |
| 4                                  | 1    | 4.906      | 8  | .768 |
| 5                                  | 1    | 1.449      | 8  | .994 |

| Hosmer and Lemeshow Test (Block 2) |      |            |    |      |
|------------------------------------|------|------------|----|------|
| Imputation Number                  | Step | Chi-square | df | Sig. |
| Original data                      | 1    | 7.623      | 8  | .471 |
| 1                                  | 1    | 3.524      | 8  | .897 |
| 2                                  | 1    | 1.841      | 8  | .986 |
| 3                                  | 1    | 5.888      | 8  | .660 |
| 4                                  | 1    | 2.514      | 8  | .961 |
| 5                                  | 1    | 3.616      | 8  | .890 |

| Hosmer and Lemeshow Test Block 3 |      |            |    |      |
|----------------------------------|------|------------|----|------|
| Imputation Number                | Step | Chi-square | df | Sig. |
| Original data                    | 1    | 9.139      | 8  | .331 |
| 1                                | 1    | 12.429     | 8  | .133 |
| 2                                | 1    | 5.705      | 8  | .680 |
| 3                                | 1    | 18.263     | 8  | .119 |
| 4                                | 1    | 3.895      | 8  | .866 |
| 5                                | 1    | 14.866     | 8  | .662 |

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