

The Role of Social Ties in School Decision Making
Processes at the End of Compulsory Schooling in England

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Abstract

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This thesis considers the role of parents, teachers and peers in the school decision making processes of children at the end of compulsory education in England. This stage represents, in fact, the first and most important school transition when pupils will have to choose whether to enter post-secondary education or not, and in cases where they do, whether to choose an academic course or a vocational one, knowing that this will affect their next transition at the age of 18. This thesis is amongst the ones to most fully analyse the role of significant others in children's education.

All the quantitative analyses in this thesis are done using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). Most of the statistical modelling of this data is done using multivariate regression analysis. Some of the results are also based on evidence from qualitative interviews with children in their last year of GCSEs in two comprehensive schools in England and children attending an apprenticeship scheme in the London area.

With regards to educational aspirations, minority students are those who show the highest and most stable aspirations during years 9 to 11, while White English working class students, especially boys, have lower and unstable aspirations. Among the explanatory factors for these results, along with social class and ethnicity, parental aspirations, friends' plans and individual attitude to education have the strongest correlation with the intentions to stay on in school after year 11. Moreover, parental aspirations did not appear to differ with regards to social class, suggesting a different mechanism than the one indicated by Breen and Goldthorpe (B&G) (2000). Also, the fact that minority students have very high aspirations (and are high achievers), do not confirm the principles of the relative risk aversion theory by B&G.

Among the types of parental involvement in children's education, participation in school-related activities and feelings towards school and supervision of children's school work seemed to have a positive impact on children's entering A-levels in year 12, although the results did not highlight differences with regards to social class and ethnicity. Evidence from the qualitative interviews showed different results with regards to helping with homework - only educated parents do that - and with regards to supporting and encouraging their children's aspirations, which is more effective with minority and middle class parents.

Considering peer relationships, the evidence from qualitative interviews suggested a very small influence of peers, especially schoolmates, in children's school decision processes; peers are, in fact, perceived as someone to share plans and common interests with, but not as well-informed and trustworthy sources such as family. Moreover, interviews suggest that school choices are not the results of long-term plans, and children treat school transitions as separate stages. This does not support Morgan's model of prefigurative and preparatory commitment.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The particular focus of this thesis is on school choices of pupils at the end of compulsory schooling in England. This is a crucial stage in the English education system where children can choose between more academic-oriented courses, i.e. AS/A-levels, and vocational courses, such as NVQs, or BTECs, or work-based education, such as apprenticeship schemes¹. Although A-levels are not the only courses providing the required qualifications to enter tertiary education, they represent the natural choice for children who intend to achieve a university degree, and remain the most prestigious courses in terms of the quality of education they provide.

This thesis also focuses on the role of parents, teachers and peers on the transition to post-compulsory schooling or full-time occupations. Parents are the primary and strongest influence on children; their cultural resources, in fact, reflect on the child's own once he enters school, affecting his academic ability and therefore scholastic performance (Bourdieu, 1960; Bernstein, 1997). On the other hand, parental

¹ Section 1.3 will focus on the English school system. For further information about these courses see Appendix C, table C.1.

aspirations and encouragement can be as strong as their economic and cultural resources in helping their children's own educational aspirations (Kahl, 1953; Sewell et al., 1969; 1970). Teachers are also believed to have an important role in children's educational attainment; according to Bourdieu (1960), their middle class status gives them a positive bias towards middle class pupils over the already disadvantaged working class pupils. Moreover, teachers' experience and the style of interaction with students could also have a significant impact on their school success (Birch & Ladd, 1996). Finally, peers can represent models to imitate, which can result in students achieving a better education, as well as dropping out of school too early (Akerlof, 1997; Evans et al., 1992).

The target population of this thesis is represented by pupils of age 15-16 who were attending the last year of compulsory education (year 11) in 2006 in England. The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) is mainly used to study the continuation patterns and role of significant others in school choices of the students in the sample. In addition to the results based on the statistical analyses of the LSYPE, this thesis also uses data obtained from interviews with students in their last year of comprehensive school in 2009-2010. This qualitative data are used, in particular, to study peer relationships in more detail and to integrate the results based on the quantitative analyses.

There are various reasons why it is important to study school decision making of children aged 15-16. Firstly, most of the UK studies focus on the transition to tertiary education and although the percentage of pupils staying on in full-time education is about 90%, only half of the students choose an academic track (AS/A-levels) and half

of this then enter higher education. For this reason, it is important to analyse the school decision processes from an early stage to capture patterns of changes.

Secondly, previous findings about the role of significant others on children's educational attainment presents some uncertainties; parental involvement in children's education, for instance, has been referred to as different types of practises, from participation in school-related activities to help with homework (Ho & Willms, 1996; Mau, 1997), to more straightforward aspirations and expectations (Bordua, 1960; Sewell et al., 1969). Whether all these dimensions, or only one of them, can make a difference in children's school attainment is not clear. A similar situation can be observed for the role of teachers; although few studies might suggest a positive relation between teachers' qualifications, quality of relationship with children and school performance (Birch & Ladd, 1996), a large number of other studies (Coleman, 1966; Hanushek, 1997) do not support these findings. Concerning peer group effects, the studies conducted so far only analysed the effects of school composition and they cannot tell us much more about how, if at all, peers interactions have an impact on students' educational attainment.

Thirdly, most of the studies about children's educational aspirations and the role of significant others have been carried out in the US; therefore the picture drawn by those findings might not be applicable to England (and the UK more widely).

The rest of this introductory chapter is organised as follows: the next section describes the English education system and give some statistics about school participation in England. Overviews of theory and research on the issue of educational inequalities are discussed in the section that follows, while the last part of the chapter includes a summary of the rest of the thesis.

1.2 The English education system

The English education system is divided into four stages: primary, secondary, further and higher education². Compulsory education lasts for 11 years, starting at age 5 until age 16. Most pupils transfer from primary to secondary school at age 11. Most secondary schools in England are comprehensive, which means they do not operate a selective entrance system³.

There are four Key Stages, at the end of which pupils are assessed:

Key Stage 1: 5 to 7 years old

Key Stage 2: 7 to 11 years old

Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years old

Key Stage 4: 14 to 16 years old

Pupils are assessed by National Curriculum tests; Key Stage 4 represents GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) level. Grades are issued on a scale from A* to G (A* being the highest grade). Having completed GCSEs, pupils have a choice of whether to continue with further education at school or college or to seek employment. The percentage of pupils who stay in full-time education after GCSEs is

² England and Wales have the same Education system, while Scotland and Northern Ireland have a slightly different one.

³ As a result of the Education Reform Act of 1988, comprehensive schools were introduced, substituting the tripartite system of grammar schools, secondary technical schools and secondary modern schools. Also the exam known as 11 plus, which assessed which pupils should attend which school was removed. However, some grammar school still operates in England and some of them still require to pass an entrance examination based on ability.

around 82%⁴. Among those, 48% are the students enrolled in A/AS-levels, and 11% are the students studying for an NVQ. Only 6% of pupils choose a work-based option, such as apprenticeships⁵. Pupils have different options for post-compulsory education: both schools and (sixth form) colleges offer a wide range of A/AS levels and vocational courses, although pupils who want to pursue a vocational qualification largely attend further education institutions.

Pupils can start tertiary education at age 18. Out of 44% of pupils in full-time education at age 18, only 23% of them are in higher education institution; 14% are, in fact, enrolled in general further education or tertiary and specialist colleges⁶.

1.3 Literature review on the issue of educational inequalities

The persistency of intergenerational inequality in educational attainment in the industrialized countries has been highlighted in various studies (Boudon 1974; Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993; Eriksson & Jonsson, 1996), which acted as a source of inspiration for several researchers trying to explain why inequalities persist over time despite the universal education expansion as well as changes in national education systems. This research not only highlights different mechanisms responsible for educational inequalities but also offers a range of theoretical perspectives in order to

⁴ Statistics are from the Department of School, Children and Families, 2009.

⁵ The remaining percentage is divided in other types of vocational education, and part-time education.

⁶ The remaining small percentage is divided into sixth form colleges, and pupils attending some kind of vocational training.

explain them. Following will be an overview of the main theoretical perspectives and research, which will be also encountered later on in the next chapters.

1.3.1 Primary and Secondary Effects in Education

Several studies on educational inequalities in all economically advanced societies have shown a fair degree of stability in class inequalities in educational attainment. Despite the expansion in school participation among all social backgrounds, the persistence of specific class effects can be highlighted. According to Boudon (1974), class differentials in educational attainment are generated by two kinds of effects: ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’.

Primary effects refer to the association between social origins and children’s academic ability. To express it formally:

$$A_t = f(E_i, O_i) \tag{1.1}$$

where A_t represents the individuals’ academic ability at time t , E_i represents the i^{th} individuals’ parents’ highest level of education and O_i represents the i^{th} individuals’ family social class.

Children of more advantaged backgrounds are, on average, superior in their school performance regarding standard tests and examinations compared to children of less advantaged backgrounds.

The model presented by Boudon assumed that school achievement of grade-school pupils in their last year is a function of social background (parents education and family class), which account for the primary effects considered in (1.1).

Primary effects are associated with family resources which are mostly represented by cultural, economic and social capital which can help children in the educational attainment process. The time parents spend with their children, helping them with homework, reading them bedtime stories and introducing them to different activities are only a few of those family resources.

Considering the action of primary effects in the model, Boudon tried to measure it separately from the other effects. Removing the effect of cultural background (by assumption)⁷, the results from the model showed that disparities among individuals from different social backgrounds remained very high. Moreover, according to a school transition scheme⁸, this disparity increases at each higher educational transition. What accounts for the remaining inequalities of educational opportunities is labelled by Boudon as secondary effects. They are not mediated by social origin and they represent the different probability of ‘surviving’ in the school system of individuals with the same academic ability but from different social background.

The mechanisms that intervene in the individual’s decision process, whether or not to stay in post-compulsory education are, according to economists, based on a model of cost-benefits and risks. The fundamental assumption of the economic approach is

⁷ Boudon assumed the existence of very effective reforms at the grade-school level, which reduce the cultural disadvantage of lower class individuals, supposing a quite equal distribution of students by both social class and school achievement.

⁸A school transition scheme is made of several branching points which represent stages where individuals have to choose between remaining in the school system (going to the next educational level), or leaving it. A more detailed explanation will be given later on in the chapter.

that individuals are rational actors, who make choices on the basis of costs and benefits and expected maximization of utility associated with them. Goldthorpe (2000:184) writes:

These patterns of educational choice reflect action on the part of children and their parents that can be understood as rational: that is, they reflect evaluations made of the costs and benefits of possible alternatives- for example, to leave school or to stay on, to take a more academic or a more vocational course- and of the probabilities of different outcomes such as educational success or failure.

Expected utility is another fundamental concept of the economic model, which helps to understand the individual's school choices in the light of primary and secondary effects previously discussed.

1.3.2 The Economic Model

The basic concept of the economic model is 'human capital'. It refers to the fact that human beings invest in themselves, by means of education, training, and other activities, which raises their future income by increasing their lifetime earnings.

Becker (1964:16) claimed:

Schooling, a computer training course, expenditures on medical care and lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty are capital too in the sense that they improve health, raise earnings, or add to a person's appreciation of literature over

much of his or her lifetime. Consequently it is fully in keeping with the capital concepts as traditionally defined to say that expenditures on education, training, medical care, etc., are investments in capital.

When economists talk about ‘investments’, they refer to expenditures on assets which will produce income in the future. These are different from investment expenditures with consumption, which give immediate satisfaction and do not create future income (Woodhall, 1996). According to economists such as Becker (1964) and Shultz (1960) who were the first to develop the concept of human capital, the profitability of the investment in education and training can be measured, like any other investment, using the technique of cost-benefit analysis.

As Becker (1964) claims, participating in education or vocational training allow the individual to increase his chances of employment and his lifetime earnings. These earnings (rate of return), can be compared with the direct and indirect cost of education that has to be taken into account by the individual. While the direct costs are mainly represented by tuition fees, schooling also includes indirect costs which are represented by expenditures on books, transport, accommodation and the forgone earnings while in school.

The probability to stay in school after compulsory education can be expressed as a function of:

$$P(s) = f(A, U(s), C) \tag{1.2}$$

Where $U(s)$ represents the expected utility to stay in school, C represents the (direct and indirect) costs of education.

Following (1.3), the expected utility maximization of an individual who goes to further secondary education can be expressed as

$$E(U) = P(s) * U(s) - C \quad (1.2a)$$

where $P(s)$ represents the individual's probability of gaining five grades C or above at GCSE final examinations, and $U(s)$ represents the individual's utility of gaining five grades C or above at GCSE final examinations⁹.

The lower probability of disadvantaged children to succeed in school, especially considering higher education, results in less utility of education for lower class individuals in which insecure investment could result in an economic loss for the family. A working class individual has to afford many more costs for his education and in order to achieve a high level of education, and the benefits associated with it, he has to be very ambitious. More so, for instance, than a middle class individual, whose costs for achieving the same education are lower. For middle class individuals, a higher educational level is therefore essential to avoid social demotion, while working class individuals can avoid this issue without pursuing higher education (Boudon, 1974). So, clearly, not only does costs and benefits vary according to the social starting point of an individual, but also their ambition.

⁹ In order to take A-levels, students are required to achieve 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSEs. Most universities, also, typically require a C or better in English and Mathematics, regardless of A-levels grades. GCSE courses are taken in a variety of subjects, which are usually decided by the students themselves between year 9 and 10 (at the age of 13-14). Subjects required are English, mathematics, science, religious education and physical education (with some differences among England, Wales and Northern Ireland). Final examinations are taken at year 11-12, at the end of two-year course. Each student receives a grade for each subject that goes from G (worst) to A* (best).

According to Eriksson and Jonsson (1996), which point of departure is represented by Becker and Boudon's assumptions, individuals rationally choose school tracks that seem the most advantageous, within given constraints. For instance, when considering the opportunity to attend higher education, an individual will take into account his previous school performance, calculating his odds of success according to that.

In contrast to economists, Eriksson and Jonsson claim that calculation of costs-benefits cannot be based on lifetime earnings because it would be too complicated for the individual to consider those but, instead, on a rough estimate of what income, working conditions and so on different types of studies will lead to.

Following these considerations E & J constructed their model of school decision making. Every student has a rough idea of the benefits (utility) that follow the achievement of a certain type of education as well as the ones which would follow in case of failure of the same. Moreover, students are aware of the costs of completing a certain type of education as well as the probability to successfully complete it. The unit of measurement, which is the same for costs and benefits, is not monetary but psychological.

E & J also underlined the crucial importance of another mechanism, which is the risk aversion. Between an educational choice which gives high rewards but also has a high risk of failure and one that leads to smaller rewards but has a higher probability of success, the individual will be more likely to choose the latter. The way individuals perceived benefits, costs and probabilities of success is associated to their economic, cultural and social resources, which are represented by their social class .The importance of economic resources is related to the costs of schooling while the importance of cultural resources is directly related to their school performance. In

other words, the better the economic status, the easier the access to support for education from the family. In the same way, the higher the parental cultural capital, the better the school achievement and probability of success. Even if schooling in Sweden has not very high direct costs (tuition fees), education still involves indirect costs (for food, literature and accommodation, if not considering the forgone earnings).

Not only do economic and cultural resources affect education, but also the social position. The latter, in fact, affects the perceived benefit, which is higher for upper class individuals who aim to maintain their social position, ambition and the value attached to education itself.

1.3.3 The Relative Risk Aversion Theory

According to Breen and Goldthorpe (1997), higher class individuals are very likely to achieve a high educational level on the basis of their high amount of resources and because pushed by a “parental pressure” to avoid social demotion. The latter is, in fact, stronger than the consideration of their academic ability and risk of failing in school.

According to the B&G model, children and parents’ choices are rational and based on economic constraints that take place in the context of action represented by class structure. Although their model accounts for primary effects, they do not go in depth concerning their nature (genetic, psychological or cultural), but concentrate on secondary effects, which are expressed by children (and parents) school choices.

The B&G model of educational decisions can be easily represented by the decision tree (figure 2.1), which divides the educational path into different branches (Mare, 1981). Each branch requires a decision by the individuals whether to stay in school or leave it; the former leads to two different outcomes, success and failure, which result in different class positions while the latter leads directly to a class position, between working and underclass.

The general idea expressed by Goldthorpe (2000:50) is:

...that this system should possess a diversified structure that provides options not just for more or less education but also for education of different kinds, and that in turn entails individuals making choices at certain 'branching points' that they may not be able later to modify, or at least not in a costless way.

Considering the 'stay' branch of the tree, there can be two different outcomes related to the subjective conditional probability of success in the final examinations (π), which leads to the 'pass' (P) branch of the tree, or 'fail' branch ($1-\pi$). Both the P and F branches, as well as the leave branch of the decision tree, expressed by L, are attached to different outcomes, expressed by B&G in terms of beliefs about the chances of access to different classes, that are salariat versus working class, considering the 'pass' branch, while for the 'fail' branch and the 'leave' branch of the tree, the individual can end in salariat, working class or underclass.

Considering the British educational system, the first decisional process is represented by the completion of GSCEs and the decision to stay in school or enter the labour market. For pupils who choose to enrol in further secondary education to take A-

levels the possible outcomes are to succeed in the final examinations, which give them the choice to go to university, or to fail it, which leave them without many choices but enter the labour market. This is actually a simplification, as the British educational system (and educational systems in general) includes many different kinds of education at year 11, such as sixth form colleges and colleges of further education, along with a wider variety of qualifications.

In the B & G model, there are three factors taken into account by children and their parents to decide whether or not to stay in school after GCSEs: the cost of staying in school (C), the likelihood of success in continuing education (P), and the utility (U) that children and their family attach to the different educational outcomes, pass, fail, and leave. Each of these outcomes gives a different chance of access to three possible destination classes: salariat, working, and underclass.

So, when an individual decides to stay in school after GCSE, given that $C > 0$,

$$U(s) > C \tag{1.3}$$

And a student will decide to stay in school after year 11 if:

$$U(s) > U(L(11)) \tag{1.4}$$

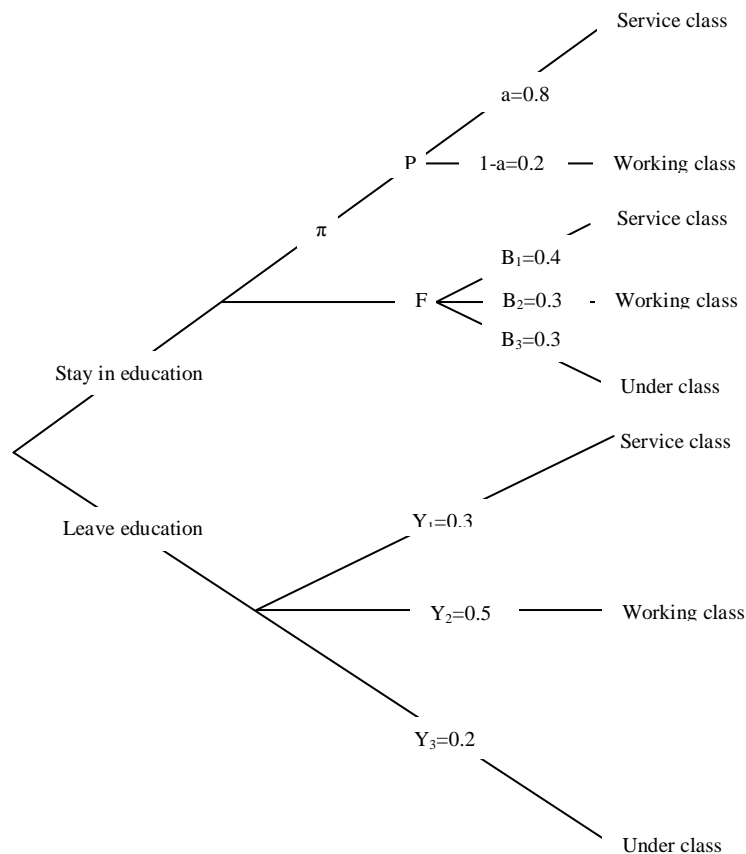
Where $U(L(11))$ represents the expected utility to leave at the end of year 11.

The main consideration taken into account by children (and their parents) in the choice of continuing school or leaving it at a certain point in their educational career is related to the cost and benefits of one choice versus the other. Staying in school after the compulsory level imposes costs on a family, both direct (tuition fees, books,

transport and so on) and indirect (earnings forgone), which have a different impact on upper class families compared to the working class ones.

Although the expected utility of education, such as entering the labour market in a better position and facilitating upward mobility, are well known by everyone, it differs according to the individual position in the social class system. The variable that best explains the variation in the expected utility of education is the probability to succeed after compulsory education of a pupil, which is expressed by his academic ability.

Figure 1.1: The B & G decision tree model.



It is at this point of the explanation that B&G consider the role of primary effects, assuming that children coming from different social classes differ in their average ability, together with their economic resources. The element that, according to the B&G model, does not differ among social classes is individuals (and families) aspirations (Goldthorpe 2000:53):

...that families in both classes alike seek to ensure, so far as they can, that their children acquire a class position at least as advantageous as that from which they originate or, in other words, they seek to avoid downward mobility.

However, B & G express these aspirations not in absolute terms but in terms relative to the parental social class.

To explain the increase in the educational participation rates the B&G model takes into account a few main conditions: the decline in the relative cost of education in the economically advanced countries, the introduction of grants and loans for less advantaged students and the increase in the importance of educational qualifications to achieve a good position in the labour market.

A decline in the parameter c leads to an increase in the rate of pupils who choose the stay branch of the decision tree, leading to an increase in the proportion of p (for both working class and service class pupils). This increase is considered to expand over time, due to the importance of educational credentials. Although these mechanisms support the general increase in educational participation, class differentials still persist

in the difference in the propensity to stay in school after year 11, which remains constant between working and service class pupils.

As it can be read in Goldthorpe (2000:64):

It is then possible to show that, given a decline over time in c , together with an increase in the proportion of both service- and working-class pupils who consider it in their best interests to remain in education, the odds of continuing in education increase by a roughly constant amount for each class, and so preserve a similar constancy in the odds ratio. This tells us that, under these circumstances, a uniform decline in the costs of education—that is, uniform across classes—will result in the odds of children of all classes choosing to continue being multiplied by something like a common factor. So if, for example, some level of education is made free of charge (in the sense that fees are no longer levied), class differences in participation (as measured by odds ratio) at this level will remain more or less unchanged even though the overall participation rate will increase.

A particular attention is also given to gender differences in educational attainment. According to the B&G model, the dramatic decline of gender differentials that can be observed in the last decades cannot be explained by changes in costs of education or amount of family resources, but rather by changes in women's participation to the labour market and the increase in the returns to education for women. However they did not show this empirically.

As Goldthorpe (2000:67) claims:

...our model has come increasingly to apply to women: the 'gradient' in their returns to education has steepened. According to our model, then, such a change should have two effects: gender differentials in educational attainment should decline, as indeed that have, and at the same time the magnitude of class differentials among women should increase.

Empirical tests of the B&G model have been presented in the last few years; some of them support the model entirely (although lacking somehow in methodological aspects¹⁰) while others raise some issues.

A test of the relative risk aversion theory has been offered by Breen & Yaish (B&Y) (2003). Using UK data they investigated the validity of the B&G model (1.5) over the school decisions at the end of GCSEs and A-level. To test the model three independent variables were introduced: family class (according to the Goldthorpe schema, 1992), general ability test at O level and A-level grades and type of accommodation. Generally speaking, they found big class differences in the odds of entering vocational training versus continuing with A-levels and in the odds of entering the labour market rather than to continue with A-levels. Although these probabilities are reduced when controlling for ability, performance and family resources other than social class, the latter shows the persistence of a direct effect, in particular considering class III, V and VI and class VII¹¹, indicating a higher

¹⁰Some tests of the B&G model do not use the best measure of academic ability, such as in the case of Schizzerotto, or as in Need and de Jong, use parental education as a proxy of family social class. Also, none of the tests presented include a strong measure of educational aspirations.

¹¹ According to the Goldthorpe class schema.

probability to enter vocational training as well as the labour market rather than enter A-levels.

B&Y suggest that pupils of class I and II are more likely to continue with A-levels because of the expected utility rate associated with it and the risk of social demotion, while class III, V and VI are more likely to enter vocational training, leaving pupils of class VII with higher odds to enter the labour market due to a lower utility that can be gained from staying in school.

A different outcome can be observed when considering the school choices at A-levels. At this stage pupils have three choices: entering the labour market, going to further education and going to university. The models presented by B&Y, based on the B&G model, show no class differences in the choice once controlling for ability and family resources. This result confirms B&Y hypothesis, that access to university is strictly associated with school performance at A-levels and the subjective probability of success, although it does not really confirm the relative risk aversion hypothesis formulated by B&G.

Schizzerotto (1997), applied the relative risk aversion theory to the Italian case, with the aim of explaining the lower participation of Italian students to upper secondary and university education compared to other European countries. The results of his analysis confirm, according to Schizzerotto, the validity of the B&G model, concerning both class and gender differential in school participation. He presented a model including family class, fathers' education and a variable related to the regularity of the individuals' school career, controlling for gender. The direct effect of social origin is very strong considering both the educational stages as well as the fathers' education. The direct effect of the above remains very strong even when

considering the regularity of the school career, although these findings might not be enough to support the B&G model. The effects of social class on educational attainment are, in fact, a general outcome demonstrated by several models. Moreover, because Schizzerotto presented only one model, we cannot really see how each variable contributes to the model and how it affects the other variables. Finally, considering the regularity of the school career, although it is a representative variable, it might not be the best indicator of academic ability when compared to the grades at final examinations.

Another test of the B&G model has been presented by Need & de Jong (2000) who investigated the mechanisms that help to explain class and gender differentials in participation to higher education. The data used for the analysis showed a large difference in educational choices: only 24 % of students whose parents had completed primary education and lower secondary education enrolled in university, compared to 66 % of students whose parents had completed university.

There are three dependent variables tested in the multinomial models utilized: choice of education (between leaving the school system, entering higher professional education, and entering university) subjective ability (considering the level of education individuals think they are able to complete) and personal aspirations, referring to the degree of study individuals plan to achieve.

To measure individuals' social origins Need & de Jong used parental education, while they used parental income as a proxy for family resources. The results show that the direct effect of parental education disappears for educational choices, introducing parental income and grade-point average, while it remains quite strong for educational aspirations and (although less strongly) for subjective ability. Concerning

gender differentials in education, the study does not find results that support the B&G model, especially considering the fact that females still appear less educated than males. According to the results for gender, social class continues to maintain a very strong effect, even after the introduction of parental income and grade-point average.

Although Need & de Jong claim that their findings support the relative risk aversion theory concerning class differentials in education, their methodology raises some doubts, especially considering the use of parental education as a proxy for social origins which does not exactly represent the assumptions of the B&G model, as well as the effect of both personal aspirations and ability on educational choices, which effects on educational choices are not explained by their analysis.

1.3.4 The role of aspirations, beliefs and expectations on educational attainment

When studying class differentials in educational attainment, it is crucial to consider the role of aspiration, beliefs and the value that individuals assign to education. Some of the main questions raised by sociologists on these issues are: do middle class pupils and working class pupils differ concerning those aspects and how do these differences affect educational choices and outcomes?

According to Willis (1977), there is a cultural explanation for the different patterns of educational attainment among middle class and working class students. Some working class students, the “lads”¹², show a “counter-school culture”, which accounts

¹² The name used by working class pupils to define their group of friends

for their negative attitudes to schooling and differentiates them from middle class pupils. There are some main aspects that define the counter-school culture of working class lads. First of all, Willis considers the opposition to authority, which involves an apparent inversion of the usual values supported by the authority (teachers in the case of school), such as diligence, deference, and respect. A second aspect is the importance of the informal group: the school represents, in fact, the formal, with a formal structure expressed by rules, pedagogic practise and staff hierarchy with powers. According to the “lads” middle class people invest in formal structure and in exchange they give up their autonomy. This aspect leads to another important one, which is the limitation of school commitment. Working class pupils are more likely not to complete tasks and homework and they show more reluctant to respond to their teacher’s demands.

Another aspect considered by Willis is the importance of practise compared to theory: this is a fundamental aspect that distinguishes working class from middle class pupils. According to Willis (1977:56):

Practical ability always come first and is a condition of other kind of knowledge. Whereas in middle class culture knowledge and qualifications are seen as a way of shifting upwards the whole mode of practical alternatives open to an individual, in working class eyes theory is revisited to particular productive practises. If it cannot earn its keep, it is to be rejected.

Moreover (Willis 1977:57):

This can be seen as a clear and usually unremarked class function of knowledge. The working class view would be the rational one were it not located in class society, i.e. that theory is only useful insofar as it really does help to do things, to accomplish practical tasks and change nature. Theory is asked to be in a close dialectic with the material world. For the middle class, more aware of its position in a class society, however, theory is seen partly in its social guise of qualifications as the power to move up the social scale¹³. In this sense theory is well worth having even if it is never applied to nature.

Another crucial concept is the rejection of the conformist, identified by the ideas and knowledge expressed by teachers, which middle class pupils follow passively while working class “lads” define themselves as more active people.

Finally, sexism and racism are two distinctive characteristics of the counter-school culture: “lads” consider themselves superior to girls and ethnic minority groups. The counter-school culture reflects a masculine and tough way of behaving as machismo is identified with industrial and heavy manual jobs.

According to a study conducted by Lareau (2002) on differentials in the childrearing practises among families of different social class and race (black and white), there is a clear difference in the way white middle class families differ from black working class families. For instance, in the way they interact with institutions and the grade of trustworthiness they show towards them. Middle class people expect institutions to be

¹³ According to Bourdieu (1997), cultural capital can exist in three forms: the ‘objectified’ state, which is in the form of cultural goods, such as pictures, books, dictionaries and more, ; the ‘institutionalized’ state, in the form of educational qualifications; and ‘embodied’, in the form of long-lasting dispositions of mind.

responsive to them and to accommodate their individual needs. For this reason, they show more energetic and active participation in their children's school activities, talking to the teachers and being part of the learning process. By contrast, lower class individuals think that institutions are mainly a sort of enemy that work against them and are always there to punish them. Differently from the middle class parents, working class parents do not intervene actively in school and they tend to depend on teachers and school professionals (even if they do not really trust them) because they feel "unprepared" to discuss schooling with them.

The existence of clear differences in the preferences and aspirations of individuals from different social backgrounds is also supported by Sullivan (2006). Education can, in fact, be valued by individuals as a mean to enter a good position in the labour market but it can also be valued as a good in itself. Sullivan's analysis of student's perception of their own ability shows that the latter is affected by social class. There is a highly significant association between social class and students' estimation of their own academic ability, which can be seen in the higher rate of estimation that middle class students used to indicate their own abilities compared to other students.

There could be a social class difference in the evaluation of the value of education in the labour market, for instance if working class students consider educational credentials as less essential to occupational success than middle class students do.

As Reay & Ball (1998) claim, the value that pupils and families assign to education differs among social backgrounds. Concerning educational decisions (Reay & Ball, 1998):

"within many of the middle class 'personal' families, children must be 'helped to understand' the importance of educational, as well as social issues".

Children need to be guided on the importance of education for their future (as a strategy of social reproduction) and parents are the ones responsible for that. In a different way, working class pupils are left with a higher level of ‘autonomy’ (with limitations such as finances in a strategy of “necessity”) in the choice of high school and parents tend to look at what is best for the present and not in an imagined future.

According to Kao & Tienda (1998), who analysed how aspirations are formed and maintained from eighth to twelfth grade, individuals with high aspirations tend to have formed them already in eighth grade and maintain them through the twelfth grade while ethnic minority pupils tend to have less stable aspirations. The latter, in fact, show ambitious aspirations during eighth grade which are very likely to change during the high school years. The disadvantaged family background is one of the main reasons explaining this mechanism: lower economic and cultural capital of ethnic minority youth families contribute to shape their early general ambitious aspirations in more concrete and lower ones by the end of high school, which affect their lower educational achievement compared to white pupils.

1.3.5 Morgan’s model of educational attainment

The previous discussion about individual preferences and aspiration concerning education is important for a better understanding of the model of educational attainment proposed by Morgan (2005).

Morgan’s model of school attainment tries to combine, indirectly, the structuralism advanced by Bourdieu and the mechanisms drawn from a bounded form of rational choice theory.

Morgan (2005:57) wrote:

Classic rational choice models of educational attainment generate predictions by assuming that individuals can be modelled as if they have engaged in perfect information processing and flawless expectation formation in advance of all relevant consequential decisions. For example, students are thought to observe college and labour market entrance rates and then, on average, accurately estimate whether or not individuals with attributes such as their own are likely to receive adequate returns for enrolling in college.

Starting from acknowledging the limitations of the rational choice theory and the need for a model able to capture the individuals' limited capacities to deliberate about decisions, Morgan presents a model of "prefigurative" and "preparatory" commitment for individuals' decision making about college entry. Grounded on the Wisconsin model of status attainment¹⁴ and the lack of specificity about belief formation processes in both Willis (1977) and Cameron & Heckman (2001)¹⁵,

¹⁴ Known as the status socialization theory (although Morgan considers here only the educational processes), and first proposed by Sewell, Haller & Portes (1969), the Wisconsin model claims that the nested effect of a pupils' family background and academic ability on their educational attainment can completely be explained by the expectations that parents, peers and teachers hold of him. The educational expectations expressed by these "significant others" are then internalized by the pupils as personal aspirations, and guide their choices and school achievement. The limitations in the ability of the model to represent the status attainment process of individuals lead to a second version of the model (Sewell, Haller & Ohlendorf 1970), which included the direct effects of academic performance on educational aspirations and educational attainment and the direct effect of academic ability on the formation of other's expectations on their school achievement.

¹⁵ Considering that disparities in family income largely account for differences in measured schooling attainment, Cameron & Heckman (2001) investigate whether income (along with other social background variables) is responsible for disparities in college attendance among Black, Hispanic

Morgan focuses on the causal relationship between educational expectations and educational attainment. The focus of Morgan is on how individuals and their significant others form their expectations and how the latter affect individuals' educational outcomes.

As Morgan (2005:103) claims: "the potentially observable course of everyday behaviour that positions an individual to realise his or her prefigurative commitment can then be defined as preparatory commitment". Preparatory commitment is determined by "the ease with which he or she is able to envision successfully doing something" (Morgan, 2005:101) or "a cognitive attachment to a future course of behaviour" (Morgan, 2005:103) and can be differentiated in three subsets: it can be *purposive*, referring to what the student sees as his best interest; *normative*, concerning the role of the 'significant others' who shape individuals' decisions; and *imitative*, when peers' choices are taken into account in order to decide for personal decisions by students. Students' attitude to study (for instance a student can decide to study hard, dedicate more time for homework than for seeing friends, and so on, in order to increase his chances to enter a certain college) is a common example of purposive prefigurative commitment.

and White males and at what stage in the schooling process it takes on its importance. To estimate the causal effect of socioeconomic variables on educational attainment Cameron & Heckman account for the sequential nature of the school decision process, made at each grade among a specific set of choices and the selective nature of higher education, where the more able and motivated students progress to. Using simulations the analyses show that equalizing family income at age 15-16, the black/Hispanic gap in college entry is eliminated. This reveals the crucial importance of income in the adolescent years as a predictor of both college entry and type of college attended. Although the model accounts for the importance of family background (income, parental education and family structure), and differences between white and minorities scholastic ability, no individual aspirations and expectations about the future returns to college education are considered.

Figure 1.2 gives a quite clear representation of Morgan's preparatory commitment model of educational attainment. The latter can be explained briefly as follows (Morgan, 2005:102):

The broad range of exogenous factors on the left of the figure affects individuals' later educational attainment in part by the ways in which they structure individuals' commitments to schooling. The central mediating mechanism is therefore the set of prefigurative commitments generated in the course of individuals' schooling, separable into its three sources.

On the left of the scheme are the exogenous factors which shape the three sources of commitment and ultimately individuals' educational attainment. Parents, peers and significant others work as a source of crucial information about what is expected from individuals and the costs and benefits of different choices. According to Morgan, the expectations leading to a certain preparatory commitment (and ultimately to a certain educational attainment) can be misled by wrong or poor information given by significant others, or, when the information is accurate, it can lead to individuals' success.

At the basis of the prefigurative commitment model of educational attainment (mainly referring to the purposive commitment) there is a stochastic decision tree (figure 1.3) which assumes that prospective students consider the possibility whether to go or not to college, according to what they consider to be in their best interest.

Figure 1.2 Morgan model of educational attainment

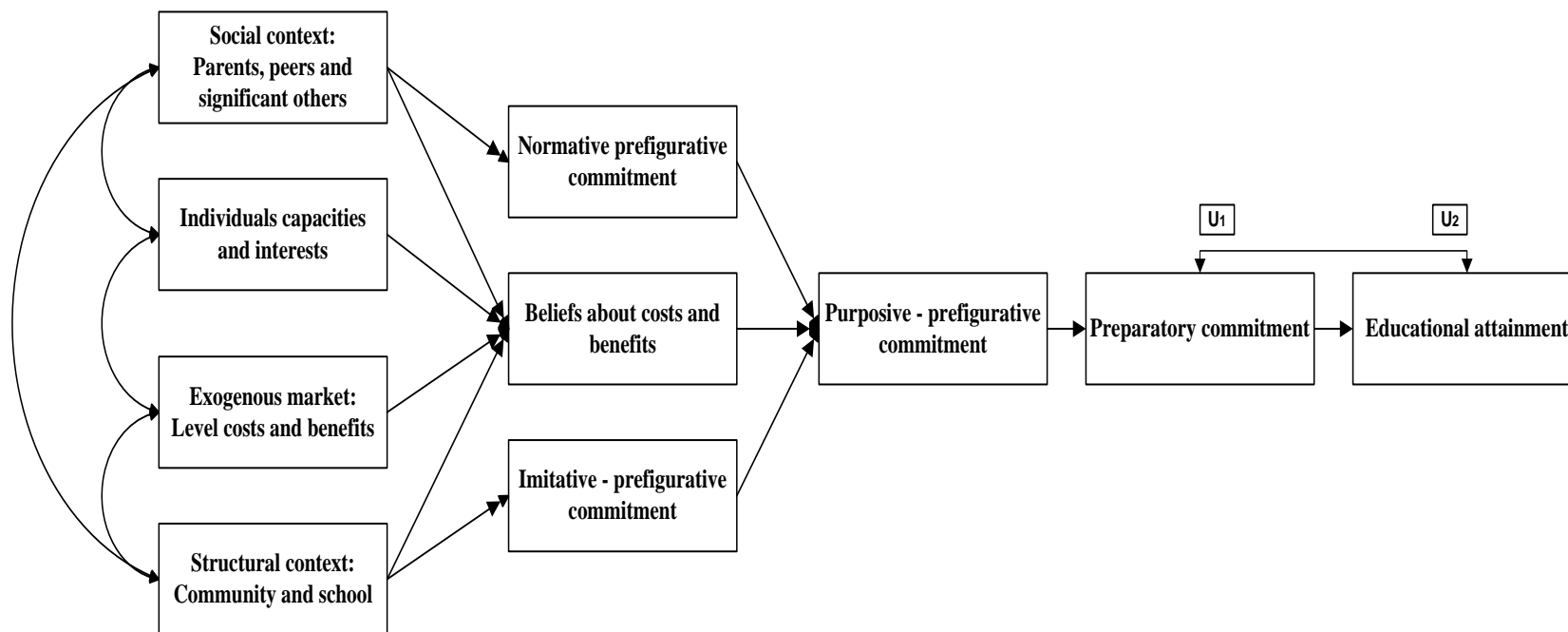
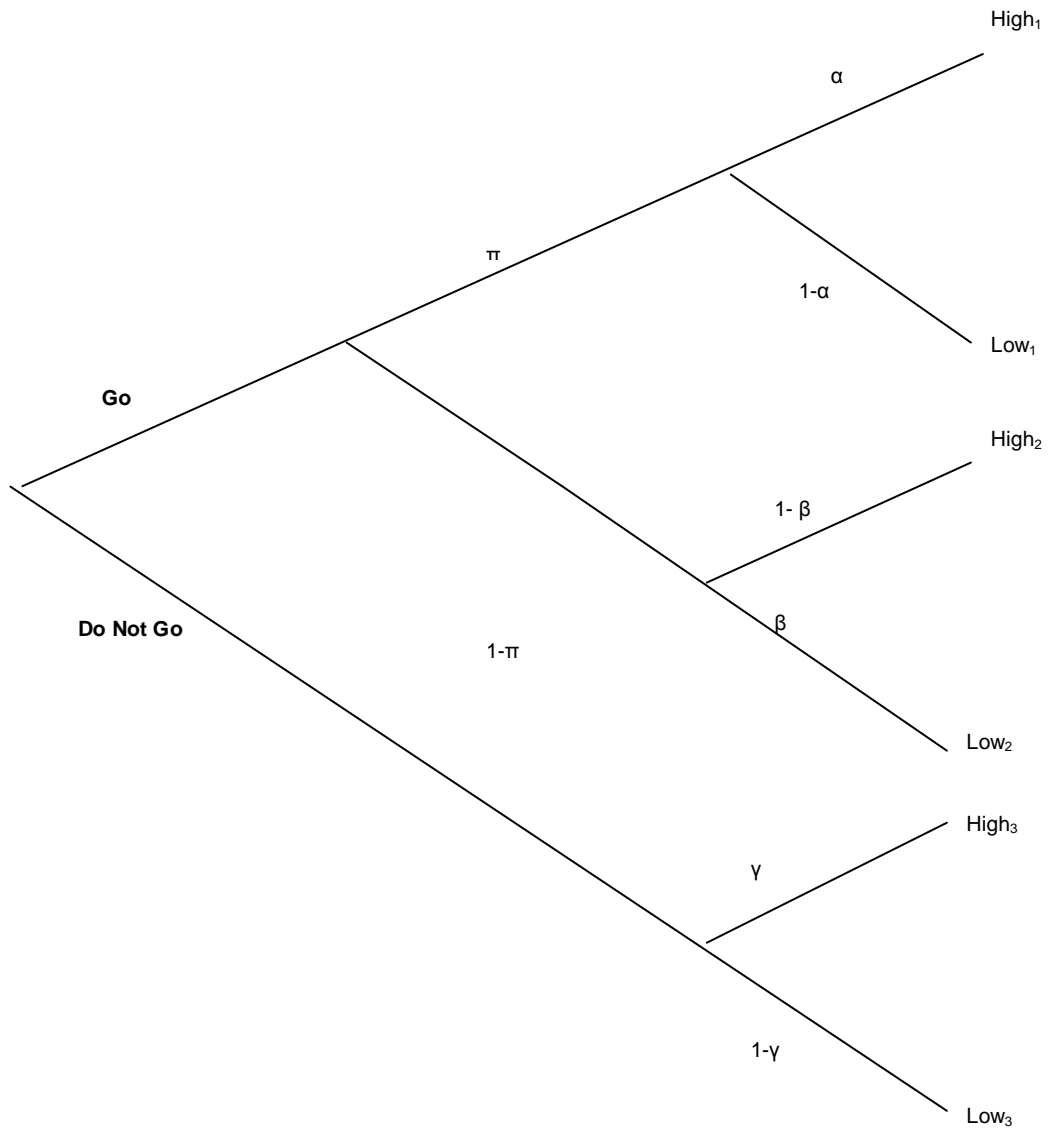


Figure 1.3: The decision tree model proposed by Morgan



According to Morgan (2005:104):

Assume that students consider two possible abstract life outcomes—a very good position in life denoted by “High” and a not very good position in life denoted by “Low”. These outcomes can be thought of as time-discounted dollar values for expected lifetime earnings (that is \$2,000,000 versus \$600,000). Further assume that all students would rather receive High than Low.

According to the decision tree model, each student has to choose a path and each of the three possible paths leads to a final attainment, indicated by high and low. College success is not, in fact, guaranteed by attendance on its own. The parameter π represents each student’s subjective belief about the probability of completing college if initially enrolled, while the parameter α represents the probability to attain High, having complete college, versus $1 - \alpha$, which represents the probability to attain Low. If the individual does not complete college, his path will be represented by $1 - \pi$, with β representing the probability to attain High and $1 - \beta$ representing the probability to attain Low. Finally y represents the probability not to enrol in college, which leads, again, to two different outcomes, y and $1 - y$, which end in the probabilities to attain High and Low.

Formalizing Morgan’s model of educational attainment, a student will choose to go to college if:

$$\pi \alpha [u(\text{High}_1) - u(\text{Low}_1)] + (1 - \pi) \beta [u(\text{High}_2) - u(\text{Low}_2)] > y [u(\text{High}_3) - u(\text{Low}_3)]$$

(1.5)

where u is a utility function that assigns subjective values to the alternative payoffs High and Low. If an individual's utility function is process-independent so that $u(\text{High}_1) = u(\text{High}_2) = u(\text{High}_3)$ and $u(\text{Low}_1) = u(\text{Low}_2) = u(\text{Low}_3)$, then both sides of the equation can be divided by a common utility difference, $u(\text{High}) - u(\text{Low})$, in order to obtain a simplified decision rule:

$$\pi \alpha + (1 - \alpha) \beta > y \quad (1.5a)$$

Each probability (going to college versus not going) has a “true” probability, which, according to Morgan, is related to the beliefs individuals have about each decisional path. Assuming that individuals, on average, have correct beliefs about the true probabilities of their choices (associated with institutional constraints and other exogenous factors), “the decision tree model can effectively motivate empirical analysis of individuals’ observed choice behaviour” (Morgan, 2005:107).

The specificity of Morgan’s model of educational attainment is in the prior preparation that the individual develops in order to accomplish the final decision, which is represented by going to college.

As Morgan (2005:112) claims:

The action “go to college” can be thought of as a compound outcome of a series of underlying decisions, many of which must be enacted long before the first college tuition bill is due. Moreover, the payoff to obtaining a college degree is a function not just of having enrolled in college but of how seriously one has prepared to master the college curriculum before being exposed to it. Thus, prior preparation

can be as consequential for levels of ultimate well-being as whether or not a student is able to make an ex ante utility-maximization college entry decision.

Considering the decision tree model as a forecasting tool used by students for self-regulating everyday behaviour in the long run (up to the college enrolment decision), how students construct and revise their beliefs is associated with stored observations about the behaviour of individuals whom they consider as payoff models. When the amount of information about ‘significant others’ is large, individuals will have precise beliefs and no uncertainty, while when the amount of information is small and/or confused, they will have uncertain beliefs and the decision process will be more difficult.

Tests of the model are not available yet and it is difficult to know exactly how it works. What Morgan offers to the reader is some numerical simulations, and analytic implications of the stochastic decision tree framework, which do not allow, as yet, evaluation of the model.

1.3.6 More Rational Models of Educational Attainment

While the relative risk aversion theory and, in general, the rational action approach, focuses only on the role of economic background and aspirations on the school decision making processes, Gambetta (1987) introduces another important variable, namely individuals’ preferences. Although he attributes differentials in educational participation to a greater normative pressure for the upper classes to reach a high level of education, despite the risk of failure, he talks about individuals’ preferences

regarding the type of secondary school to choose (liceo or vocational education¹⁶) as well as the type of education in terms of humanistic, scientific and so on, which are associated with different academic abilities.

Regarding normative pressure it can be read (Gambetta, 1987:173):

...relatively more subjects in the middle class feel a greater normative pressure to resist the temptation to abandon school after a failure or, on the other hand, that relatively more subjects in the working class do not attach as high a value to education.

Moreover, Gambetta introduces in the model of school decision making the variable of peers' influence. Although he does not offer an in depth analysis of it, he highlights the important role of classmates in both educational attainment and future educational choices, especially for working class individuals. While upper class individuals are, in fact, already advantaged by their family background (cultural, economic and social resources) in their educational process and school choices, lower class individuals face more difficult choices. Considering, for example, high school, upper class individuals are more likely to go to a *liceo* while working class people are more likely to choose a vocational high school (*istituto tecnico* and *istituto professionale*). For this main reason *liceo* has an "upper class environment" where most of the people come with a rich cultural and economic background and they simply maintain that

¹⁶In Italy there are two main types of secondary education: high schools, represented by *licei* (which can be considered as comprehensive schools), and vocational schools, represented by *istituti professionali* and *istituti tecnici*. The differentiation of secondary school in different type of schools, *licei*, *istituti professionali* and *istituti tecnici* is very important. *Licei*, offer, in fact, a general education, that involve theoretical subjects, and have the main aim to prepare individuals to the academic education. *Istituti professionali* and *istituti tecnici* are vocational schools, which offer more practical knowledge and they are aimed to prepare to specific jobs.

standard. The interesting aspect explained by Gambetta (1987) concerns the effect of this environment on lower class students who attend a *liceo*. Coping with a new environment and dealing with peers from a different social background can have a positive effect on their own achievement and strengthen their ambitions regarding education.

Educational behaviour, according to Gambetta, is largely the result of constraints. Economic constraints act when deciding whether or not to continue with further secondary education, while the cultural ones appear to be less crucial compared to the former, even when choosing a specific course. These mechanisms work in a different way, considering individuals from different social classes. While economic constraints represent the crucial factor taken into account by working class individuals, cultural constraints seem to be more important for middle class students who can count on high economic resources but may lack cultural capital. The latter will be, in fact, more likely to choose an *istituto tecnico* (technical school) instead of a *liceo* (comprehensive school), because of the risk of failing in a *liceo*. Upper class individuals, more likely, do not have to cope with any of those constraints and will choose a *liceo* and then go to university in most cases.

The importance of social ties in understanding school decisions has been analysed in depth by Akerlof (1997) in what he indicated by “social interaction theory”. According to Akerlof a rational choice theory of social decisions, such as school decisions, must take into account social factors (1997:1006):

social interaction theory explains why social decisions- such as the demand for education, the practise of discrimination, the decision to marry, divorce, and bear children, and the decision whether or not to commit crimes- are not simple choices based primarily on individual considerations. There is a significant difference between these social decisions and the conventional economic decision making epitomized in intermediate microeconomic theory as choice among alternative fruits available at the supermarket.

The key difference between social decisions and economic decisions is that the former have social consequences while the latter do not. Social networks, friends and relatives are affected by educational aspirations and choices as well as marriage choice or behaviour towards drugs or illicit activities which define an individual's personality, first to the individual himself and secondly to his friends and relatives. When making a choice, not only the individual's utility, costs and benefits are taken into account, but also those of his social networks.

Akerlof argues that two are the mechanisms of social decisions: social distance and social conformism. Social distance refers to people who try to distance themselves in the social space from their friends and relatives, also known as status seeking. Social conformism refers to the mechanism of people trying to move themselves closer, also called conformist behaviour.

The 'neighbourhood effect' can be an example of conformist behaviour in social interaction. When the individual identifies himself with the peer group in the neighbourhood, he would rather conform his choices to those of the group to avoid losing his friends, compared to choices that can result in social distance.

The stability of social inequality over the time can be explained, according to Akerlof, as the best interest of individuals, whose highest utility would be to reach and maintain their inherited social position. To distance themselves from the social group is not, in fact, an easy decision, as long as the status seeker cannot be sure he will be accepted from a different social group, although in a different (higher) social position. In other words, for a working class individual there might be social costs in upward mobility.

1.3.7 ‘Contingent’ and ‘embedded’ choosers

According to Ball et al. (2002), school decision making processes differ among individuals on the basis of social class and ethnicity. The focus of the research is on the issue of working class and ethnic minority participation in higher education. The research is conducted through qualitative in depth interviews of a sample of 120 ethnic minority students of different class positions. Through the close analysis of interviews Ball et al. were able to identify two main types of choosers: ‘contingent’ and ‘embedded’.

The contingent chooser is typically a first generation applicant to higher education whose parents were educated outside of the UK. Their parents are working class and have low incomes. The student can expect little financial support from them in choice-making or in funding higher education itself, although there may well be emotional support and high levels of encouragement and expectations within the family for the achievement of credentials. (Ball et al., 2002, p.337)

Contingent choosers consider the decision to apply for higher education with the general idea of 'getting a degree' without a specific knowledge of the different status of university institutions and courses. The fact that none of their parents achieved higher education leaves the individual with the complete responsibility towards the choice. As contingent choosers cannot usually rely on 'significant others', they tend to consult 'cold' sources such as prospectus, websites, etc., and to choose according to costs, geographical proximity to home and ethnic composition of the university (with a preference for mixed ethnic populations).

Differently from the contingent chooser:

The embedded chooser has parents who attended university, and often other relatives and friends with experience of university, but not necessarily in the UK. University attendance is a well-established and expected route beyond school, part of a 'normal biography' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Such students are subject to subtle and 'diffuse incitements (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990a, p. 20) to further study. To not to go on higher education is virtually unthinkable, and certainly unacceptable to parents. (Ball et al., 2002, p. 342)

The embedded chooser has a reduced range of choices, which consists mostly in the choice of the university institute to apply for, as the fact that he will enrol in higher education is not a matter of choice. Even the latter, by the way, could be associated with the family history and the importance for the individual to enrol in a particularly prestigious institution.

The fact that both parents (and/or other relatives) attended university, gives to the embedded chooser a lot of support, in terms of information (parents can organise visits to universities) and opportunities related to different courses (parents can arrange work experiences or discussion people in target occupations). Their choice is not based on costs or ethnic composition, but mostly on type and status of the university. For this reason it is quite expected for the student to move out of the family home and away from its city in order to achieve the ‘best education’.

1.3.8 Social Capital Theory

The variety of areas in which the concept of social capital has been applied has resulted in the identification of concepts with multiple and different aspects. According to Putnam (2000), who analysed social capital as a collective resource and focused his studies on democracy and the factors related to its functioning, social capital can be defined as the social relations individuals are involved in and the norms of reciprocity associated with them. Although peers are an important component of individuals’ social relations, the literature on social capital does not focus primarily on their role in individuals’ school choices. Coleman (1988:81), who analysed in depth the issue of inequality of educational opportunities, offers a detailed analysis of social capital, treating it as an individual resource:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors-whether persons or corporate actors- within the structure.

There are three main types of relations which lead to beneficial outcomes of social capital: (1) obligations, expectations and trustworthiness; (2) norms and effective sanctions; and (3) information channels. The first one refers to actions made by individuals to help other people, which are expected, on the basis of trust, to be reciprocated in the future by the latter. Norms and sanctions allow continuous exchanges and relations among individuals in a community, while information channels are very important to provide a basis for action and to allow people to reach their aims. Although all three structures can lead to benefits, Coleman focused his attention on social capital mainly as a source of social control.

Social capital can be identified as both social relations within the family (between parents and children) and within the community. The latter in particular makes it possible to share rules and values ultimately leading to what Coleman defines as “intergenerational closure”, which refers to the relationship among parents of kids who attend the same school.

A study by Coleman & Hoffer (1987) on the difference between public and catholic schools in the USA highlighted the advantage in school performance of children in the latter type of school, which has been explained as a result of social closure within the catholic community. Catholic people know and trust each other and are more

involved in the community life, creating a form of social control that advantages children's school outcomes by enforcing conformity with pro-school behaviour.

The mechanisms involved are, by the way, not specified by Coleman & Hoffer, as Morgan & Sorensen (1999) highlighted. As they attempt to replicate Coleman's study, looking at the mathematics achievement of children in 10th grade, they found that the average better performance of children in catholic schools can be explained by the school's higher expectations and demands, more than by social closure.

Beside its function of social control, social capital also acts as a source of support for children by the family. Various studies on the effect of disrupted versus intact families show that children who grow up with a single parent lack in social capital (considered as support, encouragement and participation by parents to the school activities), which in turn leads to lower school achievement (Aston & McLanahan, 1991).

According to Bourdieu (1997), social capital can be defined as the social networks individuals create outside the family; as Bourdieu (1997:51):

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition- or in other words, to membership in a group- which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

Social capital presupposes physical proximity (for instance geographical), as well as economic and social proximity to make the relationship possible to create and maintain over time. Although the concept of social capital is distinct from cultural and economic capital, it cannot be completely independent from them; it is not only the size of the network connections that makes the difference for the advantage of individuals, but the amount of economic as well as cultural capital possessed by the individuals of the network.

The idea of social capital proposed by Bourdieu is of a form of capital which is transferable into economic capital, for the advantage of people who can have it. Some goods, such as access to a job position or to a particular club, can only be accessed by establishing social connections, which requires time and effort.

Peer group effects have been analysed by several researchers, with quite diverse outcomes. According to the study presented by Evans et al. (1992), peer groups do not appear to have a large effect in schools. Evans et al. analyse whether the behaviour and attitudes of teenagers who get pregnant during high school and pupils who drop out of school have important effects on other students in the same school. Controlling for individual and family characteristics and publicly provided inputs, Evans et al. analysed how the proportion of students who were classified as economically disadvantaged (the measure of peer group composition) can affect both the behaviour towards pregnancy and the odds to drop out of school. Considering the former, the peer group is, as expected, a significant variable, indicating a rise in the probability to get pregnant when the percentage of disadvantaged pupils in the school increases. The magnitude of the effect loses importance, by the way, when considering variables that describe family background, such as number of siblings,

parents' characteristics and parents presence at home. Race seems to be very important concerning pregnancy, compared to family income, when controlling for the other family characteristics.

Similar results are obtained when considering school dropouts (in this case the peer group is considered as an exogenous variable). The results show the positive correlation between the unobservable factors that determine a student's peer group and those that determine her propensity to drop out of school.

While the former study does not give a clear explanation of the mechanisms involved in school and among peers, we can find clearer results in Sullivan & Heath (2002). Investigating the factors that account for differences between public and private schools, Sullivan and Heath analysed whether the better results obtained by pupils in private school (focusing on maths scores at age 16) can be explained or not by social capital and peer group effects, among other factors. Parent/school social capital is measured by the presence of a parent-teacher association (PTA) in the school, which is not considered entirely exogenous, as long as parents interested in their children's education might be willing to have parent-teacher meetings. Students characteristics measured include peer group processes and student outcomes. Peer group processes are analysed through the proportion of students from non- manual backgrounds in the school, although it can be argued that this is a quite weak proxy for the social character of the individual student' peer group.

While Sullivan & Heath found that private schools are advantaged in terms of their intakes (students' cognitive skills, parents' social class, education, etc.) and resources, they do not have very high levels of parent/school social capital and they do not seem to encourage that either. Generally speaking, the measures of home/school social

capital used do not account for differences in school outcomes, although Sullivan & Heath explained this as a consequence of the non-locally based intake of private schools, which results in the interaction of pupils from different areas and lack of closure among parents. There is a high association between students' school outcomes and social class composition (after controlling for individuals' social class), showing that the higher the rate of non-manual students in the school, the higher the test scores at age 16. The student/teacher ratio and teacher turnover appear to be not very significant, while a lot of variance is explained by previous test scores.

In the study by Robertson & Symons (2003), educational attainment of British pupils at age 11 is analysed as a function of peer group, parental input, and schooling. The peer group, which is considered as an endogenous variable, affects students' attainment in two ways: directly, when pupils help each other with coursework, for instance and indirectly, through values shared.

Individuals' academic ability is measured by maths and reading test scores at age 7 (results of a combination of genetic inheritance and pre-school parental inputs), while the peer group is measured by the percentage of a child's classmates who have fathers in the top socio-economic group. Streaming is also taken into account as well as parental time spent with children, family size and family background. The results show that attainment at 11 is strongly affected by the peer group, especially when streamed schools are considered. Family background also has a strong influence and the higher the social class and parents' education, the higher the pupils' attainment. The latter is negatively related to the number of children in the family, as well as a full time working mother and an absent father.

A study conducted by Lareau (2002) on differences in childrearing between middle class and working class families shows several differences in the interactions inside the home, such as the organization of children's time and, outside the home, in the interaction with institutions and professionals. Regarding the organization of time, Lareau points out the difference in the participation in both formal and informal activities among children coming from different social classes. Middle class children participate in several activities outside the school, organised by adults, such as sports teams, piano lessons, community choir, school plays and so on, as well as informal activities with siblings in yard, visiting friends from school and playing sometimes with neighbours. Working class children participate in very few activities organised by adults, which are limited to sports teams and Sunday school while they are more involved in informal activities such as visiting relatives, playing outside in the street and hanging out with neighbourhood kids.

Inside and outside family social ties can be explained also as primary and secondary associations as can be read in Offe & Fuchs (2002)¹⁷. Primary associations involve family, kin, ethnic and religious groups. In most cases this type of association is non-

¹⁷ The concept of social capital as social networks outside the family has also been analysed by Granovetter (1973), whose differentiation between strong ties and weak ties gives a first clear definition of social networks individuals are involved in. He studied the dynamics of the labour market and the sources individuals use to search for a job. His conceptualization of social capital focuses on social networks and, in particular, on the typology of social ties. Granovetter defines, in fact, two types of social ties, called "strong ties" and "weak ties". The former refers to the family social network, while the latter refers to secondary associations (both formal and informal). Granovetter's definition of ties is based on their strength: the strength of a tie can be measured by a combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy and the mutual reciprocity which characterize the tie (Granovetter 1973). According to the author, the most important ties, and indeed the most important type of social networks are the "weak ties", which allow people to get a good position on the labour market, for instance, and other type of advantages. According to Granovetter, while individuals cannot choose their strong ties, which are represented by the family someone belongs and is born into, individuals have a certain amount of choice in creating their weak ties. In this way while strong ties can be considered exogenous, weak ties can be identified to be of endogenous nature.

voluntary or primordial, constituted by blood tradition and family descent. Moreover, primary associations don't have fixed and specific goals. Tertiary associations include firms, interests associations and political parties. They have fixed goals and variable membership, a leadership and, generally speaking, a hierarchical structure. Secondary associations differ from the primary ones because their purposes are not so wide as those of families or other communities but they are also not as specific as the ones of tertiary associations. Moreover, they are not interested in profit and acquisition of power. As was mentioned before, secondary associations are characterized by a main domain, instead of a fixed goal, such as sport, music, education, political mobilization and so on; people participate spontaneously and act for them to be durable in time (Offe & Fuchs, 2002).

Among the secondary associations it is possible to differentiate between formal and informal associations. The former involves sport clubs, religious associations and social movements and indeed needs people to share knowledge or simply the same interests; the latter refers to socializing with friends or having conversation with neighbours which do not need particular knowledge or shared skills, but they are spontaneous gatherings.

1.3.9 Implications of the literature review

In this section we will summarize the main points of the literature presented above which will be addressed in the research questions of this thesis.

Among the rational action literature, the relative risk aversion theory by Breen & Goldthorpe (B&G) (2000) has been tested several times and largely supported by the

results. However, there are some points left untested such as the role of individual's educational aspirations; according to B&G, relative aspirations can be considered mainly as a plan to avoid downward mobility therefore they differ among social classes. In general, this concept is mainly applicable to middle class children, who are pressured by their parents to maintain their social advantage throughout a successful educational attainment. In a different way, working class children would not need to achieve a high educational level as their 'aspirations' stop at a working class position.

The lack of tests of this particular element of the B&G theory suggests that they are still hypotheses and there is need for further investigation before a complete support of the relative risk aversion theory. However, as mentioned in the literature review, some of the research available on individuals' aspirations and beliefs suggests the existence of differences among social classes. Sullivan (2004), found a difference in the perception of children's own ability and a different evaluation of educational qualification, although this might not reflect on children's own aspirations.

Another element of the B&G theory that needs further investigation is the nature of parental aspirations. As mentioned earlier on, parents are those who push their children to achieve in education, so that they can maintain their social advantage. Again, this concept seems to apply only to middle class parents who would risk downward mobility for their children. As this does not apply to working class parents, they should not have high aspirations for their children. Lareau's (2001) study on parental involvement in children's education suggests the existence of different childrearing practices among parents of different social class and ethnicity, although this might not reflect their aspirations for their children. Also, studies available on parental aspirations and involvement in children's education (Reay & Ball, 1998)

only consider limited aspects such as the different approach to education of middle class and working class families.

Another element that will be addressed in this thesis is Morgan's model of prefigurative and preparatory commitment. Firstly, this model has never been tested so far; secondly it implies long-term planning with regards to school choices and future plans by individuals. Morgan's vision of prefigurative commitment hypothesizes that children will make plans for the future in the early years of school, rationally considering the pros and cons of their choice, and will make further choices according to the early plans. Although a thorough test of the model would need longitudinal data that follow children from an early stage of their school career until the end of it, the data in this thesis will cover some years and hopefully would suggest whether it is possible to support the model or not. Also, crucial factors affecting children's prefigurative and preparatory commitment in Morgan's model are significant others. It is not clear though, who, among family, teachers (and the school environment) and peers affect children's plans the most, or at all.

Finally, going back to the role of peers in individuals' school decisions, the studies presented in the literature review do not refer to the actual peer group effect, but to the more general role of school composition. It is difficult, due to the small amount of information in quantitative data, to address this issue. Qualitative data might provide more in-depth information to put some more light on the nature of peer relationships.

1.4 Thesis outline

The key research questions that this thesis aims to address are the following:

- Considering inequalities in educational attainment among children of different social and ethnic background, how do educational aspirations differ among students during the years leading to the transition to post-secondary school?
- To what extent can the formation and change of educational aspirations be explained by social and ethnic differences between students?
- What is the role of significant others, i.e. parental aspirations and expectations, teachers' evaluation and peers' intentions on students own educational aspirations?
- Of all the dimensions of parental involvement in children's education, which are the strongest ones? And to what extent can they be explained by social background differences?
- Focusing on peer relationships, do pupils relate to friends for advice about school choices? Do they have different circles of friends, such as school friends and neighbourhood friends?

Considering the qualitative chapter:

- Who are the social influences on pupils' decisions? In particular who do they relate to for educational matters? What is their perception of school and the school environment they attend daily?
- Looking at peers relationships, do pupils have different circles of friends, such as school friends' and 'neighbourhood friends'? If this is the case who do they relate for advice?

These questions will be addressed in two quantitative chapters and a qualitative one.

Before describing the content of the analytical chapters contained within this thesis, it is important to understand that they were each developed as three stand-alone papers with specific analytical goals. For this reason, some of the literature discussed in the previous sections will be reiterated during these chapters to help the reader fully understand the context of the analysis.

Following is a brief overview of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Educational Aspirations of Pupils Age 15-16: How they are Shaped and how they Change during High School Years

This chapter examines the formation and changes of educational aspirations of students in years 9 to 11. The main result of the chapter is that ethnic minority students show very stable high aspirations from year 9, while White English students, especially boys, of a lower class background have quite unstable aspirations which show some positive change by year 11. Considering the role of significant others,

parental aspirations and expectations have the strongest influence, followed by peers' intentions. Teachers' evaluation, however, does not appear to be related to students' aspirations. Individual attitude towards education is also a strong explanatory factor for high and stable aspirations during years 9 to 11. Finally, focusing on parental aspirations, results suggest that they are very stable over the years and that they might not be directly dependent on social class.

Chapter 3: Parental involvement in children's education: Social class and ethnic differences

This chapter examines the role of parental involvement in children's education; based on the literature available on the topic, we differentiated three dimensions: (1) participation in school-related activities; (2) aspirations and encouragement; and (3) help with homework. Although we expected to find differences based on social and ethnic background, the quantitative analysis indicated no particular differences among parents concerning their type of involvement. For this reason, findings from the qualitative interviews were added, showing that the most important dimension is parental aspirations and encouragement. This is also where the most differences could be highlighted; middle class White English parents and working class ethnic minority ones are those with the highest aspirations for their children; the main difference from working class White English parents is the lack of encouragement they offer to their children, leaving them in charge to make their own decisions about education. Another important finding concerns the crucial role of older siblings, in helping with homework in particular when parents are not well-educated, and in offering advice and information regarding courses and school choices.

Chapter 4: peer relationships and school choices at age 15-16: A qualitative study

This chapter explores the nature of peer relationships and offers some further considerations about the role of parents, teachers and the school environment on children's school choices at the end of compulsory education. This is done through analysis of the interview data gathered from schools. These interviews suggest that peers are the last resource when it comes to get advice about education matters. While most of the students would, in fact, discuss plans with their friends, parents (and older siblings) represent the most trustworthy source of advice and information. Although teachers are perceived as well-informed and experienced, they are very rarely taken into account when making school choices.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The concluding chapter of the thesis brings together the results of each chapter. In particular, the crucial role of family in children's educational attainment is discussed, along with further explanation of differences in terms of social and ethnic background. Finally, policy implications of the research are also discussed.

Chapter 2

Educational aspirations of pupils Age 15-16: How they are shaped and how they change during high school years

In this chapter we examine social class, ethnicity and gender variations in educational aspirations of pupils from year 9 to year 11 of education towards their decisions at the end of compulsory education in England. The specific objectives are (1) to describe variation in educational aspirations among different social classes, ethnic and gender groups; (2) to follow possible changes over the years in pupils' aspirations and how those differ according to social class, ethnicity and gender; and (3) to assess the influence of family, school, peers and the individuals' attitude to education in the formation and change over time of educational aspirations.

The major theories about the processes of educational achievement and education inequalities suggest that the individual's socio-economic background is the crucial factor when it comes to scholastic decisions (Boudon, 1974; Becker, 1964; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). Focusing on the Breen and Goldthorpe (B&G) relative risk aversion theory (1997), which is surely one of the most successful, higher class individuals are very likely to achieve a high educational level on the basis of their high amount of resources and because they are pushed by a pressure to avoid social

demotion. On the other hand, lower class individuals tend to drop out of school at an earlier stage due to the limited economic resources which, in the case of school failure, would cause an economic loss for the family and the limited cultural resources, which are responsible for a low educational attainment and a consequent higher risk of school failure. As can be read from this brief but key passage, educational choices are “determined” by economic constraints. Social origins, economic resources and individual academic ability are the main factors that account for class inequalities in educational attainment. The main reason for individuals to achieve educational qualifications is, in the B&G model, to avoid social demotion, which concerns mostly the higher salariat class. According to this statement, individuals (and parental) educational aspirations would differ among social classes, so that the higher the social class the higher the educational level to be achieved, therefore the higher the educational aspirations. Breen and Goldthorpe also do not consider the presence of other influences in individuals’ life, such as teachers and peers, who could play an important role in shaping educational aspirations.

How individuals shape their aspirations (sometimes referred to as tastes), has been explained as a matter of social and cultural background by Bourdieu and Murphy (1981) and, as Sullivan (2001) found out, attitudes to education and beliefs about academic ability can vary across social classes. Moreover, as Gambetta (1987) claims, aspirations can be modified when the individuals enter a socially different environment and interact with individuals coming from a different family background.

Morgan’s model of “prefigurative” and “preparatory” commitment (2005) focuses on how individuals and their significant others form their expectations and how the

latter affect individuals' educational outcomes. Although Morgan's model offers an alternative way to analyse school decision making including family, peers, school and individual characteristics as influences to individual expectations, it seems not very easily applicable. If individual's school decision processes can be analysed in the short term (considering each educational level), they are not very straightforward to analyse in the long term. How is a particular school decision constructed and how do students' beliefs in former school years affect their choice whether to go or not to college when the time arrives?

Studies available on the formation and change of aspirations are mostly focused on ethnic and gender differences (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Ball et al., 2002) and how they affect their educational outcomes. Moreover, when studies have been done (Gambetta, 1987; Sullivan, 2006), results are quite limited because of the data. My analyses start where those previous ones have left off.

The next section offers an overview of relevant literature followed by a description of data and methods. After that some descriptive statistics will be shown, while the following sections will present the main findings about social class and gender differences in educational aspirations and expectations and discuss the factors affecting those differences.

2.1 Theoretical background

2.1.1 Status attainment literature

The first to suggest the crucial importance of parental encouragement in educational and occupational aspirations of pupils (in his study only working class boys were considered), was Kahl (1953). Although his findings were based on a sample of twenty four boys, he discovered the importance of parents' attitude in educational and occupational success of their children, explaining the relationship between social stratification to aspirations.

Another early study underlining the relation between socioeconomic status and college plans was the one conducted by Bordua (1960). Parental emphasis on college was positively related to college plans controlling for gender and school year, with differences for boys compared to girls and for higher opposed to lower social classes. These results are however limited; Bordua did not control for all variables simultaneously and, more importantly, he did not include academic ability in the model which is known to be fundamental when explaining educational attainment.

Starting from the results of the studies described above, Sewell & Shah (1968)¹⁸ analysed a cohort of 10,318 Wisconsin high school seniors finding out that socioeconomic status, intelligence and parental encouragement all have substantial independent relationships to college plans of pupils (both males and females), although none of them taken individually or jointly are totally responsible for social class differences in educational attainment. Parental encouragement is indeed a

¹⁸ For more reference see also Sewell, Haller & Straus (1957).

powerful intervening variable but there is much more that needs to be taken into account to explain school choices.

A well-known status socialization approach is the “Wisconsin model of status attainment” (Sewell, Haller & Portes, 1969; Sewell, Haller & Ohlendorf, 1970) which aims to explain both the processes of educational and occupational attainment. Focusing on the former, Sewell et al. claims that the effects of family background and academic ability of a pupil can be completely explained by the expectations that “significant others” (parents, teachers and peers) hold on him. What significant others do is, in fact, define educational expectations that are then internalized by the student as his own aspirations. The model is quite simple as it concludes that individuals’ educational attainment can be increased (or decreased) just by their significant others increasing (or decreasing) their expectations on him. The variables that significant others use to shape their expectations of a student’s future are mainly his socio-economic background and his demonstrated academic ability. Although the model was revised a few times due to limitations in the data used for the analyses, the results of the 1970 version showed some direct effect of significant others and schools over students’ educational outcomes, doubts remained on the validity of the claims that significant others could raise a student educational attainment only by imposing higher expectations on them.

Subsequent explorations of the status-attainment model (Sewell, 1971; Duncan et al., 1972) showed that significant school experience (teacher’s feedback and peers’ influence) could affect (strengthening it) the link between socioeconomic aspirations and actual educational attainment.

All the studies described until now treat educational aspirations as a cognitive state shaped by the expectations of significant others, most of all by parents, who control both financial and psychological resources (Kao & Tienda, 1998). A different concept is offered by Jenks et al. (1983) who claims that educational aspirations are rational assessments of the costs and benefits of different actions. In this case, the material resources available to an individual become the crucial factor determining his school choices. This conceptualization is at the basis of the economic theory of educational attainment (Becker, 1964) and the subsequent rational action theory (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 2000) which considers the individual as a rational actor making his decisions on the basis of the cost and benefits of succeeding vs. failing in school. In particular, the B&G theory considers aspirations as the mere attempt to avoid social demotion and to at least reach the same social position as their parents’.

This view seems quite simplistic in the way that it dismisses the complexity of influences that individuals experience everyday in the diverse contexts of their lives (family, school, peers and more) and how those may affect and change their educational choices.

2.1.2 Morgan’s model of prefigurative and preparatory commitment

Starting from acknowledging the limitations of the rational choice theory and the need for a model able to capture the individuals’ limited capacities to deliberate about decisions, Morgan presents a model of “prefigurative” and “preparatory”

commitment for individuals' decision making about college entry. The model is grounded on the "Wisconsin model" of status attainment and the lack of specificity on beliefs formation processes in Cameron & Heckman (2001)¹⁹. Morgan looks at the causal relationship between the individual's educational expectations, the expectations that significant others form on him, and educational attainment. Individuals and their significant others form their expectations in the long term, based on the everyday life. The result of individuals' observations and influences by significant others is what Morgan defines "prefigurative commitment". Once the individual has chosen the course of action to commit to for the future, he will figure out a plan to successfully achieve it which is defined as "preparatory commitment".

As Morgan (2005: 103) claims, "the potentially observable course of everyday behaviour that positions an individual to realise his or her prefigurative commitment can then be defined as preparatory commitment". Preparatory commitment is determined by "the ease with which he or she is able to envision successfully doing something" (Morgan 2005:101) or "a cognitive attachment to a future course of

¹⁹ Cameron and Heckman focus on the effects of educational expectations on the attainment of Black and Whites. Considering that disparities in family income largely account for differences in measured schooling attainment, Cameron and Heckman (2001) investigate whether income (along with other social background variables), is the actual responsible of disparities in college attendance among Black, Hispanic and White males and at what stage in the schooling process it takes on its importance. To estimate the causal effect of socioeconomic variables on educational attainment Cameron and Heckman account for the sequential nature of the school decision process, made at each grade among a specific set of choices and the selective nature of higher education, where the more able and motivated students progress to. Using simulations, the analyses show that equalizing family income at age 15-16 eliminates the black/Hispanic gap in college entry. This reveals the crucial importance of income in the adolescent years as a predictor of both college entry and type of college attended. Although the model accounts for the importance of family background (income, parental education and family structure), and differences between white and minorities scholastic ability, no individual aspirations and expectations about the future returns to college education are considered.

behaviour” (Morgan, 2005:103) and can be defined by three subsets. It can be *purposive*, referring to what the student sees as his best interest; *normative*, concerning the role of the “significant others” who shape individuals’ decisions and *imitative*, when peers’ choices are taken into account in order to decide for personal decisions by students. Students’ attitude to study (for instance a student can decide to study hard, dedicate more time for homework than for seeing friends and so on in order to higher his chances to enter a certain college) is a common example of purposive prefigurative commitment.

Morgan’s model can be briefly explained as multiple factors (significant others, individual capacities and interests, market level costs and benefits and the structural context of school and community) shaping the three sources of commitment and ultimately the individuals’ educational attainment. At the basis of the prefigurative commitment model of educational attainment (mainly referring to the purposive commitment) there is a stochastic decision tree which assumes that prospective students consider the possibility, or not, to go to college according to what they consider being in their best interest.

If we consider the decision tree model as a forecasting tool used by students for self-regulating everyday behaviour in the long run (up to the college enrolment decision), how students construct and revise their beliefs is associated with stored observations about the behaviour of individuals whom they consider as payoff models. When the amount of information about the “significant others” is large, individuals will have precise beliefs and no uncertainty whereas when the amount of information is small and/or confused, they will have uncertain beliefs and the decision process will be more difficult.

Tests of the model are not available yet and it is difficult to know exactly how it works. What Morgan offers to the reader is some numerical simulations and analytic implication of the stochastic decision tree framework which do not allow, anyway, an evaluation of the validity of the model.

2.1.3 Empirical studies

Most of the research done about educational aspirations focuses on ethnic minority and race differences, which is not the focus of this paper, but they can offer very important insights in the matter.

Kao & Tienda (1998) analysed how aspirations are formed and maintained from eighth to twelfth grade²⁰. White individuals with high aspirations tend to have formed them already in eighth grade and maintain them through to twelfth grade while ethnic minority pupils tend to have less stable aspirations. The latter, in fact, show ambitious aspirations during eighth grade which are very likely to change during the high school years. The disadvantaged family background is one of the main reasons explaining this mechanism: lower economic and cultural capital of ethnic minority youth families contribute to shape their early general ambitious aspirations in more concrete and lower ones by the end of high school which affect their lower educational achievement compared to white pupils.

When considering preferences (whether pupils enjoy school and have a positive attitude towards education), and aspirations of pupils concerning education, Sullivan

²⁰ In the US, eighth grade is typically the final grade before high school. It is the equivalent of year 10 in England.

(2006) found the existence of clear differences in the preferences and aspirations of individuals from different social backgrounds. Sullivan's analysis of student's perception of their own ability shows that the latter is affected by social class. There is a highly significant association between social class and students' estimation of their own academic ability which can be seen in the higher rate of estimation that middle class students used to indicate their own abilities compared to other students.

Differences in aspirations and expectations among social classes can also be a result of a different socialization and attitude that people develop towards the educational institution, the teachers and the authority in general. An example of this is the study conducted by Lareau (2002); the focus is on differentials in the childrearing practises among families of different social class and race (black and white). The study highlights a clear difference in the way white middle class families differ from black working class families, for instance, in the way they interact with institutions and the grade of trustworthiness they show towards them. Middle class people expect institutions to be responsive to them and to accommodate their individual needs. For this reason, for instance, they show more energetic and active participation in their children school activities, talking to the teachers and being part of the learning process. By contrast, lower class individuals think that institutions are mainly a sort of enemy that work against them and are there to punish them. Differently from middle class parents, working class parents do not intervene actively in school and they tend to depend on teachers and school professionals (even if they do not really trust them), because they feel "unable" to discuss with them.

2.1.4 The importance of the value given to education

Education can be valued by individuals as a mean to enter a good position in the labour market (instrumental value), but it can also be valued as a good in itself (Murphy, 1981). Very little is known about the role that the value given to education by the individual plays in his/her educational attainment.

As Sullivan (2006) claims, there could be a social class difference in the evaluation of the value of education in the labour market, for instance if working class students consider educational credentials as less essential to occupational success than middle class students do.

According to Reay & Ball (1998), the value that pupils and families assign to education differs among social backgrounds. Concerning educational decisions, children need to be guided on the importance of education for their future (as a strategy of social reproduction) and parents are the ones responsible for that. In a different way, working class pupils are left with a higher level of ‘autonomy’ (with limitations such as finances, in a strategy of “necessity”) in the choice of high school and parents tend to look at what is best for the present and not in an imagined future.

2.2 Empirical model

Following the previous discussion of the relevant literature, I will now present the empirical model that will be tested in this chapter.

The focus of this chapter is educational aspirations. Over the years aspirations have been conceptualized and treated differently by researchers; even among the Status-

attainment tradition there is some disagreement: on one hand educational aspirations are seen as the reflection of a state of mind that motivates pupils to achieve academic success (Caplan et al., 1992) while on the other hand, aspirations are considered a cognitive state shaped by the expectations of significant others (parents, teachers and peers) (Sewell, 1971; Sewell et al., 1969, 1970). The latter also suggests that past experiences will affect future outcomes, as achieving poor scores at finals can strongly affect pupil's expectations, and therefore aspirations, of academic success for the following year.

As mentioned previously, Jencks (1983) conceptualizes aspirations as rational assessments of costs and benefits of a possible action. This could be limitative, as aspirations are reduced to a mere economic evaluation of the individual's current situation and do not consider the psychological disposition to achieve.

Morgan (2004), considering the limitation of both theoretical frames, embraces a conceptualization of aspirations as a cognitive state shaped by multiple factors which include significant others' expectations, individual academic ability and interests, exogenous market level costs and benefits and the community and school. Although it would have been interesting to try to test the relevance of all these factors, the data available do not offer any information about the individual's perception of market level costs and benefits.

According to the data available, educational aspirations are operationalised as the answer to the following question: "what would you like to do after you completed compulsory education?"

Building on the literature discussed above and based on the empirical model presented (figure 1), some hypotheses can be drawn.

H1: Social class is a strong predictor of changes in aspirations over the years: I hypothesize that lower class students will have less stable aspirations during the years as they tend to shape their final school choice not long before year 11 of education (Kao & Tienda, 1998);

H2: Significant others, and in particular parents' aspirations and expectations, will be the most influential in shaping pupils' educational aspirations, absorbing some of the direct effect of socioeconomic background(Morgan, 2004);

H3: Considering ethnicity, I hypothesize, according to previous studies (Kao & Tienda, 1998) that ethnic minority groups will show higher and more stable aspirations than white English pupils, controlling for the other variables;

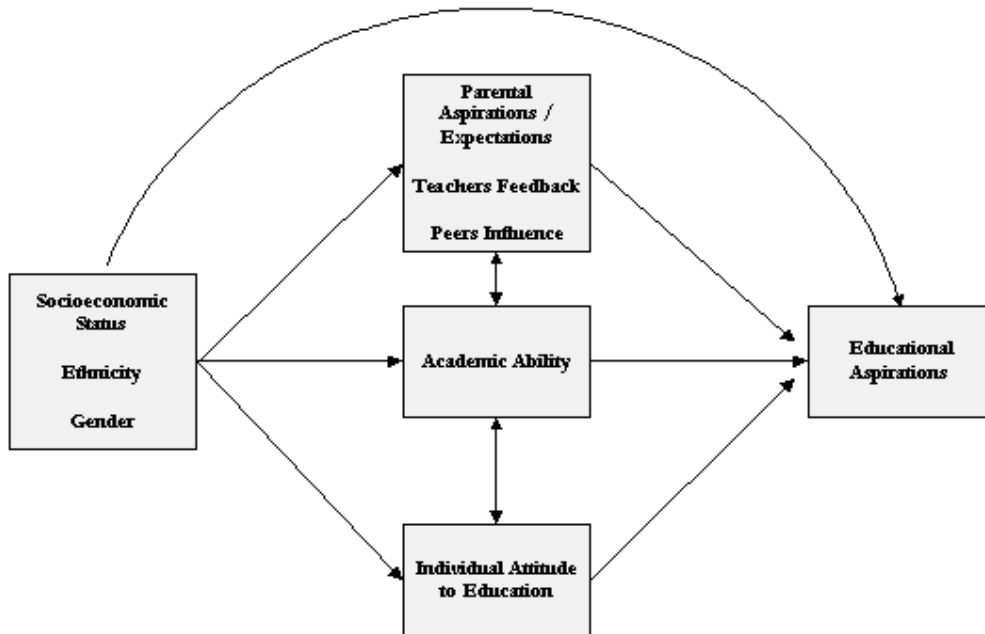
H4: Academic ability will have a stronger effect on educational aspirations for lower class pupils, whose socioeconomic and cultural background represents a big constraint when it comes to school choices (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2000);

H5: Although education is usually considered as a means to achieve a good position in the labour market and in the social ladder, it can also be valued as a good in itself (Murphy, 1981). In other words, pupils can have different 'tastes' when it comes to education, whether they like going to school or not. I

hypothesize that pupils who like going to school will have also have higher educational aspirations.

H6: Murphy (1981), as well as Sullivan (2006), claim that the value individuals give to education may have a role in shaping educational aspirations and it may vary among social classes, with middle class students considering education more for its value on the labour market than working class students.

Figure 2.1: Empirical model



2.3 Data and method

2.3.1 The data source

The source I used is the first three waves of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). Designed and funded by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the LSYPE is a large scale panel study conducted by the National Centre for Social Research.

The LSYPE began in 2004 and it has been conducted every year since. The first wave sampled young people aged between 13 and 14, who therefore were in year 9 of education, and it is planned to continue at least for the next 10 years. It is designed to provide annual information about the progress of the cohort group, their attitudes towards school and learning, and the transition from secondary to tertiary education (or training programmes), in order to evaluate the success of policies introduced by the DCSF and promote further policy development.

The survey provides information from both the young person and his/her parents, who are all interviewed every year. Information collected concerns several matters: the young person's family background, parent's socio-economic status, personal characteristics, attitudes, experiences and behaviours, attainment in education, parental employment, income and family environment as well as local deprivation, information about the school(s) the young person attends/attended.

The sample drawn for the first wave was of 21,000 young people in year 9, attending maintained schools, independent schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) in England in February 2004, who were born between 1st September 1989 and 31st August 1990. Maintained schools, divided in deprived/non deprived, were over-sampled by a factor of 1.5. A two stage probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling procedure was adopted, with schools being the primary sampling unit and pupils within the school being the second stage of the sampling procedure. Both the primary and secondary stage ensured that within a deprived stratum, all pupils within an ethnic group had an equal chance of selection. Concerning independent schools, they were stratified by percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more A-C GCSE grades in 2003 within boarding

status (i.e. whether or not they had any boarding pupils), within gender of pupils. PRUs formed a stratum of their own, with 2 units sampled²¹.

Fieldwork for the first 3 waves (those available to the public) was carried out between March and October 2004-2006. The response rate at wave 1 was 74% yielding 15,770 interviews; at wave 2 the number of interviews came down to 13,539, with an 86% response rate; and at wave 3 the survey reached 12,439 interviews, with a 92% response rate²². The survey was conducted by face to face computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI)²³.

2.3.2 Variables

The empirical model presented in figure 1 includes all the variables that will be used in the analyses. Let's start from the dependent variable²⁴:

²¹ I decided to rely on this sample structure and not weight the analyses; there are two reasons for this. Firstly from the point of view of tests of significance it is more accurate to work with the actual numbers rather than with inflated or deflated once. Second, statistical control for weighting achieves the same result weighting.

²² These percentages refer to the number of interviews in wave 1.

²³ For further information see Ward and D'Souza (2008).

²⁴ It can be argued that the model presented has some limitations in terms of the variables included; there are, in fact, other variables, such as the type of schools and the labour market, that have proved influential in previous research (Sullivan & Heath, 2002; Drinkwater, 1999). While the LSYPE do not provide with information about the labour market situation in different areas in England, we will address the issue later on in the chapter; concerning the type of school, the information is available; however, we decided not to address the issue in the analyses of this chapter. Two are the main reasons for this choice: the focus of the thesis, which is on the role of significant others, and the quality of the analyses; further controls run, in fact, the risk of obtaining 'false positives' or 'false negatives'.

Individual's educational aspirations

The variable consists of three categories, which are the answers to the question '*when you are 16 and have finished year 11 at school, what do you want to do next?*' and they are: (1) Stay on in education, (2) Leave education, (3) Do not know. The main limitation of this variable is the fact that it only provides with general information about individuals' aspirations. As I mentioned earlier on in the thesis, there is a significant difference in terms of future plans between children who choose to enter A-levels compared to vocational courses. Although the LSYPE does include a more specific question about aspirations at the end of compulsory schooling²⁵, this was introduced in the third wave of the survey. As the main focus of this chapter is the longitudinal analyses of pupils' aspirations, a general variable about future plans represented the only option in this case. However, more insights on the issue will be drawn from the qualitative data, which will be thoroughly discussed in chapter 4.

Considering structural variables, they have been constructed as follows:

Family social class

The variable combines mother and fathers' social class taking the highest between the two; I use a collapsed version of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)²⁶. This was derived by combining respondents' occupation in their most

²⁵ The question was '*Are you staying on in full-time education so you can get any of these qualifications:* (1) A- levels/A2S/AS-levels, (2) AVCE (vocational A-levels); (3) GCSEs in applied subjects; (4) other qualifications; (5) do not know.

²⁶ www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/

recent job coded to the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC 2000)²⁷ with their employment status to give one of the following NS-SEC analytic classes: (1) Employers in large organizations; higher managerial and professional occupations, (2) Lower managerial and professional; higher technical and supervisory occupations, (3) Small employers and own account workers, (4) Lower supervisory and technical occupations, (5) Semi-routine occupations; routine occupations, (6) Not employed; never employed; not classifiable.

Although social class will be referred to in the analyses as the categories above, there is a tendency, in general, to discuss class differences in terms of working classes, with limited resources, the upper class, the wealthy and powerful, and the middle classes. In general, the results of the analyses in this chapter show homogeneity within these comprehensive categories, therefore I will mostly discuss the results in the light of those. However, the qualitative analyses will allow further consideration of the specific sub-categories, which will take place in chapter 4. I am aware of the complexity of social classification and the different positions of social scientists towards the definition of social classes; this debate has been going on for several decades, especially when it comes to the middle classes and the working classes. While the upper class has always been a quite homogeneous group, the same cannot be said for the middle classes and the working classes, which have been the focus of several debates. The fact that both middle and working classes will be mostly discussed in all three chapters of this thesis makes some further discussion on the topic needed.

²⁷ www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/soc2000.asp

Goldthorpe (1982), was one of the first to develop the concept of the middle classes as the “service class”²⁸, which differentiates those who performs economic services, social services and public services from the traditional “serving class”, which performed real labour. A key point though consists in the fact that what social scientists labels as the middle class is in fact divided between white collars workers, who in many respects are not so different from manual workers, a “service class” of professionals and managers, and also a class of self-employed petites bourgeois (Butler, 1995). Social scientists generally agree about the heterogeneity within the middle classes. However, there are different positions with respect to the consideration of the service class as one group or several sub-fractions of a group. According to Goldthorpe (1982), the fact that the service class benefits from a “service relationship” with their employer (rather than a “labour contract”), and the prospect of career advancement makes different groups within the middle classes a unitary social structure, overcoming differences between managerial, professional and administrative workers.

Heath et al. (1991, 1995), proposed a different perspective, demonstrating the existence of a considerable degree of political differentiation within the service class. One structural source of fragmentation of the middle classes would be the differentiation between public and private sector. This has been explained mainly as the result of the different nature of occupations, so that public sector employment could be associated with people seeking occupational shelter, and state-oriented politics, therefore left-wing, whereas private sector occupations, are mostly associated with “money making”, and market-oriented economic forces, therefore right wing.

²⁸ Others who made the concept popular were Abercrombie & Urry (1983). For more reference see also Lash and Urry (1987).

Bourdieu (1984), presented another, more radical view explained by a distinction between economic and cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, middle class privileges are created and maintained through two mechanisms: the accumulation of economic capital and of cultural capital. On one hand the “cultured” middle class is interested in defending its cultural distinction and pass it on to their children by giving them the right “disposition” to succeed in school; on the other hand the economically privileged middle class is interested in undermining cultural privilege. The diverse nature of these middle class fractions could lead to a potential conflict within the service class, undermining the concept of the service class itself.

Concerning the working classes, the debate in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century has been focused on the “traditional working class”, as a labour movement. As Savage (1995), claims, the working class was more of a social construction which identified a category of manual workers being trade union based, and essentially in contrast with the middle class. The real picture was quite different though: manual workers were much more heterogeneous than this image of them. Since the mid-twentieth century significant changes have occurred, first of all the decline of the manufacturing industry (Goldthorpe, 1982), which resulted in a shrinkage of the working class, and economic, social and cultural changes, which affected working class consumption, the formation of working class youth cultures and so on.

It is also important to differentiate the “underclass” from the working class. The underclass refers to a significant sector of the population who do not access regular (or irregular) employment and is marginalised from the rest of society, mostly living in council estates and very poor neighbourhoods and dependent on state benefits.

Mother and father's education

The variable combines mother's and father's educational level taking the highest between the two; also the variable is collapsed into six categories:(1) university degree, (2) higher education below degree level, (3) A-levels, (4) GCSE/CSE, (5) primary education and below, and (6) no education.

Gender

Ethnic group

Due to the small size of population within the ethnic minority group categories, we use a collapsed version with 5 categories as follow: (1) White (British, Irish, any other White background), (2) Mixed, (3) Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, any other Asian background), (4) Black (Caribbean, African, any other Black background), (5) Other. I am aware of the problems this arrangement could pose for the analyses, due to differences among ethnic groups within the same category. For this reason I will provide further discussion about the background of different ethnic groups living in Great Britain.

Let's start by identifying the major ethnic groups that started migrating to the UK after the 1945. Most immigrants were people from the Indian subcontinent and Pakistan, and from the Caribbean islands. As citizens of the Commonwealth and Empire, they had the right to move to the Great Britain, and were also encouraged to do so, at least until the Nationality Act of 1981, where rights of entry and citizenship were restricted to new migrants. As a result of this act the presence of Caribbeans and South Asians was strongly reinforced with families allowed to join their relatives already living in Great Britain. In this same period Britain joined the European

Union, which enabled nationals of any member state to work and live in another, and last, the events of the past decades produced significant numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers (e.g. from Afghanistan, Africa, Iraq and the soviet-bloc countries), who have been identified as the “new migration” (Loury et al., 2005).

When the West Indians and Caribbeans first arrived they found employment mostly in the hotels, hospitals and transport; later on the availability of employment changed and they were employed in the foundries, engineering shops, car plants and the paper industry around England. While this mostly concerned migrant men, most women (both Indian and Pakistani) were employed in the textile sector (clothing and footwear). In general, migrants were underrepresented in public and commercial services, which remained a white English sector.

By the 70's the economic scenario changed; first of all unemployment started to rise, as a consequence of the oil shock (1974) and the declining of the competitiveness of the British industry, the manufacturing sector fell and the service sector rise, employing high percentages of women. Also, a significant change was represented by a growth in self-employment (Robinson & Valeny, 2005).

According to Cheung & Heath (1993), the Black Caribbeans, Indians and Pakistanis are generally disadvantaged in the labour market; they are more likely to have low-skilled jobs and to suffer from unemployment. The Indians and Chinese are particularly likely to come from petty bourgeois backgrounds, while the Pakistanis are more likely to come from farm backgrounds. The Black Caribbeans are the most similar to the British-born whites, although this picture mostly refers to the second-generation immigrants, whose parents may have worked in the British labour market.

Bangladeshi migrants were not considered in the above study, but, according to Model (2005), they have the highest rate of unemployment, especially among women.

The major changes in the occupations and social class of ethnic groups in Britain from the 70's can be summarized as follows: a significant reduction in manual work occurred for Indians (both men and women), with a growth in social class II (employers and managers). Pakistani men became more skilled manual workers instead of unskilled ones, and some moved into social class II. Black Caribbean men also increased their presence in the lower white collar categories, showing a reduction in unskilled manual work. Black Caribbean women entered social class II in large numbers. Considering White men and ethnic minority men, the past decades have seen a convergence of their class profiles, with the exception of Black Caribbean men, who are still overrepresented in manual work. Black Caribbean women are instead very similar in their class profiles with White women, while Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are very different, being overrepresented in the professional category and in semiskilled manual work (Robinson & Valeny, 2005).

Concerning education, the Chinese²⁹ and the Indians are quite heterogeneous within their group; they are in fact more likely than the British-born whites to have degrees, but they can also be unqualified. Black Caribbeans, Pakistanis and Bangladeshi are the most disadvantaged; they are, in fact, more likely to have no qualifications at all, and a small percentage of them have only low level qualifications (Heath & McMahon, 2000, 2005)³⁰.

²⁹ The Chinese represents a very small percentage in our sample; for this reason they are part of the category 'Other'.

³⁰ The data regarding Bangladeshi immigrants are taken from Model (2005).

Considering the intervening variables:

Parents' aspirations

The main parent in the household was asked the following question: '*what would you yourself like your pupil to do when he reaches 16 and can leave school?*', the analytic categories are: (1) Continue in full-time education, (2) Starting a training/apprenticeship (3) Get a full-time paid job/else.

Parents' expectations

The main parent in the household was asked the following question: '*and when your pupil reaches 16 and can leave school, what do you think he/she will do?*' Again the analytic categories are: (1) Continue in full-time education, (2) Starting a training/apprenticeship, (3) Get a full-time paid job/else.

Teachers' feedback

Pupils were asked '*how good do your teachers think you are?*' And the analytic categories that follow are fairly good/good; not very good/not good at all.

Friends' influence

Pupils are asked '*what do you think your friends will do after year 11?*' and the answers represent three categories: (1) Stay on in education, (2) Leave education, (3) Do not know.

Academic ability

The variable is in the form of Key stage 3 average scores. This score, which is used as a continuous variable, is also known as SAT (Standard assessment test) score. It is

given at the end of year 2, year 6 and year 9 and shows the child progress compared with other children born in the same month. The average score for each group is set at 100, with a standard deviation of 15. The score is measured according to the age group and is an average of the test scores in the core subjects, i.e. reading, writing, Maths, English and Science.

Individual attitude to education

I constructed this variable as an indicator from a set of 12 questions about pupil's feelings towards school. I performed principal component analysis to highlight the latent factors that represent this concept and finally I picked the main component extracted, which was the most representative and included most of the items³¹.

2.3.3 Methods

The main technique of analysis used in this chapter is logistic regression, both binomial and multinomial, as it allows evaluating the variables affecting educational aspirations. In the first part of the analysis separate models for each of the 3 years are estimated, to test the effects of structural and intervening variables over the three years. A first regression model will include only the structural variables (social class, gender and ethnicity) and subsequent models will add the intervening variables, so that the effect of the latter variables on the former ones can be easily observed.

³¹ See appendix A.

Although the regression models give a good picture of what is affecting educational aspirations over the years, they do not take into account the time variable, which is also the focus of the analyses. Although panel data analysis is one of main techniques for longitudinal data, it did not seem the most appropriate method here. Several of the variables are structural, therefore not affected by change and the intervening variables are also very stable over the three waves. Simple correlations and the construction of a typology of individuals' aspirations were performed instead. Also, references to the qualitative interviews of students in year 11, which are the focus of chapter 4, are added to support (or challenge) the quantitative findings³².

2.4 Descriptive statistics

Table 2.1 presents the distribution of educational aspirations by social class and gender during years 9, 10 and 11 of education. A few observations can be highlighted. First, educational aspirations show an overall increase from year 9 to year 11 (with the exception of pupils whose parents are non employed), in particular for lower class pupils who might wait to finalise their plans for the future closer to the end of compulsory school and change their intentions over the years, due to the fact that they have to face economic and cultural constraints and calculate costs and benefits of their choices more cautiously than higher salariat class pupils (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). Despite this increase, lower class pupils' aspirations still

³² The qualitative research is discussed in chapter 4

remain quite a lot lower than higher salariat class pupils' ones, highlighting the persistence of class differentials in educational aspirations.

Among social classes and gender, higher salariat class females have the highest and working class males have the lowest educational aspirations in year 9 and year 11; while there are no significant class differences for boys in year 10, higher salariat class girls still have higher aspirations than working class ones. To provide some figures, in year 9 84% of higher salariat class boys aspire to stay in education after the end of compulsory education compared to 91% of girls in the same social class. While the percentage of higher salariat class boys who want to stay in school goes up to almost 89 in year 11, that of higher salariat class girls reach 95, which is a very significant increase from year 9, in particular for the girls. Considering the opposite end of the spectrum, almost 68% of working class boys are thinking about staying in education after the end of compulsory school in year 9, with respect to 81% of working class girls, who increase their advantage in year 11, with almost 77% of boys who intend to stay on in school and 88% of girls.

The generalisation concerning social class and gender differences highlighted above is further confirmed by the higher rate of lower class boys who are still undecided about their future choices. Although the percentage of pupils who still do not know what they would like to do after the end of compulsory school goes down significantly over the three years considered, in year 9 there is 5% of 'undecided' higher salariat class boys vs. a 3% of girls, which goes down to a 1.5 % for boys and 1% for girls in year 11; also in year 9 there is 8% of 'undecided' working class boys vs. 6% of girls, which goes down to 3% for boys and less than 3% for girls.

Table 2.2 presents the distribution of educational aspirations by ethnicity and gender. Again, an overall increment in educational aspirations can be observed, although there is a significant gap between ethnic minorities and white pupils. The latter are, in fact, those with the lowest educational aspirations while Asians boys and black girls have the highest ones.

Among Asians, 87% of boys and just over 89% of girls express the intention to stay in education in year 9, compared to the just 71% of white boys and 84% of white girls. The disadvantage of white pupils remains throughout the years with white boys having the lowest aspirations at 77% in year 11 (girls aspirations are considerably higher at 89%), while the percentage for Asian pupils is up to 95% (girls' percentage is 96). As mentioned earlier, Black girls have the highest educational aspirations, starting from 95% in year 9 and increasing that to 97% in year 11. Black boys show a different attitude compared to girls, with percentages that go from 87% in year 9 to 93% in year 11.

As seen before with social class, gender makes a big difference when considering educational aspirations, with girls of different ethnic groups showing a significant advantage over boys. This result is quite expected though, as several studies show that girls have been achieving higher grades of education, as well as better scores, for the past twenty years (Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993; Goldthorpe, 2000).

Table 2.1: Students' educational aspirations after the end of compulsory education in year 9 to 11 by social class and gender (row percentages)^a.

	Year 9				Year 10				Year 11			
	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N
Males:												
I	84.3	10.7	5.0	2359	76.7	17.9	5.4	2217	88.8	9.8	1.4	2167
II	75.7	16.8	7.5	507	79.4	14.8	5.8	399	82.0	15.1	2.9	345
III	77.5	17.0	5.5	899	78.6	16.2	5.3	538	80.9	16.4	2.7	377
IV	69.1	23.1	7.8	792	78.1	16.3	5.6	716	73.7	24.3	2.1	676
V	67.7	24.2	8.1	1774	77.6	17.2	5.2	1595	77.1	19.7	3.2	1152
Non Employed	79.3	14.4	6.3	508	75.7	17.2	6.4	436	78.6	17.9	3.5	1139
N	5220	1176	443	6839	4567	1013	321	5901	4794	921	141	5856

(Continued on the next page)

Table 2.1: Students' educational aspirations after the end of compulsory education in year 9 to 11 by social class and gender (row percentages)^a, (continued from previous page).

	Year 9				Year 10				Year 11			
	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N
Females:												
I	91.2	5.6	3.2	2349	89.5	6.6	4.0	2195	94.9	4.1	1.0	2122
II	87.7	6.6	5.7	470	90.2	5.4	4.3	441	92.2	6.7	1.1	360
III	86.4	8.5	5.1	788	87.0	9.5	3.5	483	93.8	5.7	0.6	336
IV	84.8	9.7	5.4	718	88.6	6.4	5.0	745	89.4	8.8	1.7	634
V	81.0	12.8	6.1	1659	87.6	7.5	4.9	1478	88.2	9.2	2.7	1114
Non Employed	86.3	7.0	6.8	532	90.5	7.0	2.6	431	89.9	7.9	2.2	1168
N	5647	550	319	6516	5127	403	243	5773	5259	380	95	5734

Notes: ^aHighlighted in pink are the highest percentages who intend to stay in school and the lowest percentages of those in the other categories; highlighted in yellow is the opposite situation

Table 2.2: Students' educational aspirations after the end of compulsory education in years 9 to 11 by ethnic origins and gender (row percentages) ^a.

	Year 9				Year 10				Year 11			
	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N	Stay in school	Leave school	Don't know	N
Males:												
White	70.9	22.0	7.1	4980	71.5	22.5	6.0	4701	77.4	19.8	2.8	4379
Asian	87.1	7.5	5.4	1032	92.7	3.8	3.5	1118	95.3	2.9	1.8	1054
Black	86.7	7.7	5.5	542	89.4	5.1	5.5	415	92.7	5.0	2.3	397
Mixed/Other	92.0	3.4	4.6	671	86.4	8.8	4.8	499	90.7	8.9	4	269
N	5516	1240	469	7225	5199	1165	369	6733	5006	941	152	6099
Females:												
White	83.7	10.9	5.4	4627	86.2	9.2	4.6	4432	89.5	8.6	1.9	4143
Asian	89.7	5.3	5.0	1108	95.3	1.8	2.9	1166	96.0	2.7	1.3	1102
Black	95.5	2.0	2.5	550	96.7	6.7	.6	483	97.5	1.6	.9	440
Mixed/Other	95.4	2.6	2.0	586	90.1	5.2	4.8	484	97.4	2.2	4	274
N	5952	589	330	6871	5833	466	266	6565	5462	399	98	5959

Notes: ^a Highlighted in pink are the highest percentages who intend to stay in school and the lowest percentages of those in the other categories; highlighted in yellow is the opposite situation

2.5 Educational aspirations of pupils in years 9 - 11 of education

The next tables present the multinomial logistic regression models estimating the effects of the factors affecting educational aspirations after the end of compulsory school in year 9, 10 and 11. The models in table 2.3 include only measures of socio-economic and cultural background, gender and ethnicity in the form of odds ratios. The parameter estimates from a logistic regression are in form of log-odds ratios which are difficult to interpret. If we exponentiate the parameters we obtain ordinary odds ratios (tables 2.4 and 2.6), which have a more straightforward interpretation, although in terms of odds and not in terms of probabilities, as we would get from a linear regression.

Overall, social class, gender and ethnicity have the strongest effects, in particular in year 9 and 11, while parental education proves to be very significant only in year 9. With respect to social class, it exerts a strong influence on educational aspirations in year 9 and even more in year 11. The odds to stay in school vs. leaving after year 11 increase significantly as we go up the social ladder. In terms of odds ratios, the odds for pupils in class I to enter post-secondary education are almost twice those of pupils in class V; the odds of pupils in class II are one and half time more favourable and so on.

Concerning gender, the negative parameter tell us that the odds of staying in school after compulsory education is more favourable for girls, with the boys' odds being less than half of girls'. This situation is confirmed throughout the years with boys' odds decreasing in year 11; the value in table 2.4 shows the odds of boys to leave school after GCSEs being more than one time higher than girls, controlling for the other variables. These results confirm a trend

that has been going on for several years and sees girls achieving higher and better than boys in education.

As expected from the descriptive statistics tables, White English pupils seem to have the lowest educational aspirations over the years, compared to all other ethnic groups. The effects, in terms of odds ratios are quite big, especially considering Asian students: their odds to enter post-secondary education are more than eight times those of White English students in year 9, slightly decreasing to seven times in year 11, while the odds for the remaining ethnic minorities are four times more favourable (growing to five in year 11). White English students are also the most undecided ones until the end of compulsory school in year 11, with odds three times bigger than Asians and Blacks to still be undecided about their future. Overall, ethnicity is one of the most important variables explaining educational aspirations over the years, more than social class and parental education³³.

As mentioned earlier, both mother and father's education exert a strong influence on educational aspirations in year 9, while over the next two years this influence completely disappears. As expected, the odds of pupils who intend to stay in school after compulsory education improve the higher the parental education is. The odds for pupils with both parents with a university degree are more than 3 times those of pupils whose parents have no qualifications. Although the effect size decrease going down to pupils whose parents have higher education qualifications and A-levels, the odds are still over 2 times and one and a half times respectively. For those still undecided about the future, having parents with a university degree does at least give pupils a better chance to remain undecided compared to decide not to stay in school, with odds two time more favourable compared to individuals whose parents have no formal qualifications.

³³ The results in year 10 are quite unexpected and in general do not follow the pattern of the other years considered. Limited references have been made to the results in year 9, concentrating mostly on year 9 and 11.

Overall, the effects of socioeconomic background, gender and ethnicity represent a stronger and more persistent influence since the early years of high school and at the end of it, while this does not apply for parents' education.

Table 2.3: Multinomial logistic regression models for the intention to stay in school after the end of compulsory education in years 9, 10 and 11.

	Year 9		Year 10		Year 11	
	Stay in school ^a	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Intercept	1.15 (.09)**	-1.11 (.14)**	2.18 (.09)**	-.76(.16)**	2.05 (.11)**	-1.23 (.24)**
Social class ^b						
I ³⁴	.57 (.08)**	.09 (.13)	-.02 (.08)	-.11 (.14)	.97 (.08)**	-.12 (.20)
II	.44 (.11)**	.36 (.17)*	.24 (.13)	.17 (.21)	.42 (.14)**	.09 (.23)
III	.24 (.09)**	-.04 (.15)	-.06 (.11)	-.17 (.20)	.35 (.14)*	-.31 (.34)
IV	.09 (.09)	-.01 (.14)	.08 (.10)	.15 (.17)	-.06 (.09)*	-.56 (.25)
Non Employed	.12 (.16)	-.17 (.27)	-.06 (.09)	-.22 (.17)	.19 (.14)	.06 (.30)
Missing	.17 (.12)	.29 (.17)	-.05(.12)	-.11 (.22)	-.12 (.09)	-.01 (.19)
Males	-.86 (.05)**	-.40 (.09)**	-1.03 (.06)**	(NE)	-.94 (.06)**	-.40 (.14)**
Ethnic group ^c						
Asian	1.50 (.15)**	.91 (.15)**	.95 (.13)**	.72 (.19)**	1.98 (.18)**	1.13 (.23)**
Black	2.14 (.17)**	.83 (.11)**	1.93 (.13)**	.12 (.18)**	1.71 (.20)**	1.03 (.35)**
Mixed/Other	1.42 (.10)**	1.32 (.23)**	1.59 (.18)**	.82 (.26)**	1.13 (.19)**	-.94 (.73)*

Notes: ^a leaving education is the contrasting category, ^b class V is the reference, ^c white pupils is the reference category.

(continued on next page)

³⁴ For a description of the social class categories see pp. 78-79.

Table 2.3.: Multinomial logistic regression models for the intention to stay in school after the end of compulsory education in years 9, 10 and 11(continued from previous page).

	Year 9		Year 10		Year 11	
	Stay in school	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know
Mother education ^d						
Degree	1.22 (.16)**	.66 (.24)**	.15 (.12)	.14 (.20)	.01 (.12)	-.29 (.29)
Higher education	.78 (.11)**	.20 (.19)	.03 (.10)	.03 (.18)	-.02 (.11)	-.33 (.26)
A-levels	.49 (.10)**	.19 (.17)	.03 (.09)	-.03 (.16)	-.05 (.09)	-.22 (.23)
GCSEs	.32 (.08)**	.23 (.13)	.12 (.08)	.19 (.14)	-.14 (.09)	-.15 (.12)
Primary and lower	.06 (.09)	.24 (.15)	.09 (.15)	.10 (.25)	-.06 (.16)	.05 (.35)
Missing	.26 (.11)*	.30 (.17)	N.E.	.15 (.23)	-.17 (.15)	-.30 (.36)
Father education ^e						
Degree	1.38 (.18)**	.72 (.26)**	-.03 (.12)	.11 (.22)	.05 (.13)	-.01 (.30)
Higher education	.45 (.13)**	.37 (.21)	.12 (.13)	.17 (.22)	-.07 (.13)	.17 (.29)
A-levels	.43 (.10)**	.20 (.17)	-.04 (.09)	.02 (.16)	-.02 (.13)	-.15 (.23)
GCSEs	.31 (.09)**	.22 (.14)	-.05 (.11)	-.23 (.19)	.07 (.12)	.12 (.26)
Primary and lower	.13 (.12)	.19 (.19)	-.08 (.17)	-.08 (.30)	.26 (.20)	-.27 (.51)
Missing	.07 (.08)	.01 (.13)	-.11 (.09)	.07 (.15)	-.07 (.09)	-.31 (.22)
N	14,096		15,548		11,602	
-2 log-likelihood	4.325E3		4.117E3		3.448E3	
Pseudo R-square	.097		.586		.663	

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; Missing data have been included in all the analysis. The results are not reported as most of them have not been estimated; ^d no education is the reference category, ^e no education is the reference category.

Table 2.4: Odds ratios for the multinomial logistic regression models for the intention to stay in school after the end of compulsory education in years 9, 10 and 11.

	Year 9		Year 10		Year 11	
	Stay in	Don't know	Stay in	Don't know	Stay in	Don't know
Social class^b						
I	1.76	1.09	.98	.89	2.64	.89
II	1.55	1.43	1.27	1.19	1.52	.91
III	1.29	.96	.94	.84	1.43	.73
IV	1.09	.99	1.08	1.15	.94	.57
Non	1.15	.85	.94	.80	1.21	1.06
Missing	1.30	1.37	1.05	.89	.88	.99
Males	.42	.67	.35	.55	1.16	2.32
Ethnic group^c						
Asian	8.53	3.40	2.6	2.06	7.24	3.09
Black	4.12	2.48	6.89	3.41	5.55	2.81
Mixed/Other	4.49	2.29	4.94	2.28	3.09	.39
Mother						
Degree	3.19	1.92	1.15	1.15	.98	.75
Higher	2.06	1.21	1.03	1.03	.97	.71
A-levels	1.54	1.20	1.02	.97	.95	.80
GCSEs	1.30	1.25	1.12	1.20	.86	.86
Primary and lower	.99	1.26	1.09	1.11	.94	1.06
Missing	1.24	1.35	1.00	1.16	.84	.74
Father						
Degree	3.70	2.04	.96	1.12	1.06	.98
Higher	1.46	1.44	1.13	1.19	.93	1.18
A-levels	1.43	1.21	.96	1.02	.97	1.16
GCSEs	1.27	1.23	.94	.79	1.07	1.13
Primary and lower	1.07	1.20	.92	.92	1.30	.76
Missing	.96	1.00	.89	1.07	.93	.73

Notes: ^a leaving education is the contrasting category, ^b class V is the reference, ^c white pupils is the reference category.

Tables 2.3 and 2.4 presented models that included only the structural variables that were hypothesized having a direct effect on individuals' educational aspirations. In this way it was possible to highlight the direct effects of those variables on aspirations, before the introduction of the intervening variables; the models with the intervening variables are reported in table 2.5 and 2.6. Looking at the goodness of fit, the pseudo R square and the likelihood indicate a general improvement of the models after the addition of the intervening variables.

Looking at the following models, several interesting results can be observed. First, the direct effects of social class and parental education lose its significance³⁵ after academic ability, attitude to education, and significant others' influences are added to the model³⁶. In general, the effects of these structural variables are mediated by academic ability and attitude to education. In year 9 in particular, the odds of pupils with good academic ability have odds one time more favourable than those who did not achieve a good score at key stage 3. The higher the score achieved at key stage 3 the better the chances to stay in school, or still be undecided (odds are also one time more favourable), with respect to leaving education. With respect to attitude to education the effect size is smaller, with pupils with a positive attitude to education having odds half time more favourable than those with a negative attitude. Although an interaction effect between academic ability and social class was expected, no significant relation is highlighted by this model over the three years³⁷.

³⁵ Parental education has been included in the analysis but it is not displayed in table 4 because it has no significant effects, and with fewer variables displayed reading the table is easier.

³⁶ When academic ability is added to the model with structural variables only, the previously strong effect of social class and parental education almost disappear (with the exception of parents with a degree, who still strongly affect pupils' aspirations). This means that social class and parental education directly affect academic ability and therefore indirectly educational aspirations. Moreover, the influence exerted targets groups of individuals with different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, more than the individual level. This is the case for year 9 and 11.

³⁷ The interactions coefficients are not displayed in the table because they are not significant. The relation between academic ability and social class loses its significance when variables of significant others' influences are introduced in the model. The models in appendix 2 allow to the coefficient of the interaction effect changes:

While the importance of achieving good grades seems to affect children's educational aspirations only at an early stage, individual's attitude to education is very influential throughout the years. The more the pupil likes going to school, and in general think that school is a very positive experience, the higher the educational aspirations are. Moreover, attitude towards school does not seem to differ according to social class, as was tested by an interaction effect³⁸.

One of the strongest effects, when considering structural variables, belongs to gender. The odds for boys get even less favourable when controlling for intervening variables, with boys having two thirds of the odds of girls to stay in school after compulsory age in year 9, and almost one time less favourable odds in year 11. Boys clearly have lower educational aspirations than their female peers.

Ethnicity is also very influential through the years, although the effect size decreases significantly when controlling for intervening variables. The odds of Asians are, in fact, down to one and a half time more favourable with respect to White English pupils in year 9 and decrease to less than one time over year 11, while the odds for Blacks and mixed/others remain constant around two and a half time more favourable compared to White English students.

Among significant others, parents and friends are very influential on pupils' educational aspirations, while this is not true for teachers³⁹. The fact that teachers think the pupil academic performance is below average, compared to an average one, have a significant effect only on the odds to still be undecided with respect to intending to leave education in

the lower the social class and the higher the grades, the lower the educational aspirations. This applies only to year 9.

³⁸ Again, the interaction effect coefficients are not displayed in the table because they are not significant.

³⁹ This result could be determined by the limitations in the variables used as indicators of teachers' feedback. It has to be reminded, in fact, that teachers were not interviewed in the survey and the information I have come from parents and pupils' answers.

year 9. Parents' aspirations and, even more, expectations, on the other hand, exert a very strong influence on their children's educational aspirations. Parents who would like their children to stay in school after the end of compulsory education give the latter odds more than two times more favourable to do so in year 9 and even better, four times more favourable in year 11; those who think their children will be better off starting training or apprenticeship do not seem to make a difference in pupils' choice with respect to leaving education.

Parental expectations have even bigger effects compared to parental aspirations: children whose parents expect them to stay in school after compulsory education have odds seven times more favourable compared to children whose parents expect them to leave school in year 9, with the effect increasing dramatically to twenty seven times in year 11.

Finally, friends' intentions for the future also have a significant effect on pupils' own plans after compulsory education. The fact that friends intend to stay in school after age 16 compared to leaving education, gives individuals odds six times more favourable than pupils whose friends' plans are to leave education in year 9, while the effect decreases to two and a half times in year 11.

Table 2.5: Multinomial logistic regression models for the intention to stay in school after the end of compulsory education in year 9, 10 and 11.

	Year 9		Year 10		Year 11	
	Stay in school ^a	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know
Intercept	-3.06 (.32)**	-3.08 (.47)**	.94 (.65)	-.13 (.82)	-2.25 (.37)**	-2.02 (.54)**
Social class ^b						
I	.01 (.44)	-.29 (.64)	-.00 (.26)	.49 (.42)	-.78 (.45)	.36 (.73)
II	.01 (.35)	.01 (.50)	.17 (.23)	.68 (.37)	-.62 (.40)	.39 (.63)
III	-.23 (.24)	-.40 (.50)	-.03 (.17)	.21 (.29)	-.51 (.30)	.02 (.50)
IV	.18 (.16)	.02 (.23)	.09 (.13)	.34 (.20)	-.25 (.19)	-.25 (.32)
Non employed	-.23 (.47)	-.75 (.68)	.08 (.27)	-.62 (.45)	1.72 (.49)**	-1.09 (.83)
Missing	.29 (.19)	.33 (.26)	.06 (.15)	-.28 (.25)	.42* (.18)*	-.07 (.28)
Males	-.50 (.08)**	-.46 (.12)**	-.84 (.07)**	N.E.	-.23 (.10)*	.00 (.16)
Ethnic group ^c						
Asian	.88 (.16)**	.37 (.21)	.96 (.14)**	.66 (.21)**	.73 (.18)**	.53 (.25)*
Black	.89 (.21)**	.21 (.27)	1.70 (.14)**	.98 (.19)**	.96 (.26)**	.64 (.37)
Mixed/Other	.47 (.17)**	.61 (.22)**	1.45 (.19)**	.60 (.28)**	.42 (.27)	-1.24 (.75)
Missing			N.E.		-.06 (.27)	-1.55 (.75)*
Academic ability ^d	.08 (.01)**	.05 (.02)*	.00 (.01)	-.02 (.01)	.08 (.01)	-.02 (.02)
Attitude to education	.43 (.09)**	.28* (.12)*	.66 (.15)**	1.01 (.20)**	.28 (.10)**	.23 (.39)
Parent aspirations ^e						
Stay in school	.79 (.19)**	.83 (.30)**	.04 (.20)	-.19 (.30)	1.41 (.21)**	.74 (.28)**
Start training/apprentice	.10 (.19)	.45 (.31)	.02 (.22)	-.12 (.32)	.24 (.22)	.19 (.29)
Missing	.66* (.28)*	1.44 (.39)**	.01 (.26)	-.75 (.42)	.77 (.29)**	.41 (.41)

(continued on next page)

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; Missing data have been included in all the analysis; ^aleaving education is the contrasting category, ^b class V is the reference, ^c white pupils is the reference category, ^d score at key stage 3, ^e children leave education is the reference category.

Table 2.5: Multinomial logistic regression models for the likelihood to stay in school after the end of compulsory education in year 9, 10 and 11. (continued from previous page).

	Year 9		Year 10		Year 11	
	Stay in school	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know
Parents expectations [†]						
Stay in school	1.97 (.13)**	.71 (.19)**	-.14 (.15)	-.27 (.22)	5.43 (.19)**	1.50 (.26)**
Start training/apprentice	.32 (.13)*	-.05 (.19)	-.06 (.16)	-.50 (.26)	1.40 (.16)**	-.34 (.23)
Missing	.55 (.16)**	.81 (.21)**	-.03 (.19)	.37 (.28)	2.01 (.20)**	1.40 (.25)**
Friends [§]						
Stay in school	1.80 (.09)**	.68 (.14)**	2.27 (.07)**	-.81 (.73)	N.E.	N.E.
Don't know	.66 (.12)**	1.86 (.15)**	.58 (.10)**	-.60 (.72)	.32 (.10)**	.13 (.16)
Missing			N.E. ⁴⁰	-.51 (.72)	N.E.	
Teacher advice ^{h41}						
A little	1.16 (.92)	1.56 (.97)	.31 (.60)	N.E.		
A lot	-.06 (.11)	-.18 (.15)	.20 (.60)	N.E.		
Missing	.01 (.14)	-.23 (.12)	-.11 (.60)	N.E.		
N	14,096		14,551		14,547	
-2 log-likelihood	1.048E4		1.113E4		4.830E3	
Pseudo R-square	.16		.64		.75	

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; [†]pupil leave education is the reference category for parental expectations, [§] leave education is the reference category, ^hnot at all is the reference category, ⁱvery bad is the reference category.

⁴⁰ Not estimated.

⁴¹ The variable 'teacher's advice' is available only in years 9 and 10.

Table 2.6: Odds ratios for the multinomial logistic regression models for the intention to stay in school after the end of compulsory education in years 9, 10 and 11.

	Year 9		Year 10		Year 11	
	Stay in school ^a	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know	Stay in school	Don't know
Social class ^b						
I	1.01	.74	.99	1.63	.46	1.43
II	1.01	1.00	1.18	1.97	.54	1.47
III	.79	.67	.97	1.23	.60	1.02
IV	1.19	1.02	1.09	1.40	.78	.78
Non Employed	.79	.47	1.09	.54	5.61	.34
Missing	1.33	1.39	1.06	.76	1.52	.93
Males	.60	.63	.43	.55	.79	1.00
Ethnic group ^c						
Asian	1.60	1.83	2.62	1.94	.94	1.68
Black	2.41	1.45	5.46	2.67	2.07	1.90
Mixed/Other	2.43	1.24	4.25	1.81	2.62	.29
Academic ability ^d	1.08	1.05	1.00	.98	1.52	.98
Attitude to education	.65	.76	1.94	2.74	1.0	1.26
Parent aspirations ^e						
Stay in school	2.21	2.29	1.04	.82	4.09	2.1
Start training/apprentice	1.11	1.57	1.02	.88	1.28	1.21
Missing	1.93	4.22	1.01	.47	2.17	1.51
Parents expectations ^f						
Stay in school	7.15	2.03	.86	.79	27.7	4.48
Start training/apprentice	1.37	.95	.94	.61	4.06	.71
Missing	1.72	2.24	.97	1.45	7.48	4.05
Friends ^g						
Stay in school	6.06	1.97	9.64	2.72	2.56	.86
Don't know	1.94	6.40	1.78	6.27	.52	.46
Missing						
Teacher advice ^{h42}						
A little	3.18	4.77	1.37	.45		
A lot	.94	.83	1.23	.55		
Missing	1.01	.79	.89	.60		

Notes: ^a leaving education is the contrasting category, ^b class V is the reference, ^c white pupils is the reference category, ^f pupil leave education is the reference category for parental expectations, ^g leave education is the reference category, ^h not at all is the reference category, ⁱ very bad is the reference category.

⁴² The variable 'teacher's advice' is available only in years 9 and 10.

2.6 How do aspirations change over the years?

The regression models discussed in the previous section put some light on the effects of the independent variables on students' educational aspirations for each year of GCSEs. Considering significant others, the results highlighted a very strong effect of parental aspirations and expectations and of school mates' decision plans. In this section the analyses will extend to include changes over time in the students' aspirations, with a particular consideration of changes in parental aspirations and expectations and peers' own intentions.

2.6.1 A typology of educational aspirations over time

Concerning pupils' aspirations, a typology was constructed in order to assess the level of stability of educational aspirations during high school years. There are five types: 1) pupils whose aspirations to staying on in school are constant; 2) pupils whose aspirations to leave school are constant; 3) pupils whose aspirations change from staying on in school to leaving education; 4) pupils whose aspirations change from leaving education to staying in school; and 5) pupils whose aspirations change without a clear pattern.

Table 2.7 shows that the White English of pupils have stable aspirations to stay on in education after the end of compulsory school, while very few pupils maintain their aspirations to leave education throughout the years. The most interesting categories are those of pupils whose aspirations change towards entering post-secondary education (indicated in table 2.7 as 'aspirations get higher') vs. pupils whose aspirations change toward leaving education at the end of compulsory schooling (indicated in table 2.7 as 'aspirations get lower'). Pupils with very unstable plans (indicated in table 2.7 as 'aspirations change with no pattern') are also quite numerous.

Table 2.7: Students' distribution according to the aspiration pattern over the years.

Typology of aspirations	Percentage
Constantly stay in school	59.6
Constantly leaving school	.2
Aspirations get higher	10.8
Aspirations get lower	15.6
Aspirations change with no pattern	13.8
Total	100

Let's now look at some descriptive statistics: table 2.8 presents the distribution of social class and gender by the 5 types; overall the picture presented by the table shows that higher salariat class pupils are those with the highest and most stable aspirations, especially for boys. The difference in percentages points is smaller for girls, although a similar pattern is repeated, with the higher salariat classes showing more stable aspirations. Looking at the rate of pupils whose aspirations get higher during the years, there is no big difference between social classes (apart from class III which has the lowest rate). Alternatively, looking at pupils whose aspirations change towards the option of leaving education, the percentage rates increase as we go down the social ladder, with a clear White English of lower class pupils experiencing this change of intentions. In terms of gender, there are some differences: there are more girls of the higher salariat class who increase their aspirations during the years, compared to boys, while the percentage of girls who become less inclined to stay on in school is much lower than that of boys for all social classes. Generally speaking, this reflects what Kao & Tienda (1998), as well as other studies highlighted: lower class pupils tend to have more unstable aspirations and make their school choices at the last moment, as they need to consider more variables, one of which is their academic performance and the probability of future success if staying on in school.

Looking at ethnicity and gender, table 2.9 shows what the previous analysis already highlighted: that white pupils, especially boys, have lower aspirations than ethnic minority ones and less stable. White boys represent, in fact, the highest percentage among pupils whose aspirations get lower during the years and the lowest one considering the other way around. Asian boys and black girls are those with most stable aspirations and those with the highest percentage of pupils whose aspirations get higher during the years.

As mentioned earlier, one of the variables affecting pupils' unstable aspirations over the years, especially those going towards leaving the school system, may be academic ability. Table 2.10 reports the distributions of pupils by the score achieved at key stage 3 and social class.

As expected, the percentage of pupils who have high stable aspirations increases the higher the scores at key stage 3, and this can be observed in each social class. Considering pupils with unstable aspirations, the results are quite interesting; despite a very low academic ability at key stage 3 a significant rate of pupils who were keen towards leaving school at age 16, change their mind by year 11, intending to stay in school instead. Although this can be observed for all social classes, the percentages are much higher for higher salariat class pupils than lower class ones. Equally, the higher the academic ability (at both stages), the higher the percentage of pupils who change their mind by year 11 and decide to leave school at the end of compulsory education.

Table 2.8: typology of individuals by gender and social class (row percentages).

	Constantly stay in school	Constantly leave school	Aspirations get higher	Aspirations get lower	Aspirations change with no pattern	Total
Males						
I	62.4	.1	15.0	9.3	13.3	2147
II	58.5	.6	14.4	14.4	12.1	340
III	58.7	.8	11.7	15.2	13.6	375
IV	47.2	.8	13.4	21.4	17.3	665
V	52.0	.5	15.2	18.3	14.0	1139
Non Employed	53.9	.2	14.4	17.5	14.0	1113
N	3264	20	836	851	808	5779
Females:						
I	63.7	.1	18.1	4.1	14.0	2109
II	65.6	.0	16.8	6.4	11.2	358
III	65.1	.0	16.7	5.4	12.8	335
IV	57.2	.2	18.1	9.4	15.1	629
V	61.8	.1	14.9	9.9	13.4	1101
Non Employed	60.9	.2	16.8	8.5	13.6	1159
N	3543	6	971	393	778	5691

Table 2.9: Typology of individuals by gender and ethnicity (row percentages).

	Constantly stay in school	Constantly leave school	Aspirations get higher	Aspirations get lower	Aspirations change with no pattern	Total
Males						
White	53.7	.3	13.8	18.3	13.8	4311
Asian	65.5	.3	16.1	3.5	14.6	1045
Black	66.2	.3	15.2	5.8	12.4	394
Mixed/other	62.5	.7	14.5	8.2	14.1	269
N	3429	20	864	872	834	6019
Females:						
White	60.8	.1	16.9	8.9	13.3	4110
Asian	65.4	.0	16.1	3.0	15.5	1093
Black	67.7	.0	17.6	1.8	12.8	437
Mixed/other	64.7	.0	18.8	1.8	14.7	272
N	3685	5	998	412	812	5912

Table 2.10. Typology of individuals by their score at key stage 3 (row percentages).

Social class	Academic ability	Constantly stay in school	Constantly leave school	Aspirations get higher	Aspirations get lower	Aspirations change with no pattern	Total
I	Lowest	50.3	0	35.9	3.7	10.1	437
	Low	55.8	.1	24.6	7.0	12.5	1338
	Medium	69.1	.1	8.9	7.4	14.5	1859
	High	76.3	.0	.3	6.1	17.4	363
	N	2528	3	653	269	544	3997
II	Lowest	44.4	0	39.7	3.2	12.7	63
	Low	59.7	.9	20.8	9.1	9.5	231
	Medium	67.5	.0	8.6	12.1	11.8	314
	High	71.7	.0	0	11.3	17.0	53
	N	416	2	100	67	76	661
III	Lowest	45.5	1.3	32.5	9.1	11.7	77
	Low	58.1	.9	17.9	13.1	10.0	229
	Medium	68.7	0	8.2	8.5	14.6	281
	High	67.1	0	0	12.7	20.3	79
	N	414	3	89	71	89	666

(continue on the next page)

Table 2.10. Typology of individuals by academic ability (key stage 3 level and number of GCSEs A to G), row percentages (continued from previous page).

Social class	Academic ability	Constantly stay in school	Constantly leave school	Aspirations get higher	Aspirations get lower	Aspirations change with no pattern	Total
IV	Lowest	40.1	.7	36.7	11.6	10.9	147
	Low	45.4	.7	20.7	16.2	17.1	445
	Medium	58.1	.4	8.3	16.6	16.6	518
	High	67.6	.0	.0	13.9	18.5	108
	N	635	6	189	190	198	1218
V	Lowest	38.5	.5	31.7	12.4	17.0	218
	Low	51.7	.6	21.1	13.8	12.8	716
	Medium	62.9	.1	9.8	13.6	13.6	992
	High	63.2	.0	2.9	21.6	12.3	171
	N	1186	6	322	298	285	2097
Non Employed	Lowest	46.6	.8	26.5	12.2	13.9	238
	0	65.1	.0	8.4	13.3	13.3	83
	Low	53.1	.1	20.5	12.4	13.9	718
	Medium	62.1	.1	10.5	13.5	13.8	975
	High	69.2	.0	2.0	16.2	12.6	198
	N	1234	8	316	282	293	2129

As expected in this case the White English of pupils are from the lower social classes. Pupils coming from different social origins are diversely sensitive to their academic ability; a poor academic ability does not represent an issue for higher salariat class pupils, and indeed does not affect their subjective expectation of success, while it is a crucial variable for economically disadvantage pupils. This can also be described using Ball et al. theory (2002): higher salariat class pupils are 'embedded choosers' and are expected to stay in school and achieve higher education. Moreover they are usually expected to follow a specific career trajectory, previously achieved by one or both parents, therefore to drop out of school is considered unacceptable by the family. Educational aspirations are in this case so long standing and 'strongly encouraged' by the family that there is no real choice when it comes to choose at age 16. And, even in case of school failure due to a poor academic performance, the chances to leave school are very remote, while every option that allows the pupil to get back on the track to university will be considered.

For embedded choosers, to re-take GCSEs might be the best choice and easier choice as it does not involve economic losses, at least not as much as leaving education at this point. Differently, a school failure would mean an economic loss for working class pupils, defined by Ball as 'contingent choosers'. So, if a good academic performance can be considered a good reason for staying in school at the end of compulsory education, for the same reason a poor academic performance is enough to decide to leave education, avoiding the risk of further school failure and economic loss for the family.

In order to further investigate the factors affecting the stability of aspirations during years 9-11 of education, we performed binomial logistic regressions contrasting the different types. Not all the types could be contrasted though; the number of students with constant intentions to leave education was, in fact, too small to be contrasted with the others. In

terms of the results, the most interesting models were those contrasting pupils with stable aspirations with pupils whose aspirations change towards leaving school, and pupils whose aspirations change towards staying in school vs. those whose aspirations change towards leaving education (tables 2.11, 2.12).⁴³

Table 2.11 highlights the higher odds of working class pupils to have unstable aspirations and, in particular, to change their mind towards leaving education by year 11. This is also true for White pupils, compared to ethnic minorities and for boys. Moreover, this chance is also related to academic ability, although this still refers to key stage 3 results, and there is no way to know the progress in academic ability from year 9 to year 11. One important result though, which also confirms what was found earlier on in the paper (see tables 2.5 and 2.6), is the relation between social class and academic ability. When academic ability is added to the model, it incorporates, in fact, most of the direct effects of social class, while this is not true for parental aspirations and expectations. Once again, the results underline the fact that parental aspirations and expectations are not directly affected by social class, as Breen & Goldthorpe (1997), claim.

Concerning parental aspirations and expectations, they clearly affect students' odds to a change of aspirations during the years considered, as well as friends' intentions and pupils' attitude to education. The odds ratios for students whose parental aspirations are for them to stay in school to get lower aspirations are one fifth the odds for students who are in the opposite situation. Even bigger is the effect of parental expectations, which indicates that the odds of pupils whose parents expect them to stay in school are almost

⁴³ No significant effects were highlighted by the model contrasting students with stable aspirations and pupils whose aspirations change towards staying in school, indicating perhaps a similarity in background characteristics and significant others' behaviour. Concerning pupils whose aspirations do not show a pattern during the years, this could be the case of very undecided pupils, who tend to make a last minute choice, so the models show, again, no significant effects to discuss.

nought when considering the option for their aspirations to change towards leaving school. As seen before (tables 2.5 and 2.6), when friends' plans are to stay in school past compulsory age the odds for pupils to lower their aspirations are one-fifth of those of pupils in the opposite situation.

Also, the results confirm what the other models showed: a strong influence of parental aspirations and expectations, friends' intentions and the value given to education. When those are, in fact, positive and support the intentions to stay on in education at the end of compulsory school, the odds that pupils will change their intentions towards staying on in school are higher compared to the opposite direction. These models also confirm that the odds of girls to change their intentions towards staying on in school during the years are higher than those of boys. A difference from the earlier models is represented by ethnicity, which loses its significance once parents' aspirations and expectations are included in the model.

Table 2.11: Binomial logistic regression models contrasting types of aspirations

	Aspirations get lower ^a		Aspirations get higher ^b	
	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)
Constant	-1.67 (.11)**	3.21 (.42)**	.26 (.14)	-4.26 (.65)**
Social class ^c				
I	-.99 (.09)**	-.19 (.16)	.94 (.11)**	.32 (.22)
II	-.48 (.15)**	-.13 (.26)	.40 (.18)*	.72 (.36)*
III	-.47 (.14)**	-.24 (.25)	.21 (.18)	-.14 (.37)
IV	.09 (.11)	.02 (.19)	.03 (.13)	.18 (.28)
Non employed	.15 (.10)	-.12 (.17)	-.13 (.12)	-.07 (.24)
Missing	-.30 (.15)*	-1.32 (.26)	.05 (.19)	.47 (.41)
Gender Males	.85 (.07)**	.21 (.12)	-.90 (.08)**	-.37 (.16)*
Ethnic group ^d				
Asian	-1.79 (.13)**	-.41 (.19)*	1.45 (.21)**	.69 (.38)
Black	-1.56 (.19)**	-.76 (.27)**	1.12 (.23)**	.78 (.46)
Mixed/Other	-1.18 (.21)**	-.83 (.33)*	.31 (.26)	.12 (.53)
Missing	-.12 (.20)	-.37 (.33)	1.70 (.14)**	.25 (.25)
Mother education ^e				
Degree	.05 (.13)		-.07 (.16)	
Higher education	-.04 (.12)		.01 (.15)	
A-levels	.02 (.10)		-.03 (.13)	
GCSEs	.10 (.09)		-.15 (.11)	
Primary and lower	.06 (.17)		-.10 (.21)	
Missing	.15 (.16)		.06 (.19)	

(continued on the next page)

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; ^aaspirations get higher is the contrasting category, ^b constant stay in school is the contrasting category; ^c class V is the reference category, ^dWhite pupils is the reference category, ^e mother with no education is the reference category.

Table 2.11: Binomial logistic regression model contrasting types of aspirations (continued from the previous page).

	Aspirations get lower		Aspirations get higher	
	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)
Father education ^f	.04 (.13)		.15 (.17)	
Degree	.23 (.14)		-.01 (.17)	
Higher education	.12 (.11)		.12 (.13)	
A-levels	-.04 (.12)		.17 (.15)	
GCSEs	-.42 (.24)		.89 (.27)**	
Primary and lower	.09 (.10)		.02 (.13)	
Missing				
Academic ability ^g		-.02 (.01)*		.00 (.01)
Attitude to education		-.22 (.05)**		.28 (.07)**
Parent aspirations ^h				
Stay in school		-1.56 (.28)**		1.08 (.39)**
Start training		-.50 (.29)		-.18 (.42)
Missing		-1.05 (.36)**		.64 (.52)
Parent expectations ⁱ				
Stay in school		-5.01 (.21)**		4.80 (.32)**
Start training		-1.47 (.21)**		1.43 (.34)**
Missing		-1.63 (.24)**		1.74 (.38)**
Friends' influence ^j				
Stay in school		-1.32 (.14)**		1.35 (.22)**
Missing		-.20 (.24)		.30 (.36)
N	8564	8564	3218	3218
-2 log-likelihood	6628.21	2349.78	3868.99	1253.402
Pseudo R-square	.08	.40	.14	.58

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; ^f father with no education is the reference category, ^g score at Key stage 3^h children leave full-time education is the reference category, ⁱ children leave full-time education is the reference category, ^j leaving full-time education is the reference category.

Table 2.12: Odds ratios for the binomial logistic regression models contrasting types of aspirations

	Aspirations get lower ^a		Aspirations get higher ^b	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Social class ^c				
I	.37	.82	2.57	1.38
II	.62	.87	1.48	2.05
III	.62	.78	1.23	.86
IV	1.09	1.02	1.03	1.19
Non employed	1.16	.88	.87	.93
Missing	.74	.27	1.04	1.61
Gender Males	2.35	1.23	.40	.69
Ethnic group ^d				
Asian	.21	.47	4.26	2.0
Black	.31	.43	3.28	2.19
Mixed/Other	.89	.69	1.36	1.13
Missing	.17	.66	5.5	1.28
Mother education ^e				
Degree	1.05		.93	.92
Higher education	.96		1.01	.91
A-levels	1.03		.97	.91
GCSEs	1.11		.85	.88
Primary and lower	1.06		.90	1.00
Missing	1.16		1.05	.87

(continued on the next page)

Notes: ^aaspirations get higher is the contrasting category, ^b constant stay in school is the contrasting category; ^c class V is the reference category, ^dWhite pupils is the reference category, ^e mother with no education is the reference category.

Table 2.12: Odds ratios for the binomial logistic regression model contrasting types of aspirations (continued from the previous page).

	Aspirations get lower		Aspirations get higher	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Father education ^f				
Degree	1.04		1.16	1.05
Higher education	1.26		.99	1.35
A-levels	1.13		1.13	.71
GCSEs	.96		1.19	.85
Primary and lower	.66		2.43	2.90
Missing	1.09		1.02	.84
Academic ability ^g		.05		1.24
Attitude to education		.79		1.00
Parent aspirations ^h				
Stay in school		.21		2.96
Start training		.60		.83
Missing		.35		1.91
Parent expectations ⁱ				
Stay in school		.01		144.83
Start training		.23		4.17
Missing		.19		5.71
Friends' influence ^j				
Stay in school		.27		3.86
Missing		.82		1.353

Notes: ^f father with no education is the reference category, ^g score at Key stage 3^h children leave full-time education is the reference category, ⁱ children leave full-time education is the reference category, ^j leaving full-time education is the reference category.

2.7 Parental aspirations and expectations

In the previous sections we analysed how educational aspirations are shaped from year 9 to year 11, how they change over those years and the impact of significant others. These results show that educational aspirations are less stable for White English students, who come from a lower social class, and whose parents express lower aspirations and expectations concerning their education. Also the fact that school mates intend to leave education after year 11 has a negative impact on pupils' aspirations, while teachers' opinions do not seem to affect pupils' decisions. All these results are explored further in chapter four, which focuses in particular on peers' relationships. In this section the focus will be on parental aspirations and expectations; whether they change during the years considered and therefore affect changes in pupils' educational aspirations.

The charts presented below show the general trend of parental aspirations and expectations from year 9 to year 11. On one hand, aspirations are very stable, indicating that parents form their ideas of what they would like for their children quite early and maintain the same despite possible changes, such as pupils' own choices or school performance. Parental aspirations can be, therefore, considered an exogenous variable. On the other hand, parental expectations show a clear change over the years, with expectations for their children's education getting higher by year 11. These results suggest that parental expectations are affected by changes in other variables, and can therefore be considered as endogenous⁴⁴. Although the data do not include information about school performance from year 9 to year

⁴⁴ An exogenous variable is a factor in a causal model whose value is independent from the states of other variables in the system. When a variable change its value according to the state of other variables, it can be defined as endogenous (Pearl, 2000).

11, the change might reflect pupils' change in academic achievement, or more simply pupils' change of mind about their future plans.

Going back to parental aspirations, figure 4 shows the trend over the years for each ethnic group. White and Asian parents are those with the most stable aspirations for their children's education, while Black parents and those of mixed or other ethnicity show a slight change, which mostly concerns year 10. This year has, in fact, proved to be different from the other years in all the analyses discussed earlier on. As a middle year, it does not represent a new stage in the pupils' experience, and it is also less stressing because pupils do not have to take examinations, therefore pupils might be more relaxed about school work and future plans.

Figure 2.2: Distribution of parental aspirations from year 9 to year 11

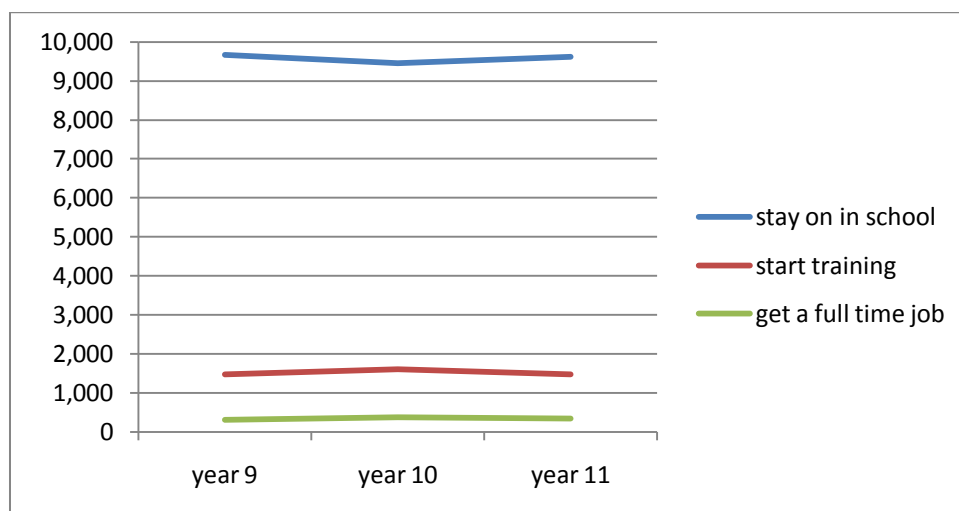


Figure 2.3: Distribution of parental expectations from year 9 to year 11

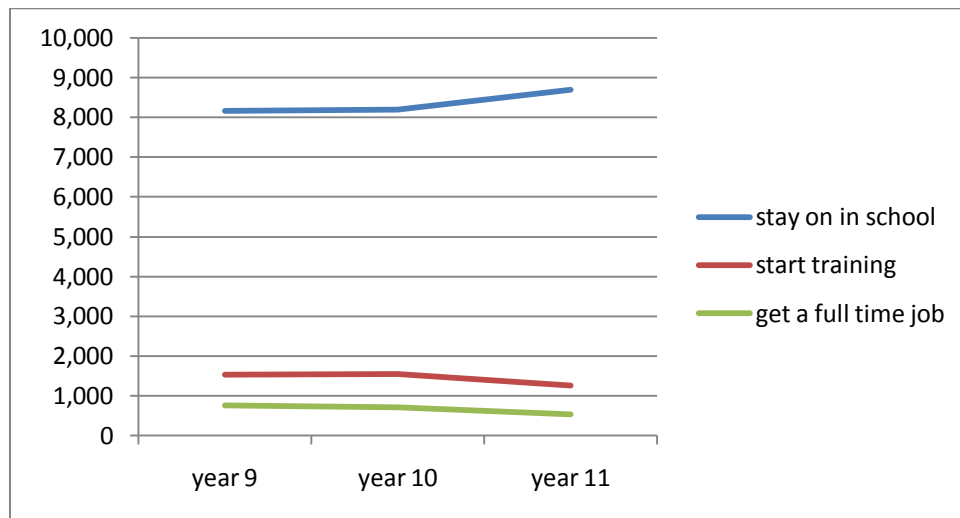
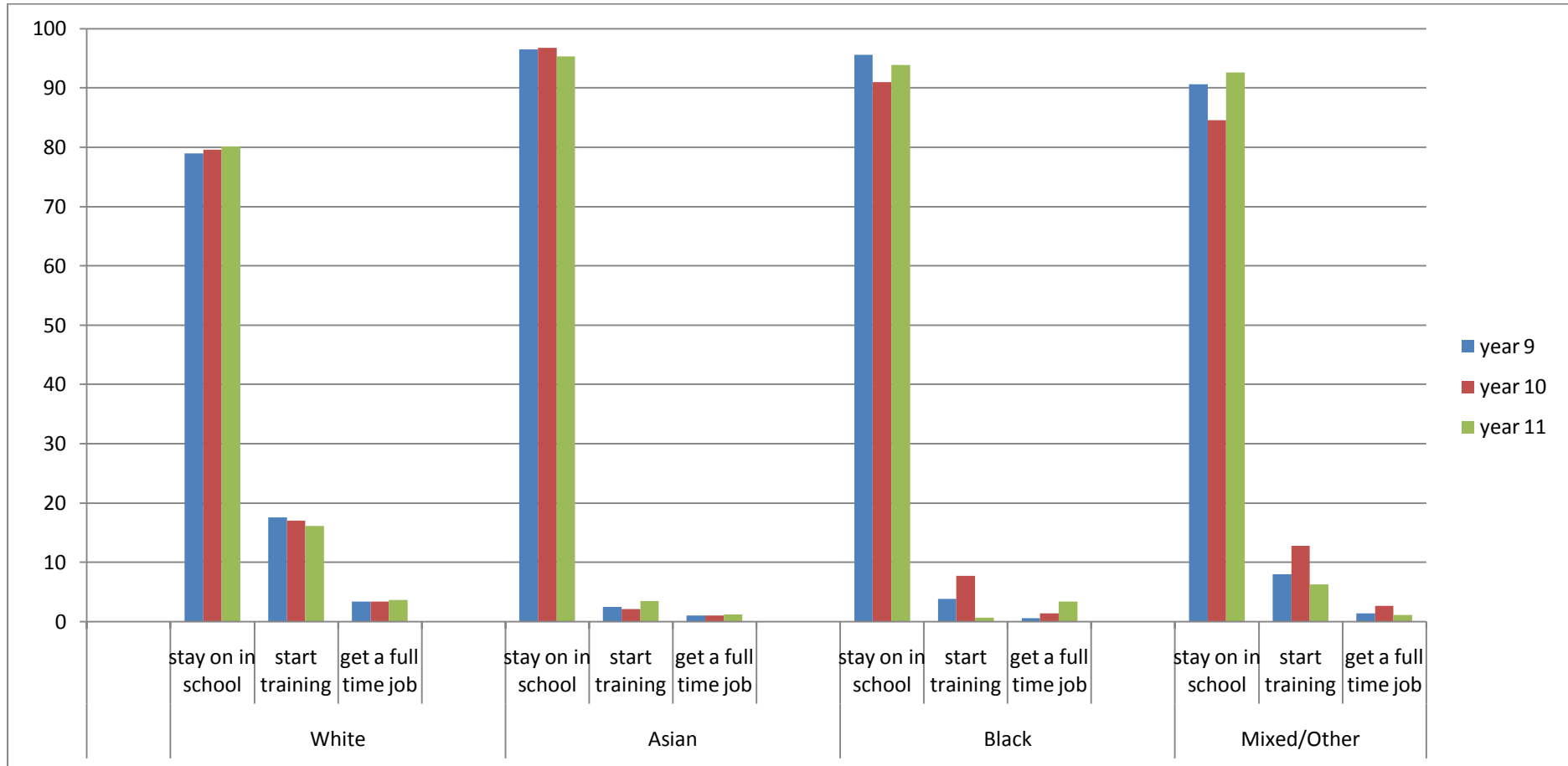


Figure 2.4: Distribution of parental aspirations by pupils' ethnic origin from year 9 to year 11 (%)



The correlation matrix below (table 2.13)⁴⁵, shows that parental aspirations and expectation are positively correlated; generally speaking the correlation between aspirations and expectations is stronger when considering the same year, while it becomes weaker when related to different years. Parental aspirations in year 11 are positively correlated with aspirations and expectations in years 9 and 10; year 10 shows a slightly different picture, again, as parental aspirations are not correlated with aspirations in year 9, as expectations in year 10 are not correlated with those in year 9.

Considering correlations between parental aspirations and expectations, and pupils' own educational aspirations, results shows that parental aspirations in year 11 are correlated with pupils' aspirations in year 9. Although we expected parents to affect pupils' aspirations across the years, the results here do not support this hypothesis. Parental aspirations and expectations are, in fact correlated with pupils' own aspirations in each year, as it was previously highlighted by the multinomial logistic regressions (see tables 2.3 and 2.5).

⁴⁵ The variables have been recoded into binary variables; pupils' aspirations: 0) enter A-levels, 1) else; parental aspirations 0) would like their children to enter A-levels, 1) else; parental expectations 0) expect their children to enter A-levels, 1) else.

Table 2.13: Correlation matrix for parental aspirations and expectations from year 9 to year 11

	Pup. Asp. year 11	Pup. Asp. year 10	Pup. Asp. year 9	Par. Asp. year 11	Par. Asp. year 10	Par. Asp. year 9	Par. Exp. Year 11	Par. Exp. year 10	Par. Exp. year 9
Pup. Asp. year 11	1	-0.001	.013	-.570**	-0.004	-0.010	-.655**	-0.002	-0.009
Pup. Asp. year 10		1	.007	-0.014	-0.006	-0.003	-0.014	-0.015	.006
Pup. Asp. year 9			1	-.025**	-0.006	-.399**	-0.011	-0.007	-.446**
Par. Asp. Year 11				1	.377**	.023**	.891**	.359**	.019*
Par. Asp. year 10					1	.011	.376**	.801**	.025**
Par. Asp. year 9						1	.027**	.013	.614**
Par. Exp. Year 11							1	.355**	.025**
Par. Exp. year 10								1	.020*
Par. Exp. year 9									1

2.8 Discussion

This chapter has tested various hypotheses concerning the development (and change) of educational aspirations from year 9 to year 11. Generally speaking, educational aspirations do change over the years for part of the pupils in the sample, although the majority of them seem to have a clear and stable idea about what to do next; the main change regards pupils who become more keen towards the option of staying in school by year 11, especially when they did not express a preference earlier on. The main explanatory factors were found to be social class and ethnicity. Lower class individuals are, in fact, those who are most likely to start year 9 with low educational aspirations and, although a big percentage of them change their mind during the following years, lower class pupils remain the group with the lowest educational aspirations (H1).

While this result simply goes to confirm decades of data and facts indicating class differentials in educational attainment (Halsey et al., 1980; Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993; Ishida et al., 1995), results concerning ethnic origins add some new knowledge; ethnic minority students not only start year 9 with very high educational aspirations, but they also maintain them over the years. The differences among ethnic groups in terms of aspirations are very small; Asians, Blacks and the others all show very high aspirations compared to White English pupils (especially boys) (H3). The higher achievement of (east) Asian students has been demonstrated in many Western Countries, including the UK (Heath & Brinbaum, 2007; Rothon, 2007), and the US (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Duran & Weffer, 1992). The situation is different for Black students; according to several

US studies they represent, in fact, the lowest achievers (together with Hispanics) (Garrison 1982; Fordham et al., 1986). Although much is known about actual educational achievement, the same cannot be said about aspirations, at least in the UK. In the US, Kao & Tienda (1998), found Black and Hispanic students to have less stable aspirations than White and Asian. Moreover, while White and Asian maintain high aspirations through the years and achieve, the same is not true for Blacks and Hispanics. The situation pictured by our result looks different; looking at the table in appendix A, in fact, minority students are those with the highest participation in full-time education in year 12, compared to White pupils. The fact that the table does not differentiate between the different courses available (choosing A-levels is very different from choosing training or apprenticeship courses), is limitative, and it is certainly something worth investigating further.

A theoretical framework that offers a plausible explanation to these results is the blocked-opportunity framework, in the form of overcompensation (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). An ethnic group can, in fact, overcompensate for the liabilities of ethnic minority group status by overachieving scholastically. This applies especially to minorities who migrated voluntarily to a country and therefore are more motivated to achieve in school and the labour market. Moreover this would also explain the higher level of parental aspirations and expectations of minorities, compared to White English parents.

These results could also be partly explained by the role of the labour market, especially when considering ethnic penalties and depressed local labour markets in some areas. Unfortunately the LSYPE data did not provide with information about the labour market situations in different areas of England, but we can relate to

previous research on the topic. Leslie and Drinkwater (1999), found evidence for economic considerations as an important factor influencing ethnic minority's school choices. Two are the main mechanisms described by the results: a “push” factor, when a higher probability of unemployment encourages ethnic participation in education; and a “pull” factor, when participation is encouraged by higher expected lifetime earnings. In general, the effect of rising unemployment rates on increasing participation in education can be easily highlighted by statistics; from 1980 to 1992 only, there was an increase of 6 percentage points in participation in further education⁴⁶.

Another important factor pushing ethnic minorities to stay in education is represented by ethnic penalties in the labour market. According to Hagell and Shaw (1996), whereas there is awareness of racism in specific areas or work sectors ethnic minorities tend to stay in education longer as a mean of protection.

Parental aspirations and expectations are proved to be very influential in shaping pupils' own aspirations. As Sewell & Shah (1968) claim, parental encouragement is a powerful intervening variable between socioeconomic status and academic ability. In their study, as well as most of the studies available (Ball et al., 2002; Morgan, 2005 among the others), the focus is on university plans; the results of this chapter highlight how parental encouragement is crucial from an early stage of education. Although A-levels are not the only courses that allow students to get to tertiary education,⁴⁷ they are still those offering the best academic preparation. Moreover, the results indicate that parental aspirations are very stable over the

⁴⁶ The participation rate in 1980 was 9%, while in 1992 it rose to 15.3%.

⁴⁷ For more information about courses and qualification see appendix E.

years, therefore independent from intervening variables, such as pupils' school performance and own intentions⁴⁸.

Parental aspirations can also work in different ways; on one hand higher salariat class pupils are pushed to achieve a high level of education mainly because they need to maintain their social advantage; on the other hand, lower class pupils might be pushed by parents who want them to achieve better than they did in order to have a better life. According to Ball et al. (2002), socioeconomic constraints, along with parents' influence and ethnicity, are at the root of individuals' school choices. Lower class students, referred to as 'contingent choosers', usually have not well educated parents and very limited economic resources; their parents can support their pupils with high levels of encouragement and push them to do well in school, but they usually cannot provide much financial support or help with schoolwork or advice about education. On the other hand, higher salariat class pupils, who are identified as 'embedded choosers'", have a lot of resources at their disposal. Educational aspirations are in this case so long standing and 'strongly encouraged' by the family, that there is no real choice when it comes to choose at age 16 but which school to apply for.

To mediate the effect of social class is academic ability. Although results are different considering each year at a time, academic ability proved to be an explanatory variable when contrasting typologies of pupils concerning stability of aspirations. Students with a good academic performance are, in fact, more likely to have stable aspirations, compared to those who do not. The fact that the only school performance score available was key stage 3 score though, might explain

⁴⁸ Parental expectations, on the other hand, proved to be an endogenous variable, as they change according to intervening variables.

the lack of effects in years 10 and 11. We would, in fact, expect academic ability to be even more important in year 11, when a final decision must be made. While key stage 3 score is very close to year 9, therefore more representative of pupils' academic ability at that stage, it might not be so for year 11. The only evidence supporting this is in year 9, represented by the coefficient of the interaction effect. What the coefficient shows is that the higher the social class and the lower the academic ability, the higher are the odds to stay in school. In other words, academic ability matters less to higher salariat class individuals, who have higher aspirations despite their school performance or any risk of failure, compared to lower class ones. The significance of the interaction effect though loses its strength as soon as variables about the influence of significant others are added to the model, in particular the variables of parental aspirations and expectations (H4).

Along with parental aspirations and expectations, the results of the analyses show a very strong effect of peers' intentions on students' educational aspirations (H2). Although this result might indicate an actual relationship between the two variables, it could also just refer to a more general effect of the school environment⁴⁹. All the quantitative studies available on peer group effects (Evans et al., 1992; Robertson & Symons, 2003), are, in fact, pointing out the effects of school composition on pupils' educational attainment rather than that of peers' relationships. The data here certainly allow us to analyse peers' choices, giving some closer insight, but it is still limited. For this main reason peers' relationships will be the focus of chapter four.

⁴⁹ More evidence and a further discussion on this issue can be found in chapter 4.

The results concerning gender confirm a trend that has been going on for several years, which sees girls achieving better than boys (Johnsson, 1999). In general, girls have higher educational aspirations than boys, when controlling for social class and ethnicity. Moreover, girls have very stable aspirations throughout high school, while boys are more likely to change their mind, especially towards the decision to stay in school.

Finally, we found attitudes to education to be another strong explanatory variable for students' educational aspirations (H5). The fact that pupils enjoy school and consider it as a value in itself, is positively correlated with them having constant high educational aspirations throughout high school years. As the qualitative interviews showed, pupils who do not like school i.e. do not like coursework and examinations mostly, are keener to choose courses such as BTECs, which do not involve examinations but consist of mainly coursework. On the other hand, we could not find any proof of a relationship between social class and attitude to education (H6), and cannot support Sullivan (2006), and Reay & Ball's (1998) earlier findings⁵⁰.

⁵⁰ The lack of relationship between attitudes to education and social class found here does also not match the findings from our qualitative study, which clearly show that working class students, especially boys, are more likely to find school boring, and define themselves more 'practical' people.

2.10 Conclusions

This chapter has shown a few important findings: on one hand, instability of educational aspirations is largely due to low social class; on the other hand ethnic minority pupils' aspirations are higher and more stable compared to White English students; among significant others, parents and peers play a key role in shaping students' educational aspirations, while teachers do not; parental aspirations are very stable and not affected by social class; and finally, students' attitude to education is also an important explanatory variable for pupils' school choices.

Previous studies in the US showed that White pupils have higher and more stable aspirations compared to ethnic minority pupils, especially blacks and Hispanics. Early aspirations seem to be higher for most pupils, but as the years go by, Blacks and Hispanics' aspirations get lower, ending with them underachieving scholastically. Underachievement of Blacks has also been highlighted by various studies in the UK, along with the advantage of Asian pupils. On one hand, the results in this chapter strengthen the findings about Asians, indicating the stability of their high aspiration from an early stage; on the other hand the disadvantage of Black students cannot be confirmed, along with the low and unstable aspirations of White students.

Although the table in appendix A shows that student' intentions by year 11 corresponds, in general, to their actual choice in year 12, this does not mean that they will all successfully finish the course they started. As we will discuss in chapter four, it is not unusual for some students to drop out of a course after less than a year since they started it, especially when they come from a lower social

class. Therefore we cannot confirm or deny, at this stage, previous findings about Black students' (or White students for that matter), underachievement.

Economic resources are the main explanation for lower and unstable educational aspirations. They affect students directly, through limited family resources, and also indirectly, mainly weakening their academic ability. Structural sociology of education arguments can well explain class differentials in educational attainment. In particular rational choice models have addressed this issue as a matter of individual consideration of costs and benefit of choices, where the reference is everyone's family background. Although rational choice models can certainly explain some aspects of individual behaviour, they are somehow limited.

Parental aspirations are very stable over the years, indicating their exogenous nature; parental expectations, on the other hand, are endogenous, and more sensitive to changes in pupils' own intentions or, perhaps, school performance. Also, the results of the analyses confirm the findings of recent research: ethnic minority parents (especially Asian) have very high aspirations and expectations for their children, despite their limited economic resources.

Moreover, peers' intentions also showed a consistent positive effect on students' own educational aspirations; on one hand, this could indicate the importance of peer group in shaping pupils' own school choices, although, on the other hand, it could refer to the effect of school composition (as highlighted by previous studies), or the importance of the school environment. As the results in chapter four indicate, the latter seem to be best answer.

Although we expected teachers to play a role in shaping pupils' educational aspirations, this is not supported by the results. Perhaps, this could be related to the

limitations in the variables available in the dataset, but it could also indicate that teachers, as part of a school, affect the school environment, therefore their influence on student is indirect.

Finally, a significant explanatory variable has proved to be individuals' attitude to education. Although the positive relationship between liking school, in terms of coursework and homework, and intending to get a good education might sound obvious, it has never been proved before.

In summary, this chapter has shown that rational choice models might not be able to explain the nature of parental aspirations and expectations, while they do with general class differentials in school attainment. Considering the role of significant others, traditional status attainment arguments can explain quite well how parents affect their children's educational aspirations, although parents seem to be the only real influence on pupils' school plans. Whereas this chapter has focuses on the factors affecting aspirations of students in years 9 to 11 of education, the next chapters will analyse further the role of parental involvement in children's education and the nature of peer relationships.

Chapter 3

Parental involvement in pupils' education: social class and ethnic differences.

This chapter will focus on the role of parents on pupils' school achievement at age 16. As mentioned earlier, although ethnic minority pupils tend to have high educational aspirations throughout the years, some (e.g. Black Caribbean) tend to underachieve scholastically. The fact that they have higher aspirations compared to white pupils could be related to high parental aspirations and parental encouragement, while the fact that they underachieve scholastically could be explained by their lack of involvement in children's school activities and help with school work. Using quantitative and qualitative data, we will analyse how parents are involved in their pupils' education and how their involvement differs in relation to ethnicity and social class.

Several studies (Sewell & Shah, 1968; Sewell, Haller & Portes, 1969; 1970; Kao & Tienda, 1998, Reay & Ball, 1998) show that parental aspirations and expectations have a very strong effect on pupils' own educational aspirations and therefore outcome. Parental "encouragement" can be of diverse nature and it can be addressed as an extra family resource, along with the economic and cultural ones, although they are not completely unrelated. According to Bourdieu (1984), children of better

educated parents are exposed to more stimuli and a culturally richer environment which give them an advantage once in school. The language itself is different, both in terms of grammar and richness of vocabulary, for those children, while children of less educated parents are exposed to a more “restricted” vocabulary and language use, which is different from what teachers use in school (Bernstein, 1975). In the same way, better educated parents are keener to help their children with homework and check on their school progress, while less educated parents might feel incapable to help their children because of their lack of knowledge.

Economic resources are also crucial when considering individuals’ educational attainment; in general, according to Breen & Goldthorpe (1997), middle class pupils are pushed to achieve higher in school in order to avoid social demotion. Parental aspirations and expectations are therefore very strong and influential, while they do not need to be for working class children, whose risk of social demotion is very low. Middle class parents can also use their better economic resources to provide their children with better education (sending them to private schools) and pay for extra lessons and extracurricular activities (music classes, sports and more). In particular, according to Reay & Ball (1998), middle class parents are deeply involved in the choice of school for their children (at secondary level) in a way that does not leave any aspect of the choice to the children themselves. They think children need to be guided through what is best for them. Differently, working class parents usually prefer their children to go to the school they attended or the one in the neighbourhood, where also their children’s friends go. This can be also related to the fact that working class parents feel ‘out of place’ in schools and institutions, considered more middle class, and their involvement in school is limited. As Lareau (2002) claims, middle class parents are more involved in their children’s education,

not only by helping them with homework but also participating in school activities, such as parent/teachers associations, meeting with teachers in school and more. Differently, lower class parents tend not to get involved in school activities and feel “uncomfortable” talking with teachers. Lareau’s study does not only underline differences in terms of social class but also in terms of ethnicity. What applies to lower class families is stronger when the parents considered are black ethnic minority, compared to white parents.

Recent studies, mostly in the US (Duran & Weffer, 1992; Kao & Tienda, 1998), show that ethnic minority pupils have very high educational aspirations, compared to white pupils, even though they do not always result in a better school achievement, especially when considering Black pupils (compared to Asian pupils). Ethnic minorities parents have, in fact, very high aspirations for their children and want them to do better than they themselves did in school (and in the labour market), but the motivational help is not accompanied by help with school work or involvement in school.

According to Ball et al. (2002), school decision making processes differ among individuals on the basis of social class and ethnicity. This study, which is focused on participation in higher education, identifies two typologies of choosers, embedded and contingent. The former represents upper class individuals, whose parents have a degree and who are expected to enrol at university, as their parents expect them to do. On the other hand there are the contingent choosers, whose parents are not so well educated and their decision whether to go to university or not is more complex and based on the resources they have and the little information available.

This study, as well as the Lareau one and others focusing on parental encouragement and involvement in their children's education to help their achievement, are qualitative studies. On the other hand, most of the quantitative studies available focus on one particular form of parental involvement in children's education. For this reason this chapter will examine parental involvement in children's education in its different forms: as aspirations, help with school work, and involvement in school. These three components reflect what previous studies had considered and found differing among social classes and ethnicities. Although the data analyses will be mainly quantitative, there will also be a qualitative section, which will examine further some of the quantitative results.

The next section will present a review of the literature related to this topic, followed by a description of the data and methods used in the chapter, and a discussion of the results achieved.

3.1 Theoretical background

There are several studies available on the effects of parental involvement in children's education. What comes across in most of these studies is the diversity of dimensions associated with this concept, which reveals its complexity. Following is a review of the literature available on this issue.

3.1.1 Parental involvement in the form of aspirations and encouragement

The first studies on the positive effects of parental involvement in children's education were associated with parental aspirations and parental encouragement. The most well-known theory on this matter is the "Wisconsin model of status attainment" (Sewell, Haller & Portes, 1969; Sewell, Haller & Ohlendorf, 1970), which aims to explain both the processes of educational and occupational attainment. Focusing on the former, Sewell et al. claims that the effects of family background and academic ability of a pupil can be completely explained by the expectations that 'significant others' (parents, teachers and peers) hold on him. What significant others do is, in fact, defining educational expectations that are then internalised by the student as his own aspirations. The model was first tested on a cohort of farm boys and of male seniors of a state-wide Wisconsin sample first contacted in 1957 and later in 1965. Also most analyses have focus on male individuals only⁵¹.

The model is quite simple as it concludes that individuals' educational attainment can be increased (or decreased) just by their significant others increasing (or decreasing) their expectations on him. The variables that affect students' expectations about his school success are mainly his socio-economic background and his demonstrated academic ability. Although the model was revised few times due to limitations in the data used for the analyses, and the results of the 1970 version showed some direct effect of significant others and schools over students' educational outcomes, doubts remained on the validity of the claims that significant

⁵¹ Female individuals have been included in later replication of the analyses with different datasets (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Williams, 1972).

others could raise a student educational attainment only by imposing higher expectations on them. One of the replications of the Wisconsin model of status attainment has been presented by Jencks et al. (1983).

One of the studies that led to the Wisconsin model of status attainment is the one by Sewell & Shah (1967); to research the relation between social class, parental encouragement and educational aspirations they analysed 10,318 seniors from both public and private schools in Wisconsin. Their results claim that “parental encouragement is a powerful intervening variable between socioeconomic class background and intelligence of the child and his educational aspirations” (Sewell & Shah 1967, p. 571). What was underlined by their results is that parental encouragement alone does not explain social class differences in educational aspirations, leaving a good deal of unexplained variance in college plans of pupils from different socio-economic classes. What Sewell and Shah also claimed is the importance of ‘parental encouragement’ variable in the sense that it can be modified, by direct counselling to help parents or the relationship between parents and children, whereas children’s intelligence or social class are more difficult to be influenced.

More recently, Aston & McLanahan (1991) supported the claim that children’s school failure is highly related to parenting style and parental practices; parents, in fact, may differ with respect to their educational aspirations for their children. This might be related to a poor economic situation, which is quite typical for non-intact families for instance, or to the fact that parents fail to transmit their high aspirations to their children. The most effective way to do that is for parents to get involved in

their children's education, supervising their activities and advising them on school matters.

According to Hao & Bonstead-Bruns (1998), an agreement between parents' and children's educational expectations facilitates children's achievement. Their analyses of a sample of eighth graders in the US from groups of immigrant and natives indicate that high levels of parent-child interactions increase parents and children educational expectations which lead to children's higher school achievement. Their results show an advantage of Asians in terms of educational expectations, with respect to Mexicans, which is partly explained by the higher interactions between Asian parents and children and a higher involvement of Chinese parents in their children's education, which results in a higher school achievement of the latter.

3.1.2 Parental involvement as supervision of children's education and participation in school activities

According to several studies (Aston & McLanahan, 1991; Lareau, 1987; Stevenson & Baker 1987), parents with higher SES tend to be more involved in their children's education, participating more actively in school meetings for instance, due to a more positive attitude to school.

Stevenson and Baker (1987), in particular, focused on mothers' involvement in children's education as positively affecting their school attainment. In their study, involvement in school is a measure of the degree of parental participation in parents-teachers organization (PTO) and parent-teacher conferences, as reported from the

teachers. Starting from the consideration that mothers are usually more involved in their children's day-to-day schooling activities (and also, in case of single-parent homes, typically the child lives with his mother), they assume that highly educated mothers will have a better understanding of how to progress in the school career and their involvement in their children's education will be more effective towards the aim of securing a successful school achievement for their children⁵². Although they consider only the mothers' educational level as family background variable, to explain the degree of parental involvement in children's education, they also look at the relation between the latter and the age and sex of the child. Correlations among those variables indicate that more educated mothers are more keen to participate in school activities and that the degree of involvement is higher the younger the children. More important, the results show a strong positive relation between parental involvement in school activities and children's performance in school for both boys and girls.

Ho & Willms (1996) addressed the complexity of the construct 'parental involvement' by examining its dimensions. They identified four dimensions: two types of home involvement (discussing school activities and monitoring the child's out of school activities) and two types of school involvement (contact between parents and school personnel and volunteering in school and attending parent teachers conferences). Their main focus is to estimate how each dimension varies among students between and within schools and to understand the relationship between

⁵²This assumption is supported by a previous study (Stevenson & Baker, 1986), where they found that more educated mothers know more about their child's school performance, were more in contact with teachers, and were more likely to take action when needed, in order to help their children's performance. Also, these mothers tended to choose college preparatory courses for their children independently from their academic performance.

parental involvement and family background. Their starting point lays on the hypotheses that (1) if parental involvement differs according to school policies and practises, there should be a significant variation of parental involvement across schools; and (2) considering the different social background of students at the same school, there should also be a considerable within-school variation.

The results of their analyses indicate a high variation of parental involvement within the schools, but not between them. The idea that successful schools promote practices that help communication between parents and teachers and encourage parents to supervise their children's school activities is not supported by the data; the only dimension that shows a significant variation is the participation as volunteers and in PTO meetings, even though this is also the least important variable when it comes to explain variation in children's academic achievement. What counts most is, in fact, the dimension of home involvement. Concerning the relationship between family background and parental involvement, the effect was not very large and it changed among the dimensions considered (for instance it had no relationship to the level of home supervision). In the same way, the results do not support the assumption that parents from ethnic minority ethnic group are less involved in their children's education (Asians, in particular, are shown to have a high level of home involvement).

Another researcher who claimed the importance of home supervision (and specifically of parental help with homework) is Mau (1997). His analyses show, in fact, that although parental expectations are quite important, their supervision of homework is a crucial variable for children's academic success. Mau focused on racial differences in the type of parental involvement, finding for example that White

parents are more likely to attend school functions than Asians, while the latter show higher expectations and spend more time supervising their children's homework.

According to Lareau (1987), one of the major mechanisms of parental involvement in school is the increase of social capital, the latter defined as parents' skills and information that make them more 'equipped' to help their children in school-related activities. Establishing a relationship with the school personnel and also interacting with the other parents at the school meetings they can form a better understanding of the school expectations for behaviour and homework. In one of her earlier studies, Lareau (1987), focuses on parental involvement in school as primarily the relationship between families and schools; according to her the perspective that best explain the different level of parental involvement in school draws on the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), which claims the uneven nature of the scholastic institution towards individuals from different social and cultural background. Schools are, in fact, middle class institutions, which favour pupils from the higher socio-economic background (using the same linguistic code children speak at home, for instance) and works to the reproduction of the privileged members of society. In the light of this mechanism, not only do children's school experiences differ considering different social classes but also parental involvement in their children's school, being quite difficult for lower class parents to feel 'comfortable' in the school environment.

In one of Lareau's most recent studies (2002), the focus of the research shifted to the role of childrearing practices among families of different social class and ethnicity (black and white) and their effect on children's academic achievement. The results of ethnographic work indicate a clear difference in the way white middle class families

differ from black working class families, for instance, in the way they interact with institutions and the grade of trustworthiness they show towards them. Middle class people expect institutions to be responsive to them and to accommodate their individual needs. For this reason, for instance, they show more energetic and active participation in their children's school activities, talking to the teachers and being part of the learning process. By contrast, lower class individual think that institutions are mainly a sort of enemy that work against them and is always there to punish them. Differently from the middle class parents, working class parents do not intervene actively in school and they tend to depend on teachers and school professionals (even if they do not really trust them), because they feel not "prepared" to discuss with them.

3.2. Research questions and hypotheses

The main focus of this chapter is (a) to understand how each dimension differs, if at all, for parents of different social class and ethnicity and (b) how they affect children's educational choices at the end of compulsory education.

The first issue that needs to be discussed is about the definition of parental involvement in education. All the studies discussed earlier reveal the complexity of this construct, in all its dimensions. Most of the studies, though, tend to focus on one specific dimension, the one hypothesised to be the most important (in the case of Ho & Willms, they tried to include a home dimension and a school dimension) but the results leave room for further investigation. According to the literature discussed earlier, we would identify three main dimensions of the construct

‘parental involvement in children’s education’: parental aspirations and expectations; participation in school-related activities, which is related also to the feelings about the school and education in general; and help and supervision with homework. The results of the principal component analysis discussed in the next paragraph though, indicate a different situation: first of all, parental aspirations and expectations are highly correlated with the variables describing participation in school-related activities. If parents want their children to succeed in school, they will be participating in their education, talking to the teachers and keeping up to date on their performance and related matters. According to Hao & Bonstead-Bruns (1998), parental expectations, in order to be fulfilled, need to be transmitted to the child, and this mechanism can be achieved through active participation in school-related activities. Secondly, parental feelings towards school are not correlated with participation in school-related activities, but indicate a separate dimension.

After thorough consideration of the literature and the results of the principal component analysis, the following three main dimensions of parental involvement in children’s education were identified: (1) parental aspirations and participation in school-related activities; (2) supervision of children’s school work; and (3) feelings towards school and education. (1) is related to the status attainment tradition (Sewell & Shah, 1968; Sewell, Haller & Portes, 1969), which claims that parental expectations (along with those of teachers and friends) can affect children’s own educational expectations. Parental encouragement and clear discussion of expectations between parents and children can, according to Hao & Bonstead-Bruns (1998), help the child to reach the same educational expectation as his parents, enhancing his academic achievement. Dimension (1) is also what Ho &

Willms (1996) name ‘school involvement’; it refers to the participation of parents in school meetings and PTO, to the fact that parents talk to teachers about their children’s future choices and their knowledge about school activities. It also refers to (2), parental supervision of children’s homework and school activities. According to the tradition of social capital theory (Coleman, 1996), helping with homework, and even more making sure that the child does homework regularly is a form of social control that goes under the ‘within-family’ type of social capital⁵³. (3) is related to the level of ‘comfort’ and familiarity that parents feel towards their children’s school, according to Lareau (1987, 2002). The fact that parents feel education as an important means to achieve success in life and they feel they ‘belong’ in the scholastic environment work towards children’s school success, encouraging them to raise their educational expectations.

In the light of the above discussion we can now draw some hypotheses;

Concerning (a), i.e. class and ethnic differences in the three dimensions:

H1a: previous findings (Modood, 2004; Heath et al., 2008), highlighted that ethnic minority parents have higher aspirations and expectations concerning their children’s education, as they consider education as a mean to achieve a good position in the labour market; considering that aspirations are correlated with participation in school-related activities:

⁵³ Coleman (1996) describes two types of social capital: ‘within-family’ social capital refers to the relations between children and parents (and other people in the family); ‘outside-family’ social capital refers to the social relationships between parents in the same community, as well the relationships of parents with the institutions of the community (school, church and so on).

We hypothesise that ethnic minority parents participate more in their children's education, according to dimension (1), compared to White English parents;

H2a: although ethnic minority parents have high aspirations and are shown to be very supportive of their children's future plans in education (Ball et al., 2002), they might not be able to support them in other ways, such as helping with homework; therefore

We hypothesise that lower class and ethnic minority parents will show a lower participation in dimension (2);

H3a: Considering dimension 3, previous findings by Lareau (2002) indicate that parents with low education feel 'uncomfortable' in the school environment and in their interaction with teachers (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 1987, 2002); therefore

We hypothesise that parents of a lower social and cultural background will show a negative attitude towards the school environment (3).

Concerning (b), i.e. the impact of the three dimensions on children's school choices:

H1b: parental involvement in children's education has been proved to be crucial for pupils' academic success. This concerns all three dimensions: parental aspirations and encouragement (Sewell & Shah, 1967; Sewell, Haller & Portes, 1969; Sewell, Haller & Ohlendorf, 1970), participation in children's school-related activities (Sui-Chu & Douglas Mills, 1996) and, even more, help with homework (Mau, 1997). Parental

perception of the scholastic institution can also be crucial, as parents from lower social classes tend to perceive school as an ‘enemy’ instead of a positive and important institution for pupils’ future (Lareau, 2002); following the above

We hypothesise the importance of the three dimensions on pupils’ school choice at age 16, so that pupils whose parents have been more involved in their education have better odds to enter A-levels compared to those pupils who did not have much parental support;

H2b: parental involvement in education is likely to differ according to social class and ethnicity, therefore parents of a higher social background will be able to affect their children’s school success more positively, compared with to parents of a less advantaged social class, who might feel ‘uncomfortable in the school environment (Lareau, 2002) and not able to help their children (especially with homework), although the latter may have higher aspirations and try to encourage them to do well in school (Ball et al., 2002); the last hypothesis is therefore

Pupils of disadvantaged family background, and of ethnic minority origins have less support from their parents concerning both help and supervision with homework, and participation in school-related activities, which affect their school choices at the end of compulsory schooling, although, in particular for ethnic minority pupils, parents try to support their children mostly showing high aspirations concerning their future.

3.3 Data, Variables and Methods

3.3.1 The data source

The source that will be used for the analyses is the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), already used for the analyses in the previous chapter. Although some of the variables have been selected across all the waves (1 to 4), most of those come from wave 4. Wave 4 represents, in fact, individuals aged 16-17, who are currently attending year 12 of education⁵⁴.

Designed and funded by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the LSYPE is a large scale panel study conducted by the National Centre for Social Research. The LSYPE began in 2004 and it has been conducted every year since. The first wave sampled young people aged between 13 and 14, who therefore were in year 9 of education, and it is planned to continue at least for the next 10 years. It is designed to provide annual information about the progress of the cohort group, their attitudes towards school and learning, and the transition from secondary to tertiary education (or training programmes), in order to evaluate the success of policies introduced by the DCSF and promote further policy development.

The survey provides information from both the young person and his/her parents, who are all interviewed every year. Information collected concerns several matters: the young person's family background, parent's socio-economic status, personal characteristics, attitudes, experiences and behaviours, attainment in education,

⁵⁴ This is also the first year after the end of compulsory schooling, so pupils can also be in a full-time job or part-time education.

parental employment, income and family environment as well as local deprivation, information about the school(s) the young person attends/attended.

The sample drawn for the first wave was of 21,000 young people in year 9, attending maintained schools, independent schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) in England in February 2004, who were born between 1st September 1989 and 31st August 1990. Maintained schools, divided in deprived/non deprived, were over-sampled by a factor of 1.5. A two stage probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling procedure was adopted, with schools being the primary sampling unit and pupils within the school being the second stage of the sampling procedure. Both the primary and secondary stage ensured that within a deprived stratum, all pupils within an ethnic group had an equal chance of selection. Concerning independent schools, they were stratified by percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more A-c GCSE grades in 2003 within boarding status (i.e. whether or not they had any boarding pupils), within gender of pupils. PRUs formed a stratum of their own, with 2 units sampled.

Fieldwork for the first 4 waves (those available to the public) was carried out between March and October 2004-2007. The response rate at wave 1 was 74% yielding 15,770 interviews; at wave 2 the number of interviews came down to 13,539, with an 86% response rate; and at wave 3 the survey reached 12,439 interviews, with a 92% response rate. Wave four has a response rate of 89%, with 11,053 full interviews completed⁵⁵. The survey was conducted by face to face computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI)⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ These percentages refer to the number of interviews in wave 1.

⁵⁶ For further information see Ward and D'Souza (2008).

3.3.2 Variables and methods

As discussed earlier, one of the focuses of this chapter is to break the construct of parental involvement in education into three dimensions, so that we can examine each of them in relation to parents of different social and ethnic background. The items selected to measure each dimension are described in table 3.1. Roughly speaking, questions 1 to 7 measure participation in school-related activities; questions 8 and 9 measure help and supervision concerning homework; questions 10 and 11 measure parental aspirations and expectations; and questions 12 to 17 measure feelings towards school and education in general. As can be seen from table 3.1, the questions have a different number of response categories, that goes from two (yes and no) to four (scale).

A principal component analysis, with Varimax rotation, identified these three dimensions, with Eigen values greater than 1⁵⁷. As it can be seen from table 3.3 the first three components have the highest eigenvalues accounting for the 83% of the variance. With regards to the set of items included in the analysis, their factor loadings are quite high with respect to one of the components, making the interpretation of the results very clear (see table 3.2). We labelled the three factors *parental aspirations and participation in school related activities* (participation in school meetings, especially arranged meetings, talk to teachers about schooling, talk to teachers about next year's plans, paid for private and extra classes, parental aspirations and expectations), *parental supervision of school work* (help with homework and check if pupil does homework) and *feelings towards school and education* (easy to deal with school, school gives clear information about pupil,

⁵⁷ See Dunteman (1989).

school help to get involved, knowledge about school to help pupil, have enough knowledge about qualifications, importance of qualifications, leaving school at 16 is limitative).

3.3.3 Other variables

To analyse the differences between parental involvement and social and ethnic background, and the effect of parental involvement on pupils' school choices at the end of year 11, I will use the following variables:

Pupil's current activity (wave 4, pupils age 16-17) in 4 categories: (1) doing A-levels or similar, (2) doing apprenticeship/training, (3) in a full-time job, (4) else; this is also the dependent variable used in the regression analysis.

Family social class⁵⁸: this variable combines mother and fathers' social class taking the highest between the two; I use a collapsed version of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)⁵⁹. This was derived by combining respondents' occupation in their most recent job coded to the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC 2000)⁶⁰ with their employment status to give one of the following NS-SEC analytic classes: (1) Employers in large organizations; higher managerial and professional occupations, (2) Lower managerial and professional; higher technical and supervisory occupations, (3) Small employers and own account workers, (4)

⁵⁸ For a broader discussion about social class see the methodological section of chapter 2.

⁵⁹ www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/

⁶⁰ www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/soc2000.asp

Lower supervisory and technical occupations, (5) Semi-routine occupations; routine occupations, (6) Not employed; never employed; not classifiable.

Mother and father's education, this variable combines mother and fathers' educational levels taking the highest between the two; also the variable is collapsed into six categories: (1) university degree, (2) higher education below degree level, (3) A-levels, (4) GCSE/CSE, (5) primary education and below and (6) no education.

Gender: in two categories;

Ethnic group⁶¹: due to the small size of population within the ethnic minority groups categories, we use a collapsed version with 5 categories: (1) White (British, Irish, any other White background), (2) Mixed, (3) Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, any other Asian background), (4) Black (Caribbean, African, any other Black background) and (5) Other.

Family structure: in three categories: (1) married/cohabiting couple; (2) lone parent and (3) no parents in the family.

Number of siblings living in the house: as a continuous variable

Individual's educational aspirations: (in year 11, wave 3): pupils were asked what they would like to do at the end of compulsory schooling; this consists of four categories: (1) doing A-levels, (2) start training/apprenticeship scheme, (3) get a full-time job and (4) else.

⁶¹ For more information about the history and background of the different ethnic groups see chapter 2, page 74.

Academic ability: in the form of prior attainment as the number of A-C passes at GCSEs. I am aware that this might not be the best measure, compared to the GCSEs results in points (according to the UCAS system⁶²), but I decided to do use it as it produced the best results in the analyses.

⁶² For more reference about the UCAS system see appendix C, table C.1.

Table 3.1: Variables measuring parental involvement in children's education

(1) Participation in school meetings	Whether self or partner have been to any parents' evenings or similar meetings at school (1=yes; 2=no)
(2) Specially arranged meetings	Whether had any specially arranged meetings with teachers about pupil's schooling (1=yes; 2=no)
(3) talk to teachers about pupil's schooling	How often speaks to teachers about pupils' schooling (1=once in one to three weeks; 2=at least once a term; 3=less than once a term; 4=never)
(4) Talk to teachers about next year's plans	Whether has talked to teachers about pupil's plan after year 11 (1=yes; 2=no)
(5) Involvement of parent in pupil's school	How involved does parent personally feels about pupil's school life (1=very involved; 2=fairly involved; 3=not very involved; 4=not at all involved)
(6) Paid for private classes	Whether in the last twelve months MP has paid for private classes in subjects also taught at YP's school (1=yes; 2=no)
(7) Paid for extra classes	Whether paid for any private lessons in supplementary subjects for YP (1=yes; 2=no)
(8) Help with homework	Whether anyone at home helps them with homework (1=yes; 2=no)
(9) Make sure pupils does homework	Whether anyone at home makes sure that do homework (1=every time; 2=sometime; 3=never; 4=depends on what it is)
(10) Parental aspirations	What would like pupil will do when reaches school leaving age (1=continue in full time education; 2=start training/apprenticeship; 3 get a full time job)
(11) Parental expectations	What think pupil will do when reaches school leaving age (1=continue in full time education; 2=start training/apprenticeship; 3 get a full time job)
(12) Easy to deal with school	Agreement with statement: I find it easy to deal with the people at YP's school (1= agree strongly; 2= agree a little; 3=disagree a little; 4=disagree strongly)
(13) School give clear information about pupil	Agreement with statement: YP's school gives me clear information on how YP is getting on (1= agree strongly; 2= agree a little; 3=disagree a little; 4=disagree strongly)
(14) School helps parent to get involved	Agreement with statement: YP's school makes it easy for me to get involved in YP's education (1= agree strongly; 2= agree a little; 3=disagree a little; 4=disagree strongly)
(15) Knowledge about school to help pupil	Agreement with statement: I know all I need to know about how I can help with YP's education (1= agree strongly; 2= agree a little; 3=disagree a little; 4=disagree strongly)
(16) Have enough knowledge about qualifications	Agreement with statement: I don't know enough about modern qualifications to give YP proper advice about what to do (1= agree strongly; 2= agree a little; 3=disagree a little; 4=disagree strongly)
(17) Leaving school at 16 is limitative	Agreement with statement: Leaving school at 16 limits young people's career opportunities later in life (1= agree strongly; 2= agree a little; 3=disagree a little; 4=disagree strongly)

Table 3.2: Principal component loadings

	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Participation in children's school life			
Participation in school meetings	.974	-.003	.171
Specially arranged meetings	.974	-.005	.171
talk to teachers about pupil's schooling	.948	.000	.160
Talk to teachers about next year's plans	.971	-.004	.169
Involvement of parent in pupil's school	.963	-.005	.160
Paid for private classes	.976	-.005	.174
Paid for extra classes	.975	-.005	.175
Parental aspirations	.959	-.002	.162
Parental expectations	.939	-.007	.150
Homework supervision			
Help with homework	.497	.000	.858
Make sure pupils does homework	.511	.002	.850
Feelings towards education			
Easy to deal with school	-.003	.751	.021
School give clear information about pupil	-.009	.885	.005
School helps parent to get involved	.002	.738	.006
Knowledge about school to help pupil	.000	.825	-.001
Have enough knowledge about qualifications	.001	.755	.006
Importance of qualifications	-.004	.846	-.007
Leaving school at 16 is limitative	-.008	.732	-.030

Table 3.3: Eigenvalues of the principal component correlation matrix and percent variance explained

	Eigenvalues	% variance	Cumulative %
Component 1	8.91	45.5	45.5
Component 2	6.97	28.7	74.2
Component 3	2.0	8.5	82.7

3.4 Results

3.4.1 Descriptive analysis

One of the areas of focus of this chapter is the existence of differences in terms of parental involvement in education according to social and ethnic background. Figures 3.1 to 3.5 show the distribution of some of the variables of parental involvement (included in the principal component analysis) by social class and ethnicity.

Overall, there are no significant differences among parents with regards to different types of parental involvement. A few small differences though can be highlighted; although all parents have very high aspirations for their children, Black parents aspirations are the highest by a few percentage points, especially with regards to class III and IV. With regards to figure 3.2., Asian parents of class IV (lower supervisory and technical occupations) and Black working class parents are those who most frequently talk to teachers about their children's education (although the percentages are just above 10 percent). The fact that those parents have more frequent meetings with teachers might suggest, though, that their children have special needs or school-related issues. Overall, most parents talk to the teachers once a term or less; among

those, black parents of class II (lower supervisory and professionals) and class III (small owners), and Asian parents are slightly overrepresented. Although there are very small differences among social and ethnic groups, White English parents tend to be those who show the lowest level of involvement in their children's education.

Looking at figure 3.3, the results are quite unexpected; there are no differences in the distribution of groups of parents with regards to their help with children's homework. This might be related to the way the question is formulated; responses might have been more accurate with a larger number of response categories, instead of a two category option. However, this result (along with the overall results) could be biased by the sensitive nature of the topic: parental lack of participation in children's education can be considered quite negatively by others, therefore parents might feel a social pressure to give a positive response when interviewed face to face.

To put some more light on the issue figure 3.4 was added. Although the differences among groups of parents are still very small, it suggests that Black parents of class I and III supervise their children's homework much more regularly compared to all the other groups of parents.

Finally, concerning parental feelings towards school, figure 3.6⁶³ shows the same situation highlighted by the previous charts: no significant differences between parents from different social class and ethnicity. Overall, very few parents strongly disagree with the statement, and the results suggest that all parents feel at ease when it comes to school matters.

⁶³ Although I did not present the distribution of other variables about feeling towards school and education, the results go according to those in figure 6.

Figure 3.1: Parental aspirations by social class and ethnicity

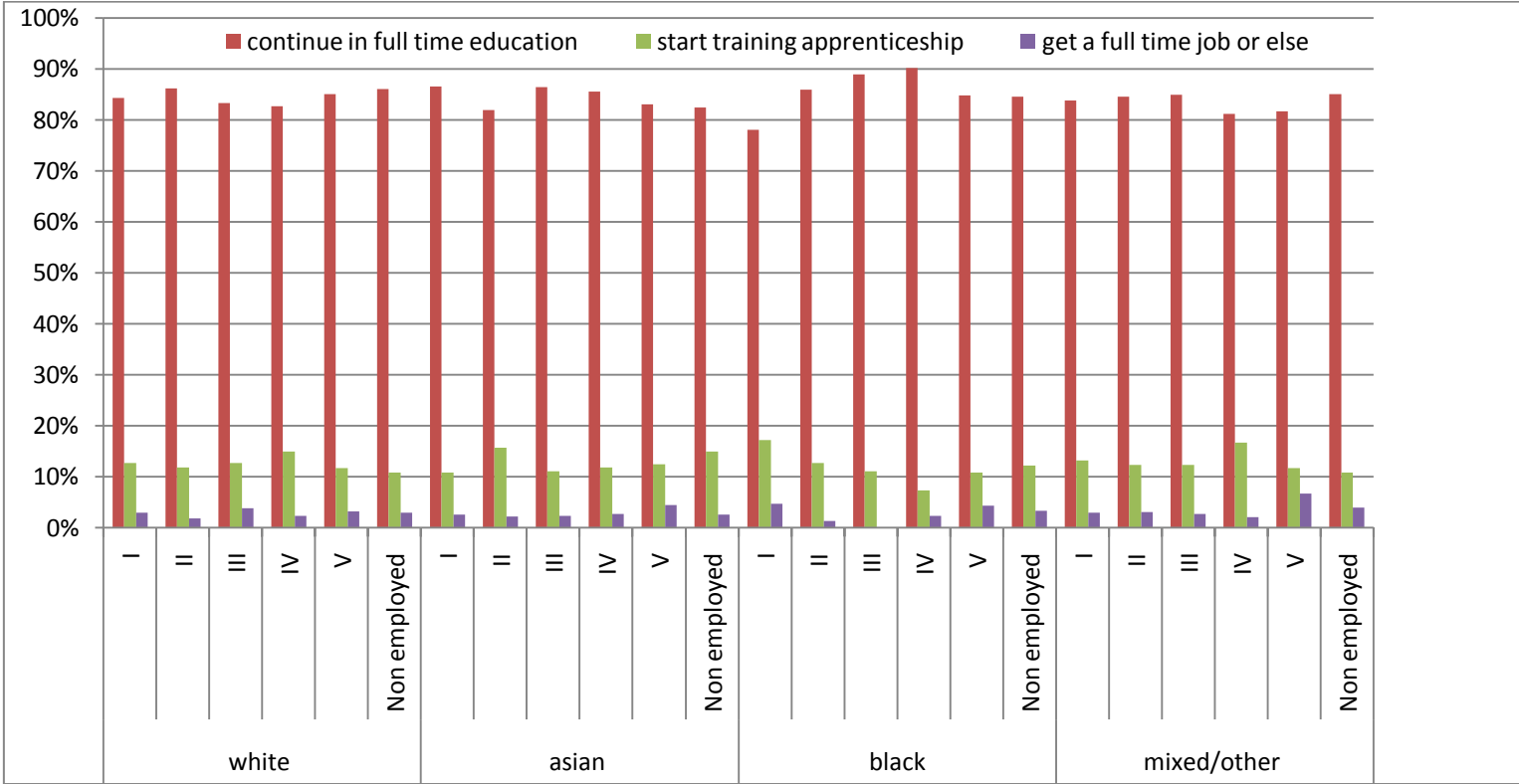


Figure 3.2: How often parents speak to teachers by social class and ethnicity

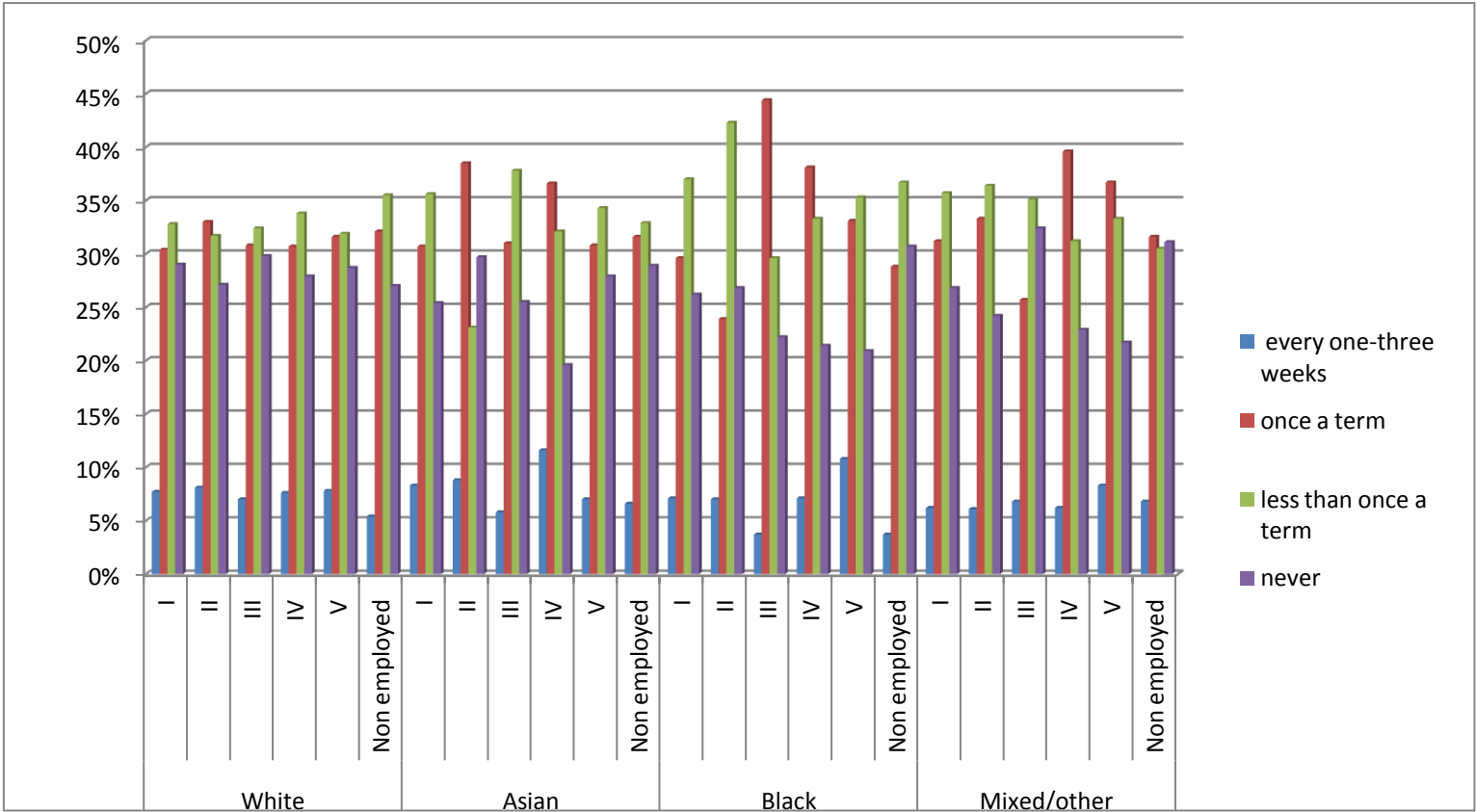


Figure 3.3: Distribution of the variable 'parents help with homework' by social class and ethnicity

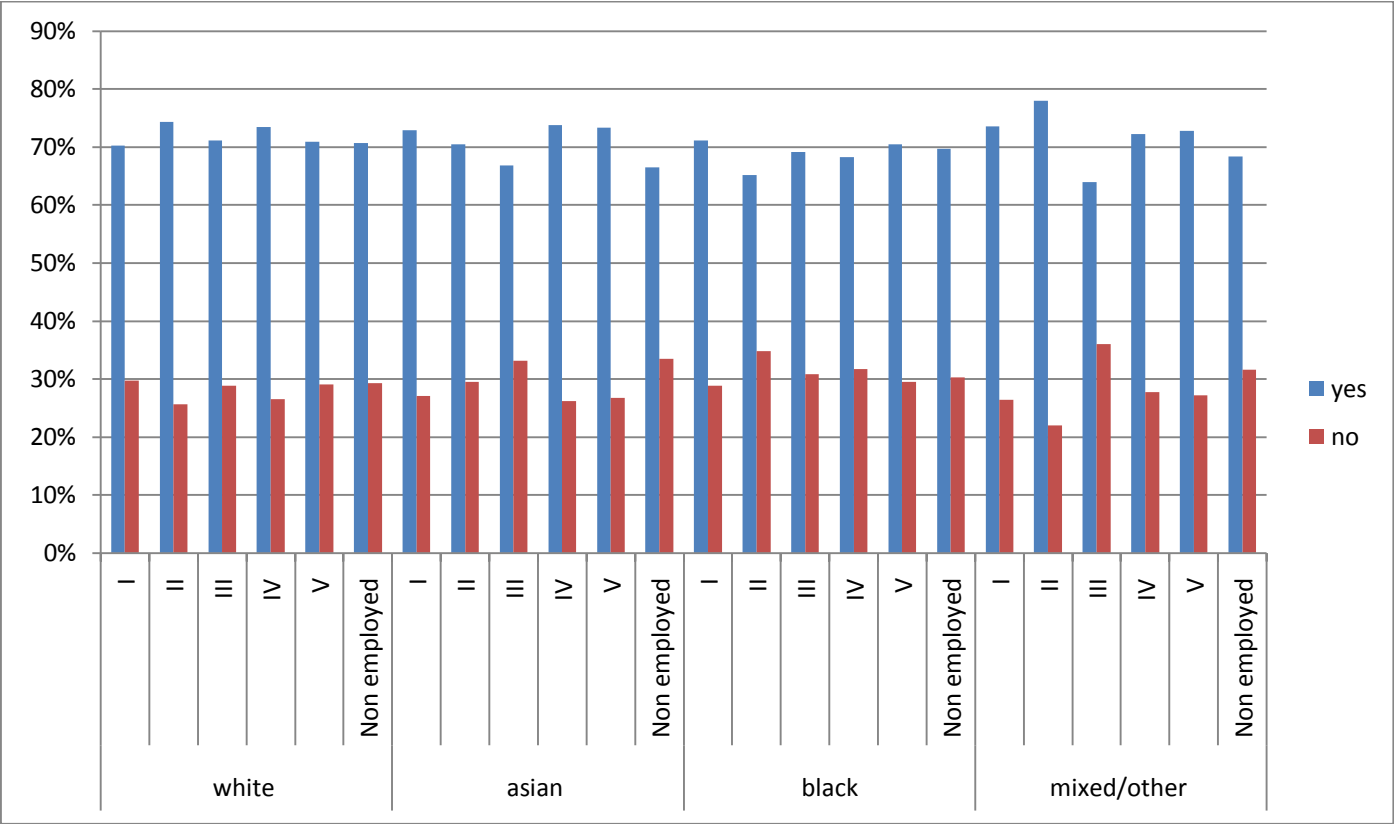


Figure 3.4: parents make sure pupils do homework by social class and ethnicity (row percentages)

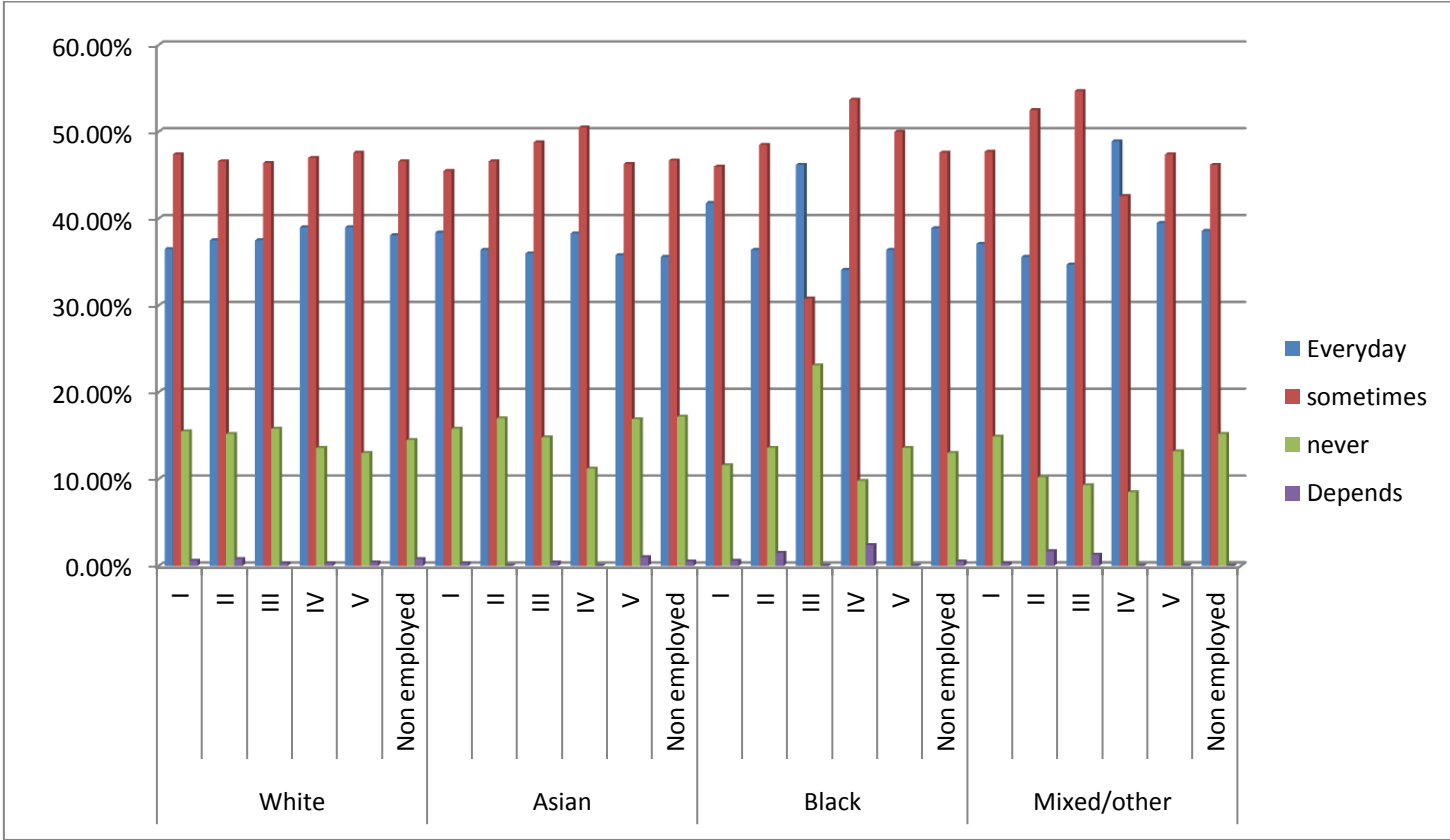
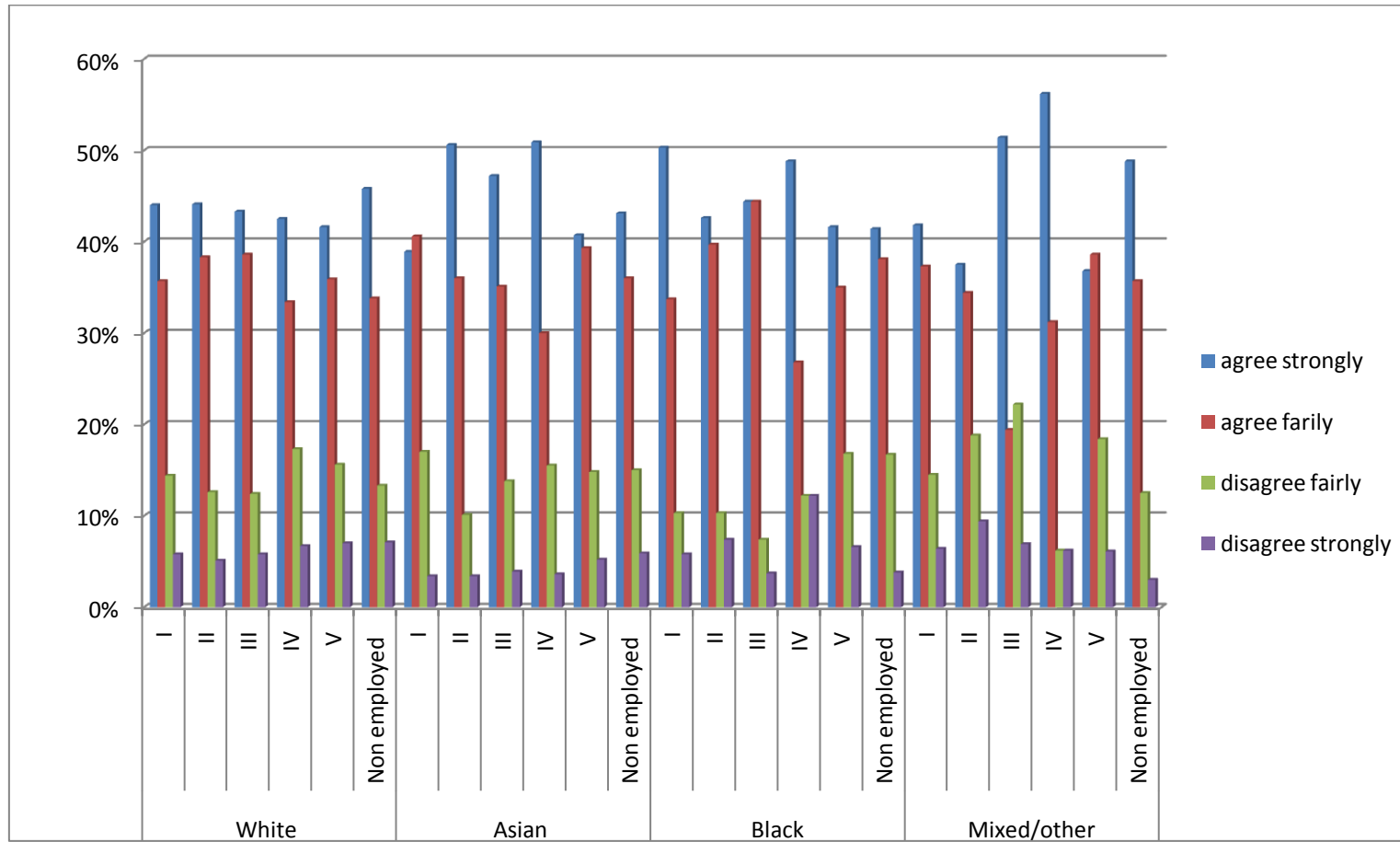


Figure 3.5: Answer to the question 'school make it easy for me to get involved in my pupil's education' by social class and ethnicity



3.5 Who are the parents mostly involved in their children's education?

In this section we will present some tables concerning the relationship between the three types of parental involvement in education and children's school choices in year 12. Table 3.4 presents the distribution of pupils' current activity by social class and ethnicity; in general, as expected, pupils of higher social class are mostly doing A-levels and very few of them are in a full-time job or doing something else, and the percentages change as we go down the social ladder, with less pupils choosing A-levels and more of them starting a job or apprenticeship schemes and else⁶⁴. The only exception is for Black pupils, where pupils in class III are those who choose A-levels most and the other options less than pupils of higher social background. Concerning ethnic groups, among Asians, almost 95% stayed in school and started A-levels, followed by almost 89% among Black pupils; the lowest percentage (less than 77%) studying for A-levels can be found among White pupils. The latter also have the highest rate currently in a full-time job (just above 14%) or starting apprenticeship schemes (18%) or something else (almost 28%). The difference between Asian and White pupils, concerning the category of those studying for A-levels, is of 18 percentage points for the highest rate and of 26 percentage points for the lowest. Also, while almost 6% of White pupils in the salariat class entered the labour market, no ethnic minority pupils have chosen the same option.

⁶⁴ In this category the majority (60%), are those pupils who are non employed and still looking for a full-time job, while the remaining percentages are pupils in part-time jobs (25%), or NEET (a 15%).

Table 3.4: Pupils current activity (at age 16-17) by social class and ethnicity (row percentages)^a.

		Pupil Current Activity				N
		Full-time job	A-levels	Apprenticeship/training	Else	
White	I	5.6	76.8	9.3	8.2	3703
	II	8.6	65.9	14.1	11.4	687
	III	13.2	56.9	15.1	14.8	729
	IV	14.4	52.1	18.2	15.3	620
	V	10.0	50.1	17.9	22.0	1115
	Non employed	7.8	47.3	17.3	27.7	747
	Total	621	4947	995	1038	7601
Asian	I	0	94.5	1.6	3.8	366
	II	1.1	90.2	2.2	6.5	92
	III	0.7	85.4	7.5	6.4	295
	IV	0.9	86.7	6.2	6.2	113
	V	1.6	85.0	6.9	6.6	319
	Non employed	1	74.0	11.3	13.7	693
	Total	16	1563	137	162	1878
Black	I	1.5	86.6	6.4	5.5	328
	II	1.4	84.5	5.6	8.5	71
	III	0	88.9	3.7	7.4	27
	IV	2.4	76.2	14.3	7.1	42
	V	1.4	78.2	7.0	13.4	142
	Non employed	1.4	81.8	7.7	9.1	220
	Total	12	691	59	68	830
Mixed Other	I	2.6	83.7	5.8	7.8	344
	II	4.5	72.7	12.1	10.6	66
	III	3.9	75.0	9.2	11.8	76
	IV	0	76.0	6.0	18.0	50
	V	4.2	74.2	9.2	12.5	120
	Non employed	2.2	69.8	9.5	18.4	179
	Total	24	645	66	100	835

^aHighlighted in pink are the highest percentage of pupils in A-levels and the lowest percentage in the other categories, highlighted in yellow is the opposite situation.

After describing the general picture of the pupils in the sample, let's take a look at the distribution of pupils' current activity by the type of parental involvement and social class and ethnicity (table 3.5). Overall, the results mirror the situation already discussed; differences among social classes or ethnicity are not detectable, i.e. there is little relation between the type of parental involvement and the structural variables considered.

Generally speaking, the higher the social class the higher the rate of pupils who entered A-levels, while there is no clear pattern for those who entered a full-time job; pupils whose parental involvement in education was the lowest are those most represented in full-time jobs, apprenticeship schemes and else and this is true for all the social classes. In the same way, pupils with a high level of parental involvement mostly enter A-levels. Some exceptions can be found among pupils of the higher salariat class (5%), and class IV (non-manual occupations) (10%) who, despite a fair and very high level of parental involvement, are in a full-time job. Moreover, with regards to pupils advantaged by a high level of parental involvement, they are not overrepresented among pupils studying for A-levels in the salariat class (79%). Parental involvement seem to make some more difference in classes IV and V, where there are almost 10 percentage points difference between parents who are very involved and those who are not at all involved, with regards to entering A-levels.

Finally, table 3.6 takes into account ethnicity; in general the higher the parental involvement the higher the rate of pupils studying for A-levels and the lower the percentages of pupils in full-time jobs and apprenticeships. There are some exceptions: parental involvement does not largely affect White English pupils'; while it seems more important for Black students (there are 16 percentage points difference

between parents who are very involved and those who are not at all involved with regards to entering A-levels). On the other hand, Asian pupils have the smallest differences in terms of level of parental involvement but they still manage to enter A-levels with the highest percentage.

Table 3.5: Pupil current activity (at age 16-17) by parental involvement in education and social class. ^a

		Pupil Current Activity				Total
		Full-time job	A-levels	Apprenticeship training	Else	
I	Very	4.3	78.8	9.4	7.5	1445
	Fairly	5.4	79.7	7.1	7.7	2210
	Not very	3.5	80.7	8.4	7.4	848
	Not at all	4.6	75.1	11.0	9.2	173
	Total	22	3714	383	359	4676
II	Very	6.5	70.4	11.5	11.5	260
	Fairly	7.3	70.7	12.2	9.9	426
	Not very	7.8	69.3	13.0	9.9	192
	Not at all	0	66.7	11.1	22.2	27
	Total	63	635	110	97	905
III	Very	8.2	68.6	11.2	12.1	331
	Fairly	8.9	65.4	13.1	12.6	541
	Not very	8.8	65.9	11.2	14.1	205
	Not at all	10.0	65.0	22.5	2.5	40
	Total	97	742	140	138	1117
IV	Very	10.3	62.3	15.1	12.3	252
	Fairly	11.8	59.1	14.2	15.0	374
	Not very	9.7	58.1	18.7	13.5	155
	Not at all	9.7	51.6	19.4	19.4	31
	Total	88	484	126	114	812
V	Very	7.6	61.7	12.6	18.0	538
	Fairly	6.3	61.5	15.2	17.0	745
	Not very	8.9	59.7	14.3	17.1	315
	Not at all	6.8	52.7	18.9	21.6	74
	Total	121	1017	240	294	1672
Non employed	Very	2.5	64.0	13.4	20.1	553
	Fairly	4.2	63.2	13.1	19.5	873
	Not very	5.4	61.6	14.2	18.7	331
	Not at all	3.1	73.4	7.8	15.6	64
	Total	71	1157	240	353	1821

^aHighlighted in pink are the highest percentage of pupils in A-levels and the lowest percentage in the other categories, highlighted in yellow is the opposite situation.

Table 3.6: Pupil current activity (at age 16-17) by parental involvement in education and ethnicity.^a

		Pupil Current Activity				
		Full-time job	A-levels	Apprenticeship/training	Else	Total
White	Very	7.5	64.5	13.5	14.4	2351
	Fairly	8.8	65.3	12.4	13.6	3557
	Not very	7.9	65.6	13.3	13.3	1432
	Not at all	6.6	60.7	16.9	15.8	272
	Total	620	4942	996	1054	7612
Asian	Very	0.2	84.5	7.5	7.9	560
	Fairly	1.2	82.4	7.1	9.2	910
	Not very	0.6	82.8	7.4	9.2	338
	Not at all	2.5	82.5	7.5	7.5	80
	Total	16	1569	138	165	1888
Black	Very	1.5	84.9	4.6	8.9	259
	Fairly	1.2	84.4	7.7	6.7	405
	Not very	1.7	79.5	9.7	9.1	176
	Not at all	3.1	68.8	12.5	15.6	32
	Total	13	724	64	71	872
Mixed/other	Very	3.2	80.1	7.6	9.0	277
	Fairly	1.5	75.8	7.3	15.4	397
	Not very	6.2	74.5	9.7	9.7	145
	Not at all	3.2	77.4	3.2	16.1	31
	Total	25	655	65	105	850

^aHighlighted in pink are the highest percentage of pupils in A-levels and the lowest percentage in the other categories, highlighted in yellow is the opposite situation.

3.6 Regression Analysis

Although the descriptive statistics in the previous section show no particular association between pupils' school choice and the three types of parental involvement, we will present here the regression analysis.

Table 3.7 presents the correlation coefficients matrix of the three dimensions of parental involvement in education, the dependent variable and the control variables

described earlier in the chapter. We applied Spearman's correlation to be able to include the continuous variables (the factors coefficients and GCSEs scores) and the categorical ones (parental education and social class are considered as ordinal, while the remaining variables are coded as binary: pupil's current activity and educational aspirations are coded as *entering A-levels* vs. *else*; and ethnicity is coded as *White* vs. *ethnic minority groups*).

Firstly, it can be observed that the three dimensions are correlated to one another, although the relation is not very strong. Generally speaking, most of the variables with significant associations are weakly related. Also the association between participation in school-related activities and help with homework is positive; while there is a negative association between feelings towards education and the other dimensions of parental involvement. None of the dimensions is associated with social class, ethnicity or parental education, while participation in school-related activities is negatively associated with gender and positively associated with pupils' aspirations in year 11 of education. Parental feelings towards school are negatively correlated with the GCSE score (indicating the more positive the feelings the more positive the GCSE score); while parental help with homework is positively related to GCSEs score and pupils' aspirations in year 11.

Table 3.7: Correlation coefficients matrix

	(1)Participation in school	(2) Feelings towards school	(3) Help with homework	Gender	Ethnicity	Social class	GCSEs score	Parental education	Pupil's aspirations
Pupil's current activity	.006	-.015	-.006	-.101**	-.165**	.159**	.012	.198**	-.007
(1)Participation in school	-	-.055**	.136**	-.018*	.005	.007	.015	.001	.217**
(2) Feelings towards school	-	--	-.292**	-.002	-.011	.013	-.205**	.005	-.011
(3) Help with homework	-	-	-	-.004	.005	-.003	.024*	.014	.023*
Gender	-	-	-	-	.033**	.010	-.012	.013	-.009
Ethnicity	-	-	-	-	-	.226**	.002	.180**	-.004
Social class	-	-	-	-	-	-	.003	.581**	.004
GCSEs score	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.006	.000
Parental education	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.010

** p<.001 *p<.05

Concerning the regression models, table 3.8 presents two models: the first one only includes the structural variables; the second one adds the three dimensions of parental involvement in children's education.

Concerning the structural variables in the first model, results go according to previous findings in several studies. It can be observed that GCSE score, family background and, in particular, ethnic origin have the biggest effects on pupils' school choices at age 16. Having better educated parents is also effective in order to increase the odds to enter A-levels, as the results show for pupils with parents with a university degree and higher education qualification. Children who live with one parent also have higher odds to be in a full-time job at age 16, as well as pupils with a high number of siblings living in the house with them. With regards to pupils' educational aspirations before the end of compulsory school, their effect is not very strong and it mostly concerns the odds to enter A-levels.

Moving to the second model it can be observed that the measures of goodness of fit do not indicate any improvement; also the coefficients of the structural variables remain largely unvaried. With regards to the dimensions of parental involvement, only (2) - feelings towards education - indicate some positive effects on the odds of pupils to enter apprentice/training programmes with respect to getting a full-time job at age 16-17⁶⁵.

Finally, concerning the hypothesis of different levels of parental involvement when considering different social classes and ethnicities, table 3.8 confirms what we have

⁶⁵ These results change when dimension 3 –help with homework – is excluded from the model. Considering only dimension (2), in particular, the coefficients indicate positive odds to enter A-levels and apprenticeship/training programmes compared with entering a full-time job. The effects though are still quite small.

been discussing so far in this chapter: the lack of interaction effects between types of parental involvement and social and ethnic background⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ The results of interaction effects are not reported in table 3.8, but they were all tested in the analyses, without significant results.

Table 3.8: Multinomial logistic regression models for the likelihood to stay in school after the end of compulsory education.

	Enter A-levels ^a	Enter Apprentice/training	Else	Enter A-levels ^a	Enter Apprentice/training	Else
	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)
Intercept	1.80 (.23)**	.40 (.26)	.86 (.25)**	1.82 (.23)**	.44 (.26)	.88 (.26)**
Males	-.62 (.09)**	-.07 (.10)	-.27 (.10)**	-.62 (.09)**	-.08 (.11)	-.27 (.10)**
GCSEs score ^b	.08 (.01)**	.05 (.02)*	-.02 (.02)	.08 (.01)**	.05 (.02)*	-.02 (.02)
Social class ^c						
I	.36 (.13)**	-.13 (.15)	-.33 (.15)*	.37 (.13)**	-.15 (.15)	-.33 (.15)**
II	.23 (.17)	-.07 (.20)	-.33 (.20)	.27 (.17)	-.07 (.20)	-.33 (.20)
III	-.29 (.15)*	-.46 (.18)**	-.58 (.17)**	-.29 (.15)*	-.46 (.18)**	-.58 (.17)**
IV	-.32 (.16)*	-.29 (.18)	-.56 (.18)**	-.32 (.16)*	-.29 (.18)	-.56 (.18)**
Non employed	-.17 (.30)	-.16 (.35)	-.01 (.33)	-.17 (.30)	-.16 (.35)	-.01 (.33)
Missing	.17 (.17)	.31 (.18)	.44 (.18)*	.18 (.17)	.31 (.18)	.44 (.18)*
Ethnic group ^d						
Asian	2.92 (.45)**	1.72 (.44)**	1.35 (.45)**	2.70 (.46)**	1.68 (.49)**	1.35 (.48)**
Black	1.96 (.28)**	.97 (.31)**	.88 (.30)**	2.00 (.28)**	.97 (.31)**	.87 (.30)**
Mixed/Other	1.23 (.21)**	.42 (.25)	.71 (.23)**	1.2 (.21)**	.42 (.25)	.71 (.23)**
Parental education ^e						
Degree	1.66 (.23)**	.21 (.26)	.13 (.25)	1.66 (.23)**	.21 (.26)	.13 (.26)
Higher education	.59 (.18)**	.11 (.21)	-.24 (.21)	.59 (.18)*	.12 (.21)	-.24 (.21)
A-levels	.17 (.17)	.01 (.19)	-.55 (.19)**	.17 (.17)	.01 (.19)	-.55 (.19)**
GCSEs	-.10 (.15)	-.20 (.20)	-.37 (.17)*	-.10 (.15)	-.01 (.17)	-.37 (.17)
Primary and lower	-.49 (.18)*	-1.39 (1.50)	-.35 (.19)	-.49 (.18)**	-.20 (.20)	-.35 (.19)
Missing	.25 (1.05)		-.11 (1.14)	.26 (1.05)	-1.40 (1.50)	-.11 (1.14)

(continued on the next page)

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; Missing data have been included in all the analysis; ^a being in a full-time job is the contrasting category, ^b number of GCSEs passes A*-C; ^c class V is the reference category, ^d white pupils is the reference category, ^e parents with no education is the reference category.

Table 3.8: Multinomial logistic regression models for the likelihood to stay in school after the end of compulsory education
(continued from previous page).

	Enter A-levels ^a	Enter Apprentice/training	Else	Enter A-levels ^a	Enter Apprentice/training	Else
	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)	B (S.E.)
Number of siblings	-.12 (.04)**	-.03 (.05)	-.03 (.05)	-.11 (.03)**	-.03 (.06)	-.03 (.06)
Family structure ^f						
Lone parent	.20 (1.08)	.75 (1.16)	.26 (1.23)	.18 (1.1)	.71 (1.08)	.26 (1.23)
No parent/step family	-.26 (.78)	.33 (.14)*	.36 (.13)**	-.26 (.78)	.32 (.15)*	.36 (.13)**
Pupils' aspirations						
Enter A-levels	.26 (.13)*	.24 (.17)	.25 (.17)	.29 (.15)*	.25 (.17)	.25 (.17)
Enter vocational courses	.33 (.14)*	.28 (.15)	.31 (.15)*	.27 (.13)*	.27 (.15)	.31 (.15)*
Missing	.25 (.22)	.35 (.26)	.13 (.26)	.21 (.22)	.37 (.15)	.14 (.27)
Participation in school (1)				-.13 (.13)	-.04 (.15)	-.20 (.17)
Parental feelings toward school (2)				.09 (.10)	.13 (.50)*	-.11 (.10)
Help with homework (3)				.05 (.07)	.07 (.08)	.04 (.09)
N	12090			12090		
-2 log likelihood	1.91E+04			1.91E+04		
Pseudo R ²	0.5			.5		

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; Missing data have been included in all the analysis; ^a being in a full-time job is the contrasting category, ^f married/cohabiting couples is the reference category.

3.7 A different approach: qualitative interviews

The qualitative interviews were conducted with students aged 15-16 in two different schools in the Midlands and with pupils aged 16-17 attending an apprenticeship scheme in London⁶⁷. The focus of the interviews was to understand the students' school choices at the end of year 11 in the light of their relationships with peers, family and the teachers. One of the areas of investigation was the role of parents in students' everyday lives and their involvement in their children's education. Generally speaking, the students' accounts indicate clear differences in parental behaviour according to social class and ethnicity. Although there is a lot of information concerning the dimension of participation in school-related activities and help with homework, there is no information with regards to parental feelings towards school.

On one hand, the students reported that ethnic minority parents are the pushiest for their children to get a good education and although they do participate in school-related activities, they do not have the ability and knowledge to help with homework. On the other hand, according to the students' accounts many White English parents from a working class background do not express a preference for their children's future plans and let them make their own decisions; they also participate in school-related activities and, again, their low education keep them from helping their children with homework. Finally, middle class parents are mostly involved in their children's education, according to all the dimensions considered in this chapter.

The rest of this section will describe this different type of parental involvement, directly from the students' point of view.

⁶⁷ The full-detailed description of the qualitative study can be read in chapter 4.

3.7.1 Involvement in school-related activities

School-related activities include, among the others, attending parent-teachers evening at school, talking regularly about the day at school and checking on school-reports. In general, all students report that one or both their parents attend school meetings and speak to the teachers; some parents, though, seem to take this task more seriously than others;

Jessica is an example; she is a white English girl, her mother is a housewife with a PhD in science, her father is a head teacher in a primary school and has a Ba; she lives with both parents and a younger brother:

E: 'Do your parents go to parents' evenings at school? Do they speak with the teachers?'

J: 'Yeah they go to every parents evening. There was one yesterday for my brother and they both went to that. They always write down everything the teachers say.'

Saima has a different experience; she is of Pakistani ethnicity (second generation immigrant), her mother is a housewife and has no formal qualifications, her father owns a small grocery shop and has primary school education (achieved in Pakistan); she lives with both parents, one sister, four brothers and two sisters in law and their two children:

E: 'Do your parents go to parents' evenings at school? Do they speak with the teachers?'

S: 'Yes, my dad goes to parents evening cause he understands better than my mum, but they both talk to the teachers about my progress and stuff.'

Arren also provide a different example; he is a white English boy, his mother works as a secretary at the local council, his father works in a factory; he lives with both parents, he has an older brother who does not live with them:

E: 'Do your parents go to parents' evenings at school? Do they speak with the teachers?'

A: 'My mum always goes to parent's evenings, because my dad just falls asleep.'

Whether parents talk to their children about their day at school or not seems to be related mainly to parents being too busy with their jobs; sometimes though it is pupils who prefer not to talk about school and even when they are asked by parents they would be very vague about it.

Following are some examples:

Jessica (see previous page for her details):

E: 'Do you talk with your parents about your day at school?'

J: 'Yes because they like ... ask me...otherwise I wouldn't tell them.'

Arafa is a girl of Bangladeshi ethnicity (born in England); she lives with her mother, who is unemployed and a younger brother:

E: 'Do you talk with your parents about your day at school?'

A: 'Every day when I go back from school my mum is like: so what did you do at school today, and so I tell her.'

Saima (see previous page for her details):

E: 'Do you talk with your parents about your day at school?'

S: 'I don't; they are too busy. My dad goes to work and come back in the evening and he is too tired. My mum is always running around the house and hardly has time,

but when they do have time I would tell them the funny things that happened in school and stuff.'

James is a white English boy; his mother is a child career and has GCSEs level education, his father works in a factory and has some vocational education (he was not sure about it); he lives with both parents and has an older sister who is at university:

E: 'Do you talk with your parents about your day at school?'

J: 'It depends, because if it's after school, in the car we just talk about the school, but not into much detail, I don't really like to talk about it.'

Concerning school reports, all parents' check them and most of them would take their time to discuss them when the grades achieved are not as good as expected;

Rhiannon, is a white English girl, her mother is a Maths teacher in a secondary school and her father is a medical drugs inspector; they both have a BSc; she lives with both parents and one brother and one sister:

E: 'Do you talk with your parents about your school reports?'

R: 'Yeah, I do.'

E: 'Are your parents happy about your school performance and school results?'

R: 'My dad is, [mum] doesn't seem to think that B is as good.'

E: 'And do you feel their opinion is important?'

J: 'I would do revision is she [mum] is pushing me to do it, but it's only to keep her quiet.'

Jim, is a boy of Black African ethnicity; his mother is a housewife and has no formal qualifications, his stepfather works for the local council and has secondary education; he lives with his mother and one younger brother (he has other three stepbrothers and two stepsisters but they do not live with them):

E: 'Do you talk with your parents about your school reports?'

J: 'Yes, all the time, but it is usually good so we don't really talk about it.'

E: 'Are your parents happy about your school performance and school results?'

J: 'Yeah, they are. They tell me all the time.'

Arren (see page 168 for reference):

E: 'Do you talk with your parents about your school reports?'

A: 'I just hand them but i don't want to talk about it. Because they would say you have a c and you know...'

E: 'Are your parents happy about your school performance and school results?'

A: 'Yes, I have got As and Bs and Cs. And they are fine about that.'

Overall, there are no big differences in these students' accounts in the level of parental involvement in school-related activities among parents of a different background. While the students' accounts suggest that both parents of middle class background tend to attend parents' evenings, there is no relation between social and ethnic differences in the routine of talking about the day at school or discussing school reports.

3.7.2 Parents' aspirations

The fact that all parents are somehow involved in their children's education does not mean that they all have the same high aspirations concerning their children's education and future plans. The results in chapter 2 already suggested that and the qualitative data largely support it. While the topic will be discussed in depth in the next chapter, we will highlight here some main differences among parents concerning aspirations for their children.

As expected, middle class parents have high aspirations and want their children to be high achievers, as they were. For this reason, middle class students mainly describe their parents as pushy and always trying to address them towards some type of subject or courses, which are considered more prestigious.

Going back to Jessica's account (see page 168 for reference):

E: 'Did your parents help you with your decision for next year?'

J: 'Yeah they want me to go to university.... So they said why don't you go to sixth form, so then you can decide what university course to choose. My mum is a very science-y person and wanted me to do biology and stuff.'

Working class parents are not pushy for their children to go to university or choose a particular course and they usually leave these decisions to the pupils, offering their support for anything they decide to do.

Sara is a white English girl; her mother works in a pre-school and has an NVQ qualification, her father is a technical engineer and has a BSc; she lives with both parents and her twin sister; she also has an older brother at university:

E: 'Did your parents help you with your decision for next year?'

S: 'Not really, my mum and my dad they don't really mind what I do as long as I enjoy it. Now I am doing the subjects that I want to do and I enjoy it... I probably would go to University but I am waiting to decide.'

Ethnic minority parents, especially those coming from a working class background, are different from White English parents in the same economic situation: they have high aspirations for their children, as they want for them what they could not achieve themselves. For this reason they are very pushy and want their children to be high achievers.

Jim (see page 171 for reference):

E: 'Did your parents help you with your decision for next year?'

J: 'My parents always told me it's not an option not to go to university, no matter what... my whole life. They wanted me to be a civil engineer, but I want to be a teacher first and then go into politics.'

3.7.3 Help with homework

While participating in school-related activities and having high aspirations for their children does not require a high level of knowledge and expertise, helping with homework largely depends on it; for this reason parents can be divided in a dichotomy: on one hand there are well-educated (middle class) parents, on the other hand there are parents with a low level of education.

Below is a passage from Rhiannon's account (see page 171 for reference):

E: 'Do your parents help you with homework?'

R: 'Yeah. My dad does mostly, because I don't ask my mum, she gets a bit strict.'

E: 'So do you ask your dad? Would your mum offer to help as well?'

R: 'Yeah. My mum would offer if she thinks I am falling behind class.'

When parents cannot help, pupils can count on their older siblings; not only for homework, but also for advice and information concerning school and subject choices.

Samantha is a white English girl; her mother is a qualified nurse and her father is a pilot and works for British airways; she lives with both parents and an older brother:

E: 'Do your parents help you with homework?'

S: 'No, usually my brother helps me, because most of the things I need my parents don't know about, like maths and German.'

When asked about her choice of course for next year, Samantha's answer is as follows:

S: 'I knew quite a lot about it [she is going to apply for the international baccalaureate course] because my brother is doing it.'

Ethnic minority students, who do not have older siblings to go for help, are those who struggle most with homework; on one hand they know that their parents cannot help them, even if they offer to, but on the other hand they do not want to make them feel bad about it, like in the case of Arafa (see page 169 for reference):

E: 'Do your parents help you with homework?'

A: 'I don't really need help with homework because I know what to do, if I do need help - because my mum is not really able to, you know she wasn't born in this country and she wouldn't know - I would try to finish that in school, before going home.'

3.8 Discussion

The fact that parental involvement plays a large role in the school decisions of their children has been proved in several studies. Whether parental involvement actually differs considering economic and ethnic background is less clear. Out of the three dimensions of parental involvement that were outlined in this chapter – participation in school-related activities, aspirations, and help with homework - only two proved to be different according to social class and ethnic origins. These results, though, come from the qualitative interviews, as the quantitative analyses gave some different results. What we learned from the quantitative data is that there are some small differences in terms of the type of parental involvement at a descriptive level, but these differences are not confirmed by the regression models.

These results are not very different from those achieved from Ho & Willms (1996), which do not support the claims that parents with a higher SES are more involved in their children's education. In particular, social class was not related at all with the level of home supervision and just weakly related with the other dimensions. Differences among ethnic groups, in terms of parental involvement are also small, although the graphs did show a general higher percentage of Black parents participating more in their children's education (H1a).

The qualitative interviews suggest that parental aspirations and encouragement are a very influential type of parental involvement; parents who support and encourage their children to be high achievers, also advising on subjects and courses to choose, are the most effective in

terms of their children's school success. These results largely support the status attainment literature (Kahl, 1953; Sewell et al., 1968, 1969), which might be based on a simple principle, but it has the right focus. It also confirms Mau's claim (1997) that parental encouragement and aspirations are far more powerful than other type of involvement, such as help with homework, to ensure children's school success. The majority of parents might have high aspirations for their children, as the results in chapter 2 showed⁶⁸, but that is not enough; high aspirations need to be transmitted to the pupils and they also need to translate in guidance throughout school decisions. The higher aspirations of middle class students can, in fact, be associated with these practices. All middle class students would describe their parents as pushy and 'too' involved in their education, as they would not allow them to make the 'wrong' school choices. This also involves the dynamics of school choice: some middle class students would report, in fact, that their parents strongly advised them to remain in the same school for sixth form, instead of going to a college⁶⁹, because it was a better school.

This dynamic confirms previous findings by Ball et al. (2000) and Reay and Ball (1998); they indicate the existence of different mechanisms of school choice at the secondary level: middle class parents are more likely to 'push' their children for a particular secondary school; mothers, in particular, have the responsibility to talk to the child and get his/her consent about going to this school, to collect information about schools, and, once in school, they are more involved in the parent-teacher relation. Middle class parents are deeply involved in the choice of school for their children, in a way that does not leave any aspect of the choice to the children themselves. They are interested in the quality and prestige of the school and children need to be guided through what is best for them. On the other hand, working class parents

⁶⁸ The results in the regression models showed that parental aspiration did not incorporate the direct effects of social class.

⁶⁹ The school we refer to is at the top range of secondary school in England. It offers good standard of education, outstanding care and guidance for the students and excellent facilities.

usually prefer their children to go to the school they themselves attended or the one in the neighbourhood, where also their children's friends go.

Although working class parents might have high aspirations for their children, their approach is different. Mainly, they leave the choice of the school (course and subjects) to their children, who report that their parents will be happy with anything they choose as long as they are happy in the first place. This practise clearly indicates that working class parents feel 'out of place' when it comes to school and that they cannot give advice in something they did not experience themselves.

A different dynamic can be observed for ethnic minority parents. Their behaviour is, in fact, much closer to middle class parents, compared to working class ones, despite their economic and cultural background. As working class ethnic minority students reported during interviews, dropping out of school before completion of tertiary education is not an option acceptable to their parents. Moreover, in various cases, parents' aspirations do not stop at the level of education they want for their children to achieve, but it includes also the type of job they would like for them. Professions, such as medical doctor and engineer, are usually what parents have in mind for their children, although in most cases pupils intend to follow a different career path. The fact that parents have such high aspirations and encourage their children to highly achieve reflects on the students' perspectives: they all report that going to university has always been in their plans, and they work really hard for it.

According to previous findings by Basit (1996), Asian Muslim girls living in Britain have a great desire for upward mobility; mostly they show the ambition of becoming doctors, as it is perceived an occupation with good social status and monetary gain which is available to them, compared to other occupations. Achieving a high qualification is, also, a strategy to avoid unemployment, which, according to Hagell & Shaw (1996), might be the hidden

motive behind their positive reasons (the desire to go to university) for getting a degree, especially if their parents are non employed or have a manual job. One explanation for this mechanism might be related to differences in the social and educational systems of countries. Previous (qualitative) studies in Britain (Modood, 2004; Modood et al., 1997) show that South Asians and Chinese pupils have a better social class and educational capital than that suggested by their parents' occupations, which was depressed by migration effects and discrimination in the labour market. Some of the ethnic minority students in our sample, in fact, point out that their parents did have a qualification in the country they migrated from, but it was not recognised in Britain.

The third type of parental involvement considered – help with homework – proved, in the qualitative study, to be a practice of well-educated parents. As expected, poorly educated parents and ethnic minority parents (who do not master the English language), cannot help their children with homework. They do offer, though, as the students reported, although they would not be able to help in practise. In fact, several students in the qualitative sample point out that they prefer not to ask their parents for help, as they perceive it almost upset them not being able to help. The fact that parents cannot help does not represent an issue, though, when older siblings are available. Most of the working class students, in fact, turn to their older siblings, not only for help with homework, but also to get information and advice concerning future plans⁷⁰. There are no studies available in the UK or the US which suggest the importance of siblings in school success⁷¹. The only findings concerning siblings are in the frame of the effect of family structure and number of siblings on pupils' educational

⁷⁰ As it will be discussed in the next chapter, in fact, siblings not only help, but become role models for school choice and future plans, when parents cannot be of help and do not have the knowledge necessary.

⁷¹ The only study available on the role of siblings in school success is the one by Ceja (2006). Analysing college aspirations of Chicana students, interviews highlight the crucial role of older siblings as sources of information about colleges and in helping with college applications.

attainment⁷². Even when there are no older siblings, pupils seem to find alternative sources of help other than their parents, such as doing homework with classmates in school before going back home. For these reasons this type of parental involvement proves not to be crucial for children's school success, compared to aspirations and encouragement.

As we mentioned above, participation in school-related activities does not seem to be related to social and cultural background, but rather to individual characteristics. Some of the prevailing perceptions among educational researchers are that scholastic institutions are responsible for the different level of parental participation, in meetings, PTOs, etc., and in encouraging parents to help their children at home with homework, according to the institutional approach (Ogbu, 1974). This mechanism, tested by Ho & Willms (1996), was not supported by their results, which indicate that a variation of parental involvement can be found not across schools, but within the same school, indicating that differences for parental involvement in education are at the individual level.

In conclusion, the qualitative interviews, as well as the results from the previous chapter, suggest that parental involvement in children's education is mostly down to parental aspirations and expectations on their children's education. This finding can be well-supported by the status attainment literature (Sewell et al, 1968 and following), and the studies focusing on parental encouragement (Kahl, 1953; Bordua, 1960).

⁷² For more reference see the study by Teachman (1987). Findings in this topic have indicated a negative relation between the number of siblings in the family and the quality of pupils' educational attainment.

3.9 Conclusions

This chapter has put some light on the different dimensions related to parental involvement in children's education. On one hand, the quantitative data did not prove very informative and did not give significant results concerning differences in the type of involvement among parents of diverse economic and cultural background; on the other hand, the qualitative data did highlight some differences in parental involvement, some of them comparable to previous international research.

Both quantitative and qualitative data suggested, though, that differences in the participation in school-related activities, such as parent-teacher evenings, cannot be reduced to social and ethnic background, but rather to individual characteristics such as the amount of time available. This result is partly supported by previous research in the US (Ho & Willms, 1996; Mau, 1997), where findings showed small differences among ethnic minorities and the less than crucial importance of this dimension on pupils' school success.

The most effective type of parental involvement in education has proved to be aspirations and encouragement. Although most parents will, in fact, hope for their children to be high achievers, the way they communicate it to their children might make a difference. This is suggested, in particular, by ethnic minority parents, who despite their lack of economic and cultural resources, encourage their children from an early age to work towards a university degree and aspire to a rewarding profession. As the ethnic minority students in the sample report, their parental aspirations become their own aspiration, as they internalise the importance to achieve a good education in order to be advantaged in the labour market.

On the other hand, working class White English parents, in the same economic and cultural situation, fail to encourage their children, leaving them to the task of making their own

decisions and accepting any choice they make, even when it leads them to drop out of school. Although working class parents mask this behaviour as ‘wanting what makes their children happy’, it shows perhaps a lack of confidence in their capacities as advisers for their children’s future. This is certainly something policy makers should target in order to reduce educational inequalities; White English working class parents should be helped to gain a better understanding of what the educational system offers and of the advantages that it provides to pupils future success in life.

Although the quantitative data indicated a very big percentage of parents helping their children with homework, with no particular difference in terms of levels of education, the qualitative data offered a different and more expected picture: only well-educated parents help with homework. The main reason for it is that they have knowledge to be able to help, while this is not the case for parents with low qualifications. This situation, though, does not represent a major issue for children with lower cultural background; older siblings, in fact, step in to help where parents cannot. Siblings have always been underestimated and their role overshadowed by that of parents when, in fact, they represent an important resource for pupils. They can also act as a source of information for subjects and courses and as role models when it comes to school decision making.

On the other hand, disadvantaged students with no older siblings can use different resources, such as doing homework with peers. Some schools, such as the one in our sample, organise an afternoon group called ‘homework club’ where students can have some help from peers and teachers. This option should become part of the activities of all schools, especially those in deprived areas, with a concentration of disadvantaged children.

Chapter 4

Peer group relationships and school decision making at age 15-16: a qualitative study.

The results of chapter 2 showed a strong influence of parents and peers in pupils' school choices at the end of compulsory schooling, while chapter 3 offered some further insights in the way parents affect their children's school choices. This last analytical chapter will focus on the way peers affect each other, both in school matters and future plans.

The role of peer relationships on school choices is an area of study that has been investigated for many years. Following the success of the status attainment theory back in the 1970's (see Duncan et al., 1972; Sewell, Haller & Portes, 1969), several studies have been released testing the theory and improving upon it. Most of the studies, that are the successful ones, are quantitative studies. Although this area of research is characterised by a very sophisticated degree of methodologies and techniques of analysis, the results are somehow limited. What has been achieved is, in fact, related to the overall composition of schools or neighbourhoods, in terms of socio-economic background and how this is correlated with students' school attainment.

One of the most famous studies on peer group effects in school is the one by Evans et al. (1992). Peer groups in school do not appear to have a large effect. The focus is on the effect of teenage pregnancy and school drop out on the behaviour of other students in the same school. Controlling for individual and family characteristics and publicly provided inputs, Evans et al. analysed how the school composition and, in particular, students who were classified as economically disadvantaged affect both the behaviour towards pregnancy and the odds to drop out of school.

Considering the former, peer group effect is, as expected, a significant coefficient indicating a rise in the probability to get pregnant when the percentage of disadvantaged pupils in the school increase. The magnitude of the effect loses importance, by the way, when including control variables that describe family background, such as number of siblings, parents' characteristics and parents' presence at home. Race seems to be very important concerning pregnancy, compared to family income, when controlling for the other family characteristics. Similar results are obtained when considering school dropouts (in this case peer group effect is considered as an exogenous variable). The results show the positive correlation between the unobservable factors that determine a student's peer group and those that determine his propensity to drop out of school. The analysis of peer group as an exogenous variable could be reconsidered, as long as individuals do have a choice concerning the type of school to attend (or for parents to choose for their children) and the fact that even in the school attended they still have a choice concerning the type of pupils they relate to.

An important point when considering peer group effects is, in fact, the assumption about the direction of the relationship: does the individual choose his peers, or are peers given to him, in a certain way? Individuals choose a neighbourhood to live in, which is associated with their economic resources and not always with what represents the preferred choice. But if parents cannot choose the place to live, they can still choose a school for their children. The

British government gives, in fact, some freedom to parents concerning the choice of a school so that children who live in less advantaged areas have the option to attend a better school (in terms of resources), in a different neighbourhood⁷³. This practise can result in the formation of different peer groups, which can be distinguished in peer group at school and peer group from the neighbourhood.

In the study by Robertson & Symons (2003), educational attainment of British pupils at age 11 is analysed as a function of peer group, parental input and schooling. Peer group is considered an endogenous variable therefore it is assumed that individuals cannot choose their peers but rather they are ‘imposed’ on them. Peer group affects students’ attainment in two ways: directly, when pupils help each other with coursework, for instance, and indirectly, through values shared. Individuals’ academic ability is measured by maths and reading test scores at age 7 (results of a combination of genetic inheritance and pre-school parental inputs), while peer group effect is measured as class composition (the percentage of a child’s classmates who have fathers in the top socio-economic group). Streaming is also taken into account as well as parental time spent with children, family size and family background. The results show that attainment at 11 is strongly correlated to the peer group, especially when streamed schools are considered. Family background also has a strong influence and the higher the social class and parents’ education, the higher the pupils’ attainment. The latter is negatively related to the number of children in the family, as well as a full time working mother and an absent father.

⁷³ This concerns in particular the secondary phase and the choice of a school among the comprehensive schools, which are not selective and are generally mixed sex school. The other types of secondary schools include grammar schools, selective on the basis of year 11 examinations, and high schools, not selective but single sex.

In general, quantitative studies on peer group effects can only measure the overall composition of the school or neighbourhoods. Moreover, they tend to consider peer group as an endogenous variable, when, even within a fairly homogenous school, students can still choose who to be friends with. Qualitative research can look at choices and outcomes from the point of view of the participants themselves; what they have planned, the options they have considered and who they have taken notice of.

Qualitative literature in this area of study is limited; most of the research in the UK focuses on the class differentials in school decisions (Reay & Ball, 1998) and mechanisms of school decision making at tertiary level (Ball et al., 2004; Modood, 2004). Some qualitative research on peers' relationship has been carried out by Birch & Ladd (1996) in the US, although it focussed on primary school children. Good peers' relationships are, according to this research, positively associated with school adjustment. Children who are engaged in positive relationships with classmates are likely to feel more comfortable in school and may be better able to take advantage of the social and learning opportunities they encounter in this setting. On the other hand, children who experience peer rejection may develop a negative attitude towards school (Birch & Ladd, 1996). Most of research carried out on peer relationships is in the area of developmental psychology (see Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2002).

The role of peers in school choices is the main focus of this chapter: to understand how peers and also parents and teachers are perceived from an individual's point of view, concerning decisional processes, both for future educational choices and in everyday activities.

Although the sample is quite small, I was able to draw on findings using semi-structured interviews on 15-16 years old pupils from two different comprehensive schools and one apprenticeship scheme programme in England. The interviews were designed in order to gain information about three different areas: the pupils' future plans and the major influences on

them; the pupils' attitude to school and education and things they like to do; and the relationship with their family and friends. Although the main focus of this chapter is peer group effect, I was also able to gain precious information about family, school and more, which gives me the opportunity to draw on some more insights concerning the results of my previous chapters.

The general research questions guiding my study are: 1) what are the pupil's plans/options for the following year? 2) Who are the social influences on pupils' decisions? Who do they relate to for educational matters in particular, such as whether to continue or not in school after the end of compulsory schooling and which course and subjects to choose? 3) Considering peers, do pupils have different circles of friends, such as 'school friends' and 'neighbourhood friends'? If this is the case, who do they relate to for advice? And 4) what is their perception of school and in particular the school environment they attend daily? Do they feel at ease? How are their feelings towards school and school work?

The next section will describe the methodology used, with a particular attention to the characteristics of the schools sampled and their pupils. Following will be a discussion of the students' own accounts.

4.1 Methodology

4.1.1 Study participants

This study is based on interviews of pupils aged 15-16, who are attending their last year of compulsory education in England. The data were collected over two months, in March and April, although the overall study, from the design to the actual data collection, took over six months. Concerning the interviews in the schools, I was granted access to two comprehensive

schools: one in Birmingham (school A) and one in the south area of England (school B). After a few meetings with the headmasters and heads of year 11, some of the teachers helped me to select a sample of students who differ according to social background, ethnicity and gender. Although I was eventually able to conduct interviews, it was very difficult to be granted parental consent (especially for the school B) for those pupils under the age of 16, as time of final examinations was fast approaching and they did not want their children to miss even 10 minutes of class. Concerning the interviews of pupils attending the apprenticeship scheme, it was a much easier and quicker fieldwork. After contacting the Director of the advanced IT apprenticeship scheme in London, I was granted access and could interview the pupils straight away, as I only needed their consent with them all being over 16. As for the schools, the Director and one of the Instructors helped me sampling the pupils, which anyway came from very similar backgrounds and areas. The reason why I decided to include in the sample these pupils (who already finished compulsory school), was primarily to gain a better understanding of the type of individuals that choose an apprenticeship scheme. This part of the fieldwork was, in fact, added after finishing the interviews in the schools. One particular aspect that I noticed from the answers of the pupils in both schools regarding choices after GCSEs, was the preference of different type of courses, from A-levels to BTECs and a sort of dislike or even lack of information for more work-related choices, like apprenticeship schemes. For this reason I decided to do some retrospective interviews, on the basis of the same semi-structured interview used for the other pupils, to put some light on the characteristics and the stories of those pupils who chose to enter an apprenticeship scheme.

Summing up the total number of interviews, I have a final sample of 32 individuals, 18 of whom are girls. Concerning social background, 24 interviewees come from a working class family, while the remaining 8 have a middle class family background. Among the 32 interviewees there are 11 ethnic minority pupils, 6 of whom are girls (see table 1 below).

Table 4.1. Students by ethnicity and social class

	Working class	Middle class	Total
White British	10	9	19
Chinese	1		1
Pakistani	4		4
Bangladeshi	1		1
Black African	3	1	4
Black Caribbean	2		2
Total	21	10	32

4.1.2 The interviews

The questions asked in the interviews were focused on one main topic: students' choices post-year 11 and the social influences around them⁷⁴. Because the interest is in the students' own perspective and their own account of the school decision making process, a semi-structured interview seemed the best approach. It gives, in fact, some degree of freedom to the interviewer to go in depth in some aspects highlighted by the answer of the interviewee (King et al., 1994). The average interview lasted for 12 minutes.

The interviews were used as narratives, according to the biographical approach (Miller, 2003). That is the data is not analysed further using narrative analysis techniques; the aim is to use the students' accounts as real information about their choices and the influences around them (with all the limitations of individuals' memory and the process of recollection). The biographical approach could be also explained as the interpretation of 'personal' or 'human documents' and seek to understand the experiences of individuals' daily lives and

⁷⁴ The complete list of questions can be found in appendix C.

what they consider important in their accounts of past, present and future. The documents mostly used in the biographical research are diaries, letters, biographies and autobiographies, although interviews have become one of those.

I am aware of the possible pitfalls of using selective pieces of data to support a wider theory; for this reason I tried to highlight all the themes that emerged from the students' accounts.

4.1.3 The schools and the apprenticeship scheme

School A

School A is a very deprived school. According to the last Ofsted report (2009), the school provides students with a satisfactory standard of education and shows improvement with respect to the previous years. Despite this, standards remain below the average in Mathematics, English and Science. The school facilities are limited and the teaching quality has been improving recently, thanks to a more stable staff (there used to be a significant turnover).

The school is slightly smaller than average size secondary school (858 pupils in 2009). Just over half of the students are from ethnic minority groups (mostly Asian and some Black Caribbean) and a much higher percentage than average do not speak English as their first language. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is much higher than the national average, as is the number of students with disabilities and special needs.

The school catchment area is limited to the surrounding neighbourhoods, which represent a very deprived area of Birmingham. The curriculum offers numerous subjects from year 7 onwards, such as art, design and technology, information technology, food, expressive arts (including drama, dance, art and music) and personal social and health education. Students

can also choose from a wide range of GCSEs, such as business studies, food technology, citizenship, physical education, sociology, triple science, geography, history, resistant materials, textiles and photography.

Although the school started offering sixth form from September 2010, the proportion of students staying after year 11 is very low (around 30 per cent). The school offers a wide range of vocational qualifications, such as BTECs in ICT, art, health and social care, media studies; skills for life, carpentry and joinery and manufacturing through resistant materials; and some NVQs, such as NVQ drama and international business communication⁷⁵.

School B

School B is at the top range of secondary schools. The latest Ofsted report (2007), pictured the school as provider of good standard of education, outstanding care and guidance for the students, which is also what I could observe in my days of fieldwork in the school. The facilities are excellent and the quality of teaching was praised by the same students in the sample.

The number of students on Roll in 2009 was 1,508, which remained stable from the past years and is much higher than the national average for secondary schools (975 in 2009). Considering the gender composition, there is the same percentage of boys and girls, while in terms of ethnicity, the school has one of the lowest rate of ethnic minority pupils (7.6 v the national average of 20.6), and pupils whose first language is not English. In terms of ethnic groups, the school has pupils from a mixed ethnic background, Asian and Chinese mostly. The rate of pupils eligible for free school meals is also much below the national average (4.3 VS. 14.5). Not far from the school area there is an RAF base, although this does not highly

⁷⁵ For a description of the courses and qualifications see appendix 1.

affect the school intake. Only around 13 per cent of pupils have one or both parents working for the RAF and none of them have parents working in the army. The school catchment area is restricted to this particular area and the closest neighbourhoods, while only 10 per cent of pupils come from other areas around Swindon.

Concerning the school offer in terms of facilities, there are modern science labs, an assembly room, a library (which can be used by pupils during school time and after school), music rooms, a computer room and outdoors sport facilities. The curriculum is focused on technology, with different science courses, design and technology and food technology, but also on arts, with art crafts and expressive art lessons. Different foreign language courses are also available. The school offers numerous extra-curricular activities such as sport, music and drama. There is a rock society and numerous school trips abroad are offered every year.

The school also offers sixth form, which attracts pupils coming from other schools in the areas around (only around 50 per cent of pupils attending the school stay on for sixth form), with a wide range of courses at AS-level, A-level, BTEC and the international baccalaureate diploma programme. The subjects offered include science, business studies, languages, psychology, sociology and law studies.

The apprenticeship scheme

The Advanced IT apprenticeship is a programme offered by an IT training company (funded by the government) which train learners for a career in IT, computing or telecoms. It is located in London and lasts for 26 weeks. Pupils are provided with extensive training and practical skills and they are guaranteed a job at the end of the programme. The number of students enrolling in 2009 was around 150, with only 30 per cent of these girls. The ethnic composition is quite mixed, with a very low proportion of White English individuals, and the majority being Asian (mostly Pakistani and Bangladeshi) and Black African Caribbean. The

catchment area of this apprenticeship scheme is the greater London area, Slough and Reading.

The Advanced IT apprenticeship leads to different qualifications: diploma in IT professional competence; level 3 certificate in ICT systems and principles for advanced apprentices; application of number level 2; and communication level 2.

The reason why I included apprentices in the sample is related to the fact that several of them have dropped out of college to join the apprenticeship programme and therefore providing some further insights into the school decision making processes.

According to a report presented by the National statistics office in 2008⁷⁶, the percentage of pupils age 16-18⁷⁷ in full-time education (FTE) and work based learning⁷⁸ (WBL) was 79.7 percent and of this number the rate of pupils in WBL only is 15.8 percent. Breaking down these statistics by age, there is significant decrease of pupils participating in FTE from age 16 to age 18: starting from 81.5 at age 16, the figure goes down to 67.6 at age 17 and 43.8 at age 18. On the other hand, if we consider WBL, the trend is quite different: starting at 11.4 percent at age 16, the rate increase to 16.1 at age 17 and more at age 18, where it reaches 19.7 percent. What these figures suggest is that although the majority of pupils enrol to full-time education (including sixth form, colleges and else) at the end of compulsory schooling, and stay in it until the end of year 13, a significant rate of them drop out or simply change their mind, choosing among the courses offered from the WBL, such as apprenticeship schemes.

⁷⁶ For more information and tables go to <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000849/>

⁷⁷ Age 16 refers to the first year after the end of compulsory schooling.

⁷⁸ WBL refers here also to employer funded training and other forms of training, both full-time and part-time.

4.3 The school decision making from the students' perspective

This section is mainly descriptive and concentrates on the students' characteristics and plans post-year 11. To have a better understanding of the latter it is fundamental to consider the environment the students live in and the influences around them.

As we mentioned earlier on, the students in the sample differ according to gender as well as social and ethnic background. They also differ according to the school they attend, which give them different resources, both educational and social, but this will be discussed in a later section.

Concerning their future plans (in the case of apprentices these are their original choices back in year 11), 29 students are sure they will stay in education at the end of year 11, while 2 students plan to enter the labour market. Among these two students, one of them has already found a job to keep him busy until year 13 when he is planning to start an apprenticeship scheme in the Catering field (and he has already applied for it) and the other pupil plans to work for a few months before entering the apprenticeship scheme in IT. Both these students are White English and come from a working class background. The majority of students are planning to go to sixth form, attending A-levels, while four students intend to enrol on a BTEC course.

Although all the students made some plans after year 11, they can be divided in three groups based on the certainty of their choices and the timing. On one side are students who, without any hesitation, know what their future plan is. Although other options might have been taken into account, this plan was always the first choice. On the other side are students who are still undecided about their future and are weighing different options. In the middle are students

who have recently made up their mind about their choice for next year. Some of them changed their mind during the years and others just started thinking about plans post year 11 during year 10.

Among the pupils who long chose their path after completion of GCSEs are those very confident about their future plans. Not only had they made plans about the next educational stages but they know the job they want to achieve, so that every choice they make is based on that goal. There are also pupils who did not think thoroughly about their future but they are sure they do not want to enter tertiary education but aim to achieve a BTEC or similar to ensure themselves some skills to enter the labour market at age 18. Generally speaking, the consideration that makes the most difference is the attitude to school. Students who like going to school (coursework, class etc.) are, in fact, keen on continuing on A-levels and university, while students who do not like school cannot see themselves sitting for more exams after GCSEs. Grades are also important, as is family advice.

The undecided students and those who just recently made a choice about the future seem to be confused or not aware of all the options available. The lack of guidance from the family is partly responsible for this, along with the uncertainty of their career plans.

The two unhesitating groups will be discussed first, starting with students who intend to enter A-levels. The focus will be on their individual characteristics, although the school attended does make a difference, but that will be discussed in a later section. A particular attention will be given to students currently attending the apprenticeship scheme.

4.3.1 Students who are applying to A-Levels without uncertainty

As was mentioned above, students who, without uncertainty, are applying to study A levels report that they are generally good at school and mostly they enjoy it, which is to say they do not mind coursework and are comfortable with examinations. Alongside this is the thought that vocational courses do not give you the same preparation and, for those who want to go to university, A-levels represent the recognised path to higher education.

Emma is a white English girl at school B; her mother is a medical secretary and has GCSEs, her father is a technical engineer at an Airport and has some vocational qualification; she lives with both her parents and has an older brother who left home:

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

Em: "I am going to college and take some A-levels."

E: "Have you considered different options?"

Em: "Well I was always going to get to sixth form and it's only been in the past couple of weeks that i have decided to go to (another) college actually."

E: "Do you have any job in mind for the future?"

Em: "Hopefully I'll either do nurse or English degree at university and teach... I've always wanted to go to university... It's always been a plan when i was younger, so it's only recently that i changed my mind about going to college and stuff but university has always been the same plan really."

Some of the students have had their minds set on a specific job for many years, so every choice is seen as a step towards this end goal. This is the case of Hazel, who is a black African girl at school B who lives with her aunt and uncle (who she refers to as parents); they both have university degrees achieved in the US, her aunt has an administrative position at Alcatel Company and her uncle is an IT engineer:

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

H: "I am going to sixth form and do A- levels here."

E: "Do you have any job in mind for the future?"

H: "I want to be a paediatrician, so I am going to do the pre-medical course."

E: "Which subject are you going to study?"

H: "Chemistry, biology, physics and psychology."

E: "Did you do any research about universities?"

H: "I want to go to Oxford [University], but if it's not possible I do have a backup plan, I will apply for five universities and see which one I get into. The second one is Cambridge and then Stamford..."

The students, who, like Hazel, are very driven in their future plans, are also very attentive to their grades and they work very hard on their coursework. As Hazel says when asked whether she is involved in any extra-curricular activities:

E: "Do you do any extra -curricular activities? "

H: "No, just homework club [organised by the school]. I am not really into going out after school. I have lots of homework to do."

This relates to another aspect that can be seen in students like Hazel: they like school. They feel at ease in the school environment, do not mind coursework and do not struggle with tests and examinations. Ciaran and Samantha's accounts are an example; they are both white English pupils at school B; Ciaran live with both parents and an older brother; his mother is a primary school teacher and has an NVQ qualification while his father is lorry driver and has primary education. Samantha is a white English girl; her mother is a qualified nurse and her father is a pilot and works for British airways; she lives with both parents and an older brother:

E: "Do you like going to school, in general?"

C: "Yeah, I think coursework is quite useful. Not so hard. It's quite good to set yourself a target and work towards it as much as you can and the teachers help you a lot and give you advice."

S: "Yeah, I like getting to see everyone. Coursework is ok, some lessons are boring. I know it sounds crazy but in some ways I kind of like exams. Not the lead up to them but when I get in there, everything just kicks in and works, I like that."

The fact that they have decided their future plans long ago make their choice of subjects for A-levels much easier compared to those who do not have a future job or a specific university course in mind.

Saima, a girl of Pakistani ethnicity (second generation immigrant), is at school A; her mother is a housewife and has no formal qualifications, her father owns a small grocery shop and has primary school education (achieved in Pakistan); she lives with both parents, one sister, four brothers and two sisters in law and their two children shows no hesitation when explaining her future plans:

"I am hoping to go to college and study A-levels. I want to do chemistry, biology, Maths and psychology. The reason why I chose them it is because I want to do Pharmacy at university. I have been thinking about pharmacy for a few years because it is different from what my family does and it is interesting."

The case of Emma (see page 195 for reference), is different: she will certainly go to university but does not know which course to choose yet, or what kind of job she would like to do in the future. In order to keep her options open she chose different subjects:

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

Em: "I will go to Sixth Form College and do A-levels."

E: "Did you consider different options?"

Em: "Before I just wanted to do sixth form here because I didn't know what to do. I went to see the career's lady and she told me about college and I really liked this."

E: "have you thought about university?"

Em: "I want to go to university but don't know what I am going to do there."

E: "Did you do any research about universities?"

Em: "I mean I know about one university, which is Portsmouth, because my cousin goes there."

E: "Do you have any ideas which course you would like to attend?"

Em: "Not yet. I will wait until second year college cause if I decide to drop anything..."

E: "Do you have any job in mind for the future?"

Em: "Not really, no. At one point I wanted to be a veterinary but it changes like monthly..."

E: "Which subjects are you going to study next year?"

Em: "I have taken four very different subjects, Ancient history, English literature and language, maths and human biology...you can have like one plan but you really need to have a backup plan as well, you can't live off one thing... you need to do a range of things."

Although the main reasons for students to choose A-levels are the desire to get a better education and to achieve a particular job that requires a higher education degree, there is another strong driver: parents' opinions.

On one side are parents with a high level of education; they expect their children to follow their example, so that applying to A-levels is not really a choice but a necessity in order to get into higher education. Sometime expectations do not stop at this level but extend to the field of study their children should embrace, 'advising' them to choose some subjects and not others.

This is the case of Jessica, from school B; she is a white English girl, her mother is a housewife with a PhD in science, her father is a head teacher in a primary school and has a Ba; she lives with both parents and a younger brother:

E: "do you have plans about university?"

J: "Well hmmm recently I thought I would like to be a primary school teacher so I'd have to go to university for that."

E: "Did you consider other options?"

J: "For a while I wanted to be a doctor but then...I am not smart enough for chemistry and all that..."

E: "My mum she's a very science person and she pushed me to do biology as well....I am more good at it than I like it, but it's ok. My parents want me to go to university and now they are ok with me wanting to be a primary school teacher because my dad is a head teacher in a primary school so he is happy about that. ... They would be very happy if I go to university... but as long as I do my A-levels they are happy. If i didn't want to go to sixth form they would be really angry. They talked to me about...they wanted me to change some of my A level choices, they don't want me to do sociology and psychology, they say I should do like maths or English instead. I am like no..."

One theme that emerges from the quote above is the consideration of what pupils like when deciding about the future. What Jessica underlines in her account is that, although she is good at biology, she does not like it and for this reason she would not consider taking it for A-Levels. In the same way, although she understands that her parents would want her to choose more prestigious subjects, such as Maths or English, her choice will eventually settle on the subjects she likes most.

On the other side are parents with low or no education, usually ethnic minority from a working class background; they have high aspirations for their children and they tend to push them to achieve the best they can. They want for their children what they could not achieve for themselves. In some cases they would push their children to study for a specific job, usually a profession such as doctor, lawyer or engineer; although in most cases children would not follow their wishes, having their mind set on another kind of job. The general agreement though is that their plans must include A-levels and a university degree.

The case of Jim, an ethnic minority boy from school A, is very representative of this situation; Jim is a boy of Black African ethnicity; his mother is a housewife and has no formal qualifications, his stepfather works for the local council and has secondary education;

he lives with his mother and one younger brother (he has other three stepbrothers and two stepsisters but they do not live with them):

“I have always wanted to go to university. I want to do history and politics. I have looked into some universities. I have always wanted to go to the best universities. My parents have always told me I have to go to university. It was never an option. BTECs or else have never been an option, although the teachers here have to tell you about all your options. I want to become a teacher first and then go to politics. My mum wanted me to become a civil engineer, and she wanted me to do science subjects, but that wasn't me. But now she's ok with me doing something I like.”

To summarise, there are two main characteristics of students, who without hesitation, intend to apply to A-levels: they want a better education and they are sure they will go to university. They also like school, i.e. they do not mind coursework. Their parents have always ‘encouraged’ this course of action since achieving a good education is what they did, or, in the case of ethnic minority students, it is what they could not achieve for themselves but want for their children.

4.3.2 Students who are applying to vocational courses with no uncertainty

The other group of students who made their mind up long ago about doing a vocational course have one main characteristic in common; they do not like going to school. Their school performance is usually medium- low, as a direct result of that.

Arren is a white English boy at school B; his mother works as a secretary at the local council, his father works in a factory; he lives with both parents, he has an older brother who does not live with them:

E: "what is your plan for next year?"

A: "I got a place in a catering college in Cheltenham. I feel like changing [school] because I have got problems in this school. I have got problems with the teachers."

E: "When did you decide about it?"

A: "I decided back in year 9."

E: "Have you ever considered university?"

A: "I don't want to go to university. I have got lots of As and Bs and Cs, it's ok, but I want to work in catering and move with my auntie in Gloucester."

E: "Do you like school in general?"

A: "I don't like school; I lose attention very quickly. I like football and practical activities. I like moving and cooking, stuff like that. School is boring."

Some of the students find school and coursework, in particular, too hard. They do not like to study and spend time on the books, which make BTECs and similar courses very appealing; plus they do not require sitting for examinations.

Mike is a Black African boy in school A; he lives with his mother, who works as a caterer, and his younger brother. His dad is a road worker and both parents have no formal qualifications:

E: "Why did you choose to apply for a BTEC?"

M: "Because once you have done the classwork, then you have done that piece of work. If you do A-levels then you have to remember all that work for the final examinations."

E: "Have you ever considered applying for A-levels?"

M: "Yes I did, but then you have to do examinations at the end."

Although parents are not usually happy with the decision to move to vocational education (and they keep pushing for them to aspire for a better education, such as A-levels and then higher education) the fact that they themselves have no qualifications is often used as a justification by their children for choosing a vocational course. Going back to Arren's account (see page 200 for reference):

E: "Did your parents advice you in your choice for next year?"

A: "My dad wanted me to go to university because he didn't go and my mum as well because she didn't do the course she wanted to. They also wanted my brother to go to university but he went to work instead, so I will do the same. My mum is not happy about that but my dad understands and he let me be. He did originally want to become what I want to and then he got an apprenticeship with Rolls Royce, so cannot tell me to do whatever he wants. My mum wanted me to do woodwork instead of food cooking because she didn't think I would make it, and I was like I want to live my own life and chose my own things. They also wanted me to do P.E. but I did not. My mum was trying to tell me to go into something different, like what she does, work with the children, social worker, but i did not want to do that and I want to live my life and do my own things."

Another theme that comes across from the quote above and from some other student accounts is the desire for independence. Being able to make their own decisions, although they are different from what their parents would like for them to do, is very important.

For some students, the choice is left almost entirely to them. Parents who do not have a good education do not feel comfortable advising their children in school matters and tend to leave them 'free' to make a choice. Moreover, the general idea that comes across from these students' accounts is a lack of guidance or (more likely) a lack of interest in listening to other people's opinions. These students say that they made up their minds and are very happy with their plans.

Dale is a White English boy in school A; he lives with his mother and two siblings; his mother works as a dinner lady in the school and has O levels:

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

D: "I am going to college and do a BTEC"

E: "When did you decide about it?"

D: "I decided about college last year, but I have always wanted to do a BTEC. I don't want to go to university."

E: Do you have a job in mind you would like to do?"

D: "I want to be a P.E. teacher."

E: "Do you like going to school in general?"

D: "I don't like school, coursework and getting up in the morning."

E: "Did anyone help you with your choice for next year?"

D: "I spoke with the teachers, but I made the choice by myself... no one influenced me... if my parents told me to change college or do something else I wouldn't have, but they are ok with my choice. My mum let me make my own decisions."

Summarising, the main characteristic that can be highlighted in these group of students is the dislike of school and the inclination towards more practical activities, which do not include examinations and the kind. Among these students only one is a girl. Also a common feature is a working class family background, with parents with low education. The latter tends to result in little help from them with school choices or else in the pupil showing to be independent and able to make his own choices. This is in accordance with the type of students described by Ball et al. (2002) as contingent choosers. Coming from a working class family, he might be the first one to be in the position to achieve higher education. Although parents are supportive and encouraging their children to stay in school, the lack of help, in terms of information, represent a limit for the student.

4.3.3 Students who are still uncertain about their future plans: the case of the apprentices

The students who are still unsure about their plans for the future are very keen on staying on in education and applying for A levels and their grade are also good enough for them to have this option. The general idea behind it is that A levels will give them two more years to come up with a plan and perhaps during that time they will understand whether applying for tertiary education is a suitable option or not.

This group is very well represented by students currently in the apprenticeship scheme. Most of them are second generation immigrants and come from a working class background. Most of them applied originally to A-levels and dropped out of it just a few months later (only one pupil was able to complete year 12). The common denominator for these students seems to be the lack of a plan for the future combined with the lack of awareness of all the available options. When asked about the options considered in year 11 (or earlier), most of these students would say that they did not really know about apprenticeship schemes and were not fully aware of where vocational education would lead them. Moreover, in some cases teachers suggested they should stay on in the school for sixth form, and so they did. Here is a quote from Holly, who is attending the apprenticeship scheme; she is a White English girl living with both parents; her mother has a university degree and is head of benefits department at the local council, her father has GCSEs and owns a business in motor trade:

E: "What did you decide to do at the end of compulsory school?"

H: "I stayed in school for sixth form, because I was not sure what I wanted to do. It's not necessarily because it was what I wanted to do, I sort of believed I could go anywhere else with that [A levels]."

E: "Did you consider different options?"

H: "Yes, I considered full-time work, obviously A-levels, college, things like that."

E: "Why did you leave sixth form?"

H: "It wasn't the place for me. When I worked out what I did want to do I was in the completely wrong environment. I didn't know about apprenticeship schemes, just in general and then I went to look it up on the internet."

E: "Did you say you stayed in the same school for sixth form?"

H: "Yeah, but it was the first year they had sixth form and the teachers didn't really know what to do."

Most of the students did not have very good grades and did not really like going to school in the first place. They have also never wanted to go to university but, as they had to

choose something by the end of year 11, entering A-levels seemed the most convenient choice, mostly because it meant they could stay in the same school when it offered sixth form.

Karl is a Black Caribbean boy doing the apprenticeship scheme; he lives with his mother and has a sister who lives with his father; both his parents have some kind of vocational education, his mother is unemployed and his father is an emergency gas operator:

E: "What did you do after compulsory schooling?"

K: "I went to college for a bit [4-5 months] but it wasn't really for me so I went to my connexions office and found out about the apprenticeship. I just came here."

E: "How many options did you consider while you were in high school?"

K: "Quite a lot...I'd say; different ones every week, lots of options.."

E: Did anyone help you with your decision?"

K: "I talked to parents and teachers for a bit but not too much."

E: "Did you go to the career service?"

K: "No."

E: "What about your parents, did they help?"

K: "They were not really helping...more of a support role, as they didn't really change my decision or want me to change my decision. At some point I was considering to join the RAF force but I changed my mind... Well I didn't think it was right to join at that moment, there were other things first...I wasn't too sure what I wanted to do last year so I just picked a course...I didn't know about the apprenticeship schemes, not a lot until I checked the website and I found out most of the things I know now from them."

When asked about his school performance and feelings towards school Karl replies:

"Hmmm I like sports and that sort of things....I was sort of good all round (the subjects) but not excellent at anything... Not really [never thought about going to university]... it's too much work! I have never like school, not really... The coursework most of all."

Some of them had fine grades and even got seven or more GCSEs. The main reason for dropping out of A-levels was the difference in the organisation of the courses and, most of all, the coursework load the students could not cope with.

Jamal is a black African boy attending the apprenticeship scheme; he lives with his mother, who works at home (she used to do some e-commerce with the government but had to stop because of health issues) and has O levels, and a sister and two step-siblings; he used to enjoy school while studying for his GCSEs (he got 8 GCSEs, in fact), and even thought about university:

E: "What did you do after compulsory schooling?"

J: "I started sixth form at my school and didn't really like the courses, didn't like the learning environment so I thought I'd change. For about a week after I started my sixth form then I thought I can't deal with this. I did before...I was going to do maths, you know at university but then I found out I wasn't enjoying maths at A levels so I thought university must be more boring so..."

E: "So you did like maths during GCSEs?"

J: "Yeah I did like Maths back in GCSEs.... Maybe it was the teachers...I stayed in the same school but changed teacher. Before GCSEs it was literally real things but when we got to A-levels we couldn't actually learn about real things before we learn about these imaginary things..."

E: Did you have a job in mind for the future back then?"

J: "I wanted to be a financial advisor"

E: "did you like going to school?"

J: "I liked going to school most of the time...but I like this (the apprenticeship scheme) a lot and more than school. It's because it's practical and it's more independent and you know they slow down for people, which I like."

Along with uncertainty about different options or without an occupation in mind, there is also the lack of guidance from both family and teachers. Generally speaking, students were left to decide on their own; parental help was mostly in the form of support towards one

choice or the other. Although teachers offered some help, this did not seem to be taken much into account from the students. But perhaps, most importantly, they did not enjoy sixth form as much as they thought they would.

4.3.4 Students who recently made a choice

A number of students, especially in school B, made a decision about the following year plans only during year 11. The uncertainty though was not associated with whether or not to stay on in school or whether to choose A-levels or vocational education; it was mostly about which subjects to choose for A-levels and which sixth form college to apply to.

This group is composed of students who did not think a lot about the future and kept their options open until year 11. They are still quite confused about what kind of job they would like to have and therefore it is more difficult to choose the courses to apply for. One aspect they have in common though is that they want to get higher education, but there is no real plan yet.

Sarah is a White English girl in school B; she lives with both parents and her twin sister (her older brother is at university); her mother works in a pre-school play group and has an NVQ, her father is a technical engineer and has a university degree:

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

S: "I am going to stay on and do A levels in this school."

E: "When did you decide that?"

S: "This year because I wasn't sure I wanted to stay here or go to another college."

E: "What about university?"

S: "I probably would go. But I am waiting to decide where."

E: "Did you consider any options?"

S: "No not really."

E: "Did you any research about universities?"

S: "No"

E: "Do you have a job in mind that you would like to do?"

S: "No, absolutely no idea. I never thought about that."

Students like Sarah get good grades and they like school in general. In most cases the choice of subjects, which happens in year 11, is the key for the following choice of college. Because the plan after A-levels is still vague, these students tend to choose quite general subjects, like English literature and maths, or those they like best.

Continuing with Sarah's account:

E: "Did someone advice you in your choice for next year?"

S: "Not really, because I am doing the subjects that i want to do and I enjoy, but my mum and my dad they don't really mind what I do as long as I enjoy it."

E: "Which subjects are you going to study next year?"

S: "I want to do maths, geography and psychology..."

A small number of students, in school A, delayed their decision about post-compulsory education because they were not sure whether to enrol on A-levels or to vocational courses. Their plans became final during year 11, just two or three months before the end of the year, and the choice went to vocational education. The main reason, again, is associated with a dislike for examinations.

Amy-Louise is a White English girl attending school A; she lives with her mum (she has not seen her dad, a decorator with no formal education, in 10 years), who is currently unemployed (she used to be a social worker) and has GCSEs (she started college a few years back but drop out), and two siblings. Amy-Louise decided to apply for a BTEC a few months ago and is planning to then go to university:

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

A: "I am going to a college to study business with law included in. It's BTEC national extended diploma."

E: "Have you ever thought about going to university?"

A: "Yes I want to go to university. I do not know which one yet but I do want to go."

E: "Have you considered applying for A-levels?"

A: "Not really, because I prefer coursework than exams."

Amy-Louise, like some other students, has thought about jobs that she would like to do but she is still very uncertain. What comes across for these students' accounts is their need for more information about careers and advice for what would be a good choice:

E: "Do you have a job in mind for the future?"

A: "Maybe something to do with law, I would like to be a lawyer."

E: "Is that a recent idea?"

A: "it's a very recent decision. I went through a phase when I wanted to work with disabled children, but then I always had a thing for law. Then I wanted to become a police officer, because it has to do with law; but I also want to do something that has to do with Maths, because I love Maths. It's really weird."

Summarising, the main characteristic of the undecided student is an uncertainty about the future, in terms of what job they would feel like preparing for. This, along with the lack of support and advice, or clear guidance from the significant others, leave these students to make decisions for the very near future, waiting to make more choices as the next transition approaches. In a way, they seem to 'drift' towards a choice, without much thinking about the pros and cons of it. There are no strong constraints from parents or grades and no strong preferences either. As for some of the apprentices who 'drifted' to sixth form because they did not know what else to do, these students 'go with flow'. Matza (1964), first addressed the action of drifting in relation to juvenile delinquency. Young people, who live in poor neighbourhoods, surrounded by groups of young deviants easily become part of them, as they

drift towards them. The same mechanism is applicable to students, who just ‘go with flow’ instead of making an individual choice.

4.4 The value of education

In the previous section a typology of students was discussed, according to the time and the level of certainty of their future plans. In this section the focus will be on the value that students give to education and how that differs according to the students’ plans and background.

Although there are differences between the value of education of students whose plans include university from those whose plans stop at vocational education, there is a general positive consideration of education by the students. The aspect mainly related to the value given to education is the attitude to school. Students who like going to school and have no problems with coursework and examinations also associate education with something very valuable, especially as a mean to get a good job.

This is the case of Ryad, a Pakistani boy in school A. He lives with his mother, who owns a grocery shop and has some kind of secondary school qualification achieved back in Pakistan, and his aunt:

E: “Do you think having a good education is important for future success?”

R: “Yes I think that is very important. Even if you are smart and everything, at the end of the day if you don’t have that written down on paper you are not going to have a good job.”

And Jim (see page 199 for reference):

E: “Do you having a good education is important for future success?”

J: "Yes, I feel like now, with my generation, we are starting to compete for jobs with other countries, like China, and they have so much more education and potential. We need to be competitive."

Both the quotes above refer to ethnic minority students from a working class background. They are quite representative of the perspective of the other students with similar characteristics: they are very enthusiastic when it comes to describe the value of education and they count on it to give them "opportunities" for the future. The perspective of White English pupils from a middle class background is slightly different: they are very focused on the instrumental value of education. What these students underline is the need to achieve some kind of education in order to get a job.

Jessica (see page 198) and James give an example: James is a White English boy in school B; he lives with both parents (he has a sister who left for university); his mother has vocational education and work as a child minder, while his father is a director in a company and has a university degree:

E: "Do you think having a good education is important for your future success?"

Je: Yes because you need it... now they are asking for A-levels rather than GCSEs so that's kind of why I stayed over.

Je: "Definitely, because nowadays with this economy... people all need A-levels and GCSEs to get the jobs."

Students who intend to apply for vocational education or, as in the case of the apprentices, who are in vocational education, also see the value of education for a future success, but sometimes from a more "practical" side:

According to Jamal (see page 206 for reference):

E: "Do you think having a good education is important for future success?"

J: "Yeah because you see people that go straight from bad education into a job and at that point you think they are earning good money but they'll always stay on that money, while if they get a better education they can progress up and go through things."

And Mohseeb, who is an African boy attending the apprenticeship scheme; he lives with both parents and a sister; his mother is unemployed and has GCSEs equivalent achieved in Africa and his father is a contractor and has some vocational qualification:

M: "Yeah definitely. You need a qualification for you to know what you're doing to get into a job."

Some students consider education for its value as a good in itself, like Shanice; she is a Jamaican girl attending school A; she lives with her mother, who has some kind of education achieved in Jamaica and works as a caterer, and her younger brother:

E: "Do you think having a good education is important for future success?"

S: "Yes, not just for the jobs, but I think about self-confidence. It's knowing that you have your education and your qualifications and that means you can aspire to be anything you want."

As was mentioned earlier, students who do not like school also think that education is not so important for their future success. The general idea is that a qualification might be needed to enter the labour market but all the subjects learned in school will not help in a job.

Arren (see page 200 for reference), is an example:

E: "Do you think having a good education is important for future success?"

A: "Yeah because I need the skills to help me in my future career, but I don't think I need all this courses I chose for this year."

Some students also believe that what makes someone successful is not how much education he has achieved but his personal characteristics;

Karl (see page 205 for reference), gives an example:

E: “Do you think having a good education is important for future success?”

K: “Hmm not really; I think it helps you start off but it’s all down to you as a person how far you can go really.”

One of the mechanisms behind Karl and similar students’ reasoning could be the attempt to rationalise their choice as the best one, when they suspect that this is not the case. As Festinger (1957) puts it, in a situation of cognitive dissonance, the person would try to reduce it, actively avoiding situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance. The students who do not like going to school but know the advantages to have an education, would therefore find arguments which support their feelings and go against the value of education.

Summarising, there is a general idea among the students of the importance of education for their future success, although it takes different forms; students who like going to school and whose plans for the future include higher education and a specific job are more “driven” than students who are uncertain about their future or who intend to get a vocational qualification. Their idea of education is something that gives opportunities, while for the other students education means a qualification that can get them a job. There are then students who do not like school, who prefer to believe that it is the person who makes the difference and not just a qualification.

4.5 The role of significant others in the decision making process

One of the first theoretical traditions to include other people’s influence in pupils’ school decision making is the status attainment one. In particular, with the Wisconsin model of

status attainment (Duncan et al., 1972), family and friends started to be addressed as strong influences on individuals' educational achievement. The mechanism was straightforward; individuals' educational aspirations would adjust according to family and friends' expectations on the pupil's achievement.

This approach has been refined during the years; an example of a recent theory partly based on the Wisconsin model, is the one by Morgan (2004) who speaks of prefigurative commitment as the way individuals and their significant others form their expectations based on everyday events. The influences coming from significant others, the school environment, attitude to education and more all works to determine a future plan that the individual will see as successful.

These approaches are very different from the rational choice tradition; individuals' choices are, in fact, described as independent and rational, affected only by the (perfect) information possessed by the individual and by a rational consideration of costs, benefits and risks associated with the situation (Boudon 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe 1997). The influence of others is only indirect.

The interviews with the students shed some light on the decision making processes, highlighting a recurrent role of family and friends. Although some of the students came across as quite independent in their choices, they still at least discussed their options with parents and classmates or sought information through the school and advisors.

As mentioned above, there are three sources of influence that will be discussed in this section: family, peers and teachers. A particular attention will be given to peers relationships and how they are experienced by the students.

4.5.1 Family: Parents and Siblings

A big portion of the students in the sample address their parents as the people who they spoke to for advice or information before making a decision for the following year. Among those, half of the students say that they were the ones asking for advice, while the other half would say their parents sat with them to discuss about their best option, although they did not really ask for it.

Based on the relationship between parents and pupils and the agreement between them about school choices after the end of compulsory schooling, three groups can be created: parents and pupil agree; parents and pupils agree about the course but disagree about the subject choice; and parents leave the choice to the child without interfering.

Parents and pupil agree

Although this seems to be the least usual case scenario, in some cases parents are happy about their children's choices, both in terms of the courses and subjects. This is the case of pupils who have clear ideas about university and a future job. Also, pupils' plans sometimes aim to achieve a similar career to that of their parents, so that the influence here is quite strong.

Emma (see page 195 for reference), is an example:

E: "Do you have a job in mind for the future?"

Em: "Probably at the moment I want to be a nurse and I want to join the RAF and stuff."

E: "Did anybody affect your choice?"

Em: "Well I want to join the RAF because both my parents and my brother have been in the RAF, so..."

Emma's parents, like some others, are not pushy for her to choose some other educational path and, although they do try to give her some other options, they are happy with her choice.

Continuing with Emma:

E: "Did your parents help you making a decision for next year?"

Em: "I have always talked to my parents about school and stuff, they know more about it than me."

E: "did your parents help with the choice of subjects in year 10?"

Em: "They didn't like push me towards anything but they made me consider everything and make sure I was making the right decision. "

E: "Do your parents talk with you about future plans?"

Em: "If I ask them they'd talk to me about it."

E: "What would they like you to do when you finish compulsory school?"

Em: "They are ok with me joining the RAF. As long as I am happy they would say to me."

Although some pupils are happy to follow in their parents' footsteps in terms of education and jobs and keeping parents happy, most of the time this is not the case. Usually parents are focused on educational choices that lead to university and towards subjects that are more prestigious, like sciences or law. Therefore, when the child is also focussed on those there is agreement between parents and pupil.

Samantha (see page 196 for reference), is planning to enter A-levels and then university to study law:

E: "Do you have a job in mind for the future?"

S: "I am thinking a barrister, because I like to argue a lot!"

E: "Did your parents advise you on the choice?"

S: "They helped me make the decision and stuff, but they didn't want to push me and make me feel that it was their choice."

E: "Would say you are free to choose or are you parents a big influence?"

S: "I think I am fairly free to choose. I do kind of parents' friendly subjects, so there are no problems about that."

E: "What subjects are you studying next year?"

S: "I am doing higher Maths, higher English literature, higher History and Higher biology and some standard languages"⁷⁹.

Parents and pupil disagree about the subjects

The plans to enter A-levels and then go to university are not enough for some parents who feel the need to advice their children about the importance to choose some subjects over others. As was discussed above in the case of Samantha, her parents did not interfere a lot in her choices because she chose mostly "parent-friendly" subjects.

Parents who have higher education, or who are professionals, try to push their children to choose more prestigious subjects, which can lead them to more rewarding jobs in the future.

Jessica (see page 198 for reference), is an example:

E: "Which subjects are you studying next year?"

J: "Biology, psychology, sociology and law.

E: "Did your parents help you with plans for next year?"

J: "Yes my mum is a very science-y person and she pushed me to do biology as well as English."

E: "Do your parents talk with you about future plans?"

J: "They talked to me about...they wanted me to change some of my A- levels choices. They don't want me to do sociology and psychology, they say I should do like maths or English instead. I am like no..."

E: "Are your parents happy about your school performance and school results?"

J: "They think i can do better in some stuff like ICT, why don't I like try harder."

E: "And do you feel their opinion is important?"

J: "When it's about ICT and the fact that I should do better I really don't care..."

E: "Did your parents help with the choice of subjects in year 10?"

⁷⁹ These subjects are part of the international *Baccalaureate diploma programme (IBDP)*. The IBDP is a 2 year educational programme for students aged 16-19, that provides an internationally accepted qualification for entry into higher education. Students must complete assessment in six subjects from the six subject groups and take examinations that are externally assessed.

J: "Yes they did. They told me to do ICT and they were saying about you should do English literature instead of media, cause it's like more academic."

E: "Did you follow their advice?"

J: "Yes I did."

E: "Did you get to choose something you like or did they choose for what best for you?"

J: "Mostly they did; they were like ... you have to do hard subjects."

Not only do parents want to push their children to choose specific subjects, according to their experience, but they usually push them to do better in school, checking their homework every day and discussing their school reports in detail.

Rhiannon is another example; she is a White English girl attending school B; she lives with both parents and two sisters, her mother is a Maths teacher and her father is a medical drug inspector. Both her parents have a university degree:

E: "Did someone advice you in your choice for next year?"

R: "My parents wanted me to go here for sixth form, because it is a good school and it's more convenient and all of the teachers tell us to go to sixth form here really so I didn't get any info on college until I went to see the career's lady."

E: "Are your parent s happy for you to go to college?"

R: "No, but I told them I am going anyway cause they got the courses I like there..."

E: "Do your parents help you with homework?"

R: "My dad does but I don't ask my mum, she gets a bit strict."

E: "Is it usually you asking for help or them offering?"

R: "My mum would offer if she thinks I am falling behind class."

E: "Are your parents happy about your school results?"

R: "My dad is; [mum] doesn't seem to think that B is a good!"

E: "Do you regard their opinion as important in school matters?"

*R: "I would do revision is she [mum] is pushing me to do it, but it's only to keep her quiet.
"*

E: "Did your parents help with the choice of subjects in year 10?"

R: "My mum said that I had to take maths, so yeah, but I think it's fair enough really. And she wanted me to take German but I said no I will take history."

In general, this group is composed of parents from a middle class background and a high level of education. As highly qualified and successful people they believe children need to be guided in what represents the best choice for their future. Moreover, they have the knowledge themselves to advise their children on what is best for them.

Parents leave the choice to the pupil

Parents who do not have a good educational themselves, usually from a working class background, tend to leave their children free to make their own decisions. As was mentioned earlier in the chapter, these parents feel unable to advise their children because of their lack of experience about school. Although they would like for their children a better education and career, they tend not to interfere with their children's decisions.

This is the case of Shanice (see page 212 for reference). She intends to apply for A-levels and has no specific plans for university:

E: "Did your parents help you with your decision for next year?"

S: "I kind of did my own research, just went to the school library and got looked at prospectuses. I feel like my parents left me to do my own decision and then I would go to them and tell them ok this is what I want to do, and they would support me with it."

Some of the students have disrupted families and live with just one parent, who is described as very busy with work. In these cases not only does the parent leave the pupil to make his own choices but there is a clear lack of communication between parent and child.

This is the case of Dale (see page 202 for reference). Dale is going to study for a BTEC and does not want to go to university:

E: "Did your parents help you with your plans for next year?"

D: "No, the teachers helped me a bit, with like what grades I need to get into college and stuff like that."

E: "Did your parents help you with the choice of subjects in year 10?"

D: "My sister helped me a bit, and then the teachers."

E: "Are your parents happy with your future plans?"

D: "My mum let me make my own choices."

Dale's account introduced another influence in pupils' decision making processes: siblings. Brothers and sisters are quite recurrent in the students' account and they seem to fulfil parental role whenever this is lacking.

4.5.2 The role of siblings

Older brothers and sisters are an important source of information and they can be role models, especially when parents leave their children to make their own choices.

Some pupils choose the same school and course that their older siblings attended or are currently attending, like in the case of Samantha (see page 196 for reference):

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

S: "I am staying here and going to sixth form; I am going to do IB [international baccalaureate], cause my brother is doing it and I knew a lot about it. I want to specialize in six subjects and do that at A-levels is too hard."

E: "Have you thought about going to university?"

S: "Yes, I want to study law."

E: "Did you do some research about universities?"

S: "Yeah, I have. I looked at some websites and because my brother is looking at it as well he got me some brochures and stuff and we looked at them together."

Some of the students consider their siblings as role models and they want to follow in their steps, like James (see page 211 for reference):

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

J: "I am going to stay here for sixth form."

E: "When did you decide that?"

J: "Year 9 because my sister had just gone to university so when she decided to do sixth form obviously I wanted to follow her steps."

E: "What about university? Do you have plans to go?"

J: "Yes because she's there [his sister] as well ...and it looks pretty good. It's like very sporty."

Although James's sister represents a positive role model, this is not always the case. Going back to Arren's account (see the previous section), he justified his choice to go for an apprentice scheme and leave education with the fact that his brother did the same and he seemed pretty happy about it still.

When parents feel they cannot help their children with homework, because of their low educational level, siblings are again those who provide pupils with some help, like in the case of Shanice (see page 212 for reference):

E: "Do your parents help you with homework?"

S: "No, my brother does. My mum would probably offer because she wants to help me but she wouldn't know the answers."

4.5.3 The role of teachers and the school environment

Few students have discussed their options with their teachers. Students who are uncertain about their future plans and who are not supported in their choice by their parents are those who tend to take into account teachers' advice.

This is the case of Mike, a White English boy attending school A; Mike lives with his mother and younger brother; his mother works as a caterer and has A-levels, while his father is a road worker and has no formal education:

E: "Did anyone help you with your plans for next year?"

M: "Yes the school [the career service] and the teachers helped me. My parents helped me a bit but they don't know much about it."

Very few students would say they personally ask their teachers for advice; although some students consider their teachers' opinion valuable in terms of their experience, they are still not their first choice when it comes to seeking advice. Most of the students tend to relate more to their parents, as they feel they can understand better.

This is case of Emma:

E: "Did your teachers advice you?"

Em: "No not really."

E: "Did you ask for their advice at all?"

Em: "No. I mean they've got lots of experience in stuff like that but I have always talked to my parents more about school and stuff."

Some students are not interested at all in their teachers' opinions and, although they would probably discuss plans with their parents, they have a very clear plan for the future and feel like they do not need to be advised.

Rhiannon (see page 218 for reference) is an example of this:

E: "Did the teachers give you any advice?"

R: "Yeah some teachers were like you should take this or that subject, but I haven't really listened."

E: "Did you ask them for advice?"

R: "Not really, just asked my parents."

Some of the students received some help from the career service. Although schools have allocated days where the career advisors would present the students with different options for their future, many students seem not interested in the service. Those who mentioned it had a one to one session with the career advisor to get information.

One of these students is Sarah (see page 207 for reference):

E: "What is your plan for next year?"

S: "I am going to college."

E: "When did you decide that you wanted to do that?"

S: "A week ago...before I just wanted to do sixth form here cause I didn't know what to do. Then I went to see the career's lady and she told me about college and I really liked this."

A big difference can be highlighted among the schools; school A, as well as some of the more deprived schools attended by the apprentices, seem to make pupils aware of more options compared to school B. Students of these schools seem more aware of the options they have, from A-levels to vocational education. School B, which has lots of resources and offers a very rich environment, is more focused on their pupils continuing on in A-levels and university. For students in school B, dropping out of school at age 16 is not really an option; the real option is among the subjects that a student should choose for A-levels.

As some of the students in school B would say, the school environment is friendly but the teachers are very strict. Jessica (see page 198 for reference) says:

E: "Would you say this school is a friendly environment?"

J: "Yeah, most teachers are really strict but... yeah."

Although the teachers are not so strict in school A, the environment is not so friendly; there can be, in fact, issues with violence and bullies among the students.

Amy-Louise (see page 208 for reference), talks about it in her account:

E: "Would you say this school is a friendly environment?"

A-L: "It can be. Sometimes with this school things can be blowing out of proportion. Some people say things and then start a fight. The teachers try to help and make their best but sometimes they make things worse for some students. People in this school are not too nice to be honest."

Summarising, teachers seem to be the last resource when it comes to get help in students' school decisions. Students do perceive them as well informed and experienced in school matters, but this is not enough to ask them for help and advice. If teachers are considered good at their job, this does not translate to a feeling of trust with important matters like future plans.

What seems to affect students is the school environment, in terms of school resources, policies and the composition of the school. A school with good resources would attract more middle class families, who would want their children to achieve a good education; therefore the school would become focussed on getting their students to achieve better and better results, for its own prestige. This mechanism could be what the quantitative studies on peer group effects highlighted, which is, in fact, the effect of the overall composition of the school.

4.5.4 Peers relationships

All the students, in some way, have discussed their options for the future with their peers.

In general, girls are more keen to talk about future plans with their mates and seem to engage more in giving each other suggestions. Boys prefer to engage in more casual conversation.

Moreover, while future plans are discussed among school friends, most pupils tend to make their school decisions mainly based on other considerations.

The majority of students would describe their decision for next year as a combination of their preferences, their parents' advice and sometimes the help of teachers (as discussed above). The fact that friends are going to another college or are choosing different subjects does not seem to affect their choices. Students would say they will miss their friends, but this is not enough to make the same choice and follow them.

Here are a few examples:

Saima (see page 197 for reference):

E: "Do you know what your friends are going to do next year?"

S: "Yeah. A few of them might go to the same college as I am; some of them are staying in this school."

E: "Did you consider following your friends in their choice for next year?"

S: "Not really because it is my choice and when I go to college it will benefit me, as well as university. This is my main focus."

Rhiannon (see page 218 for reference):

E: "Do you know what your friends are going to do next year?"

R: "Some of them are staying here, some of them are going to same college as me, one of them is going to different sixth form somewhere else."

E: "So did the fact that these friends are going to another college affect your choice somehow?"

R: "Not really; I would say I was going there and this friend said she coming with me."

E: "Did your friend suggest you to stay?"

R: "Some of them wanted me to stay here cause they'd... whatever..... but I did not really care."

A few students said they would have considered their school mates choices as a good option in the case where those friends were the clever and successful ones in the school; here is a quote from Jim (see page 199 for reference):

E: "Do you know what your friends are doing next year?"

J: "Some friends are going to the same college as me; some others are staying in this college."

E: "Did the fact that your friends made that decision affect your own decision?"

J: "I admit that if I have some friends who are bright and clever and everything and they decide to stay here in this sixth form I would actually think about it cause then I would be around them and their environment. I wouldn't follow them but I would think about it maybe."

A few exceptions are represented by students who did not discuss their future plans with their peers at all. They might have listened to their friends' plans but they were not interested in sharing their own.

Karl (see page 205 for reference), who was among the students still uncertain about their future plans, is one of them:

E: "Did you use to discuss future plans with your friends?"

K: "Not really... never. It's not really something I found interesting really."

Other exceptions are represented by the few students who followed their friends' choices. These students were uncertain about the future and did not have a plan. Moreover the school they were attending offered sixth form, so they could just stay in the same school. This is the case of Mohseeb (see page 212 for reference):

E: "Did you use to talk to your friends about future plans when in high school?"

M: "Yeah, sometime. Mostly it was just a casual conversation."

E: "What about your school friends? Did you know what they were going to do?"

M: "Yeah most of them I knew what they were doing. Some of them were going to other places [other colleges], some of them were leaving school, and most of them stayed on [sixth form]."

E: "Would you say your decision to stay on in that school was affected somehow by your friends' doing the same?"

M: "I would say that's one of the reasons yeah."

E: "Do you know what your friends are doing right now?"

M: "Yeah some of them are still doing A- levels."

E: "Did any of them leave?"

M: "Actually the one who left is doing the apprenticeship as well."

Several students' accounts show that it is friends attending the same school who are those mostly involved in these discussions. Friends outside school are perceived as part of a different circle and they are those they hang out with for fun.

Jim (see page 199 for reference) is an example:

E: "Do you have friends outside school?"

J: "Yes, some live in the neighbourhood and then some family."

E: "Do you feel comfortable with both your friends in school and outside school?"

J: "I feel with my friends in school I can talk about more educational things, while with those outside school we don't want to talk about school and switch off."

Some students feel more comfortable talking about school matters with friends outside school. This happens when friends outside school are older and already in college or even at university. Students perceive them as someone they can relate to for advice because they have experience.

This is the case of Saima (see page 197 for reference):

E: "Did someone help you with your choice for next year?"

S: "I have got some friends in college and university and I did actually ask them. They did support me with the decision I made and they did help me with applications and subjects."

E: "So you relate more to your friends outside school for advice. What about your friends in school?"

S: "Yeah I know what they are doing but we talk about these things in general."

All of the students have other friends outside school, from their family or the neighbourhood, and hang out with them as well as with their school mates. Boys, in particular, belong to sport teams such as football or basketball and tend to see these friends mostly during weekends.

James (see page 211 for reference) is an example:

E: "Do you have friends outside school?"

J: "Yeah, because I play football, in a team..."

E: "Do you see your school mates outside school?"

J: "Yes, we hang out sometime."

E: "Do you see more your friends from the football team?"

J: "Yeah because we play every weekend."

Ethnic minority students, especially girls whose family comes from Asia, have friends outside school who are mainly family friends, and they also tend to spend time with extended family.

Here is quote from Saima (see page 197 for reference):

E: "Do you have many friends in this school?"

S: "Not really."

E: "Do you have friends outside school?"

S: "Yeah, a lot."

E: "Are they neighbourhood friends?"

S: "Some of them. Mostly they are family friends. I met some neighbourhood people but I wouldn't call them friends. It's mostly from family."

In general, students have several friends from both school and outside school. Mostly they do not have a preference between them, and they would see them either separately or at the same time. Very few students would have preference when it comes to their groups of friends, as they feel comfortable with both of them. Sometimes they are different, in terms of family situations, like in Emma's case, or personality, as with Rhiannon, but it does not affect the friendship. In fact, pupils are not interested in these kinds of considerations, as much as in personal interests, personality traits and hobbies they have in common.

Here is a quote from Rhiannon (see page 218 for reference):

E: Do you have other friends outside school?"

R: "Yes; most of my friends are like in wales, I've got lots of family there and I go there quite often."

E: "Do you prefer to hang out with those friends?"

R: "Well there is one friend here, E, she's my best friend. So I hang out with E, and some others from school, and occasionally go down to Wales."

E: "Do you feel comfortable around your school mates?"

R: "Yeah I am happy to just do whatever, while they just sit quietly."

E: "Would you say your friends outside school are different from your friends at school?"

R: "Yeah in school they are all quite quiet a part from the one person really, because we are like the main people in the group..."

E: "So you feel like you differ in character?"

R: "...yeah!"

E: "Do they like different things that you do?"

R: "They all just seems so like reserved really, so it's like.....boring."

E: "Do you prefer your friends outside school?"

R: "Yes they are more fun."

Also, students have friends whose future plans are quite different from theirs, such as choosing a different course or not having plans to attend higher education, but this does not make relationships difficult.

Jamal (see page 206 for reference), is now attending the apprenticeship scheme, after a year in a sixth form college:

E: "What about your school friends? Did you discuss with them about the future?"

J: "Yeah, about university, if you are going or not, yeah, about work."

E: "Did you know what they were going to do?"

J: "Yeah they all went to sixth form, most of them; a couple of them went into labouring, you know building and that stuff."

E: "Back then you choose to enter A-levels. Was it because most of your friends did that?"

J: "No, I always thought to... [stay in school and do A-levels], cause my dad is a builder as well and I always wanted to get an education and get a nice secure job instead of building."

E: "But then you changed your mind about A- levels?"

J: "Yeah I went to IT."

E: "Do you know what your friends are doing right now?"

J: "Yeah most of them are doing sixth form, just doing a variety of courses."

E: "Are you still in contact with them?"

J: "Yeah, a lot!"

From all the examples and students' quotes above, it is clear that pupils do not consider their peers to be the best source of information from whom to make their decision for the future. Sometimes they would be uncertain about their choices, so following their friends seems the easiest path, but usually they consider friends someone to share hobbies and hang out with at the weekend. Parents and siblings are those who students relate to the most when it comes to seeking advice on future plans. Parents, in particular those who are well-educated, and older siblings are, in fact, well informed about different options and their outcomes. They are also trustworthy and they can be asked for help. Peers are in their same situation as the individual in questions and, although they share a close relationship, they cannot give more information than they already have.

4.6 Discussion of the main themes

In the previous sections we highlighted the students' perception of their relationship with parents, teachers and friends and their role in their school decisions. Numerous recurrent themes came out of their accounts. This section will discuss these themes in the light of the research questions, the previous findings and the related theories.

4.6.1 The role of family: the importance of trust

Although pupils have multiple sources of information, some of them are more reliable than others. Family is the first place to discuss future plans. In most cases parents are considered those who want the best for their children and, even though sometimes they do not know much about education, they would support and encourage them in their choices. Trust is, therefore, the most important aspect in a relationship, followed by experience. As discussed earlier in the paper, parents' involvement in their children's school choices differs across family backgrounds. Highly educated parents feel the need to 'direct' their children towards the best school choice, on the premise that they know better; poorly educated parents on the other hand feel inadequately 'equipped' to advice their children and tend to leave them responsible to make their own choice. These different attitudes reflect some previous findings, such as Chan & Koo (2008), who identified three parenting styles across social class, education and family structure.

Their typology is based on Baumrind's threefold typology of parenting style, which she refers to as 'authoritative', 'authoritarian', and 'permissive'. Authoritative parents direct their child's activities in a 'rational issue-oriented' manner', encouraging verbal give and take by

sharing the 'reasoning behind parental policy'. Authoritarian parents on the other hand, do not encourage verbal give and take but value obedience and use punishment measures when parent-child conflicts arise. Finally, permissive parents are there when their child needs them and see themselves as a source of support and help rather than an active agent responsible to shape their behaviour and future plans. According to Chan & Koo results, authoritative parenting is more common among the salariat class, while permissive parenting can be found more among the working class. The association between authoritarian parenting and social class is less clear. The results from the interviews support entirely the division in those two groups.

According to Reay & Ball (1998), the family dynamics embedded in school choices are clearly different across social classes. Working class families focus on the present, not on some imagined future. Moreover the choice of school (that is secondary school), is largely left to the child, perceived as capable of choosing in autonomy. As mentioned earlier, this is mainly related to a feeling of being deskilled and not prepared to deal with schools. Middle class parents, on the other hand, see the need to make the choice for their children. Children are, in fact, unable to choose what is best for them and they are often persuaded to accept their parents' choice in case of conflict.

A different picture is presented when considering parenting style and ethnic background. Working class ethnic minority parents can be identified, in fact, in the authoritative group; they have precise plans for their children, which include at least a university degree in a subject that will make them successful in the labour market. As some of the ethnic minority students put it, "dropping out of school at 16 or 18 is not an option". This result also supports recent findings in this area of study. Heath (2007), among others, highlighted this mechanism; ethnic minority students are pushed by their parents to perform well in school and, as a result, their own aspirations arise.

Going back to the crucial role of parents in students' future plans, this also relates to the results of chapter 1. Parents' aspirations and expectations proved to be very important for the pupils' decision to stay in school after compulsory education, throughout every year of GCSEs.

4.6.2 When parents cannot help: the role of older siblings

When parents cannot provide enough help, older siblings become the best source of information, which is the most trustworthy and well informed. This is the case of working class families, where parents are not well educated and they feel unable to advice their children about future plans.

Numerous students in the sample claimed they were going to follow in their older siblings footsteps, sometimes applying for the same course and other times aiming to apply for a certain university in the future. The fact that a sibling has chosen a course that he likes and is succeeding at, is a good enough reason for a student to do the same. In this way they would not have to weigh several options or discuss with others and they can have all the information they need through their siblings.

The role of siblings in school choices has always been underestimated and overshadowed by that of parents. A recent study by Ceja (2006) on the mechanisms of college choice highlighted the role of siblings as information sources covering for parents. Not only could help siblings with information, but also assisting with college applications.

The role of siblings though is not only as an information source; siblings also help with homework, again when parents are not able to. Several working class students, especially ethnic minority ones, confirm that when they need help with homework they do not ask their

parents, rather their siblings. The fact that siblings can provide help is also another reason why some students would choose the same course and subjects. That makes it a safer choice.

Although the impact of siblings has shown to be mostly positive, it can sometimes be negative; when an older sibling drops out of school for instance, this can be perceived by the pupil as a good option, or be used to justify his own plans to drop out of school.

4.6.3 Pupils' perception of teachers and the school environment

Teachers are the last resource considered by pupils when it comes to advice for their future plans. They are, in fact, considered very competent and well experienced about educational options, but they are not as trustworthy as family. Teachers represent the authority and those who give them homework and mark their tests. Teacher – pupil relationship is a formal one and pupils tend not to perceive teachers as significant others, like they do with family and friends. Students who mostly discussed some options with teachers are those uncertain about their future plan or students who cannot get help from family and friends.

Several studies have been carried out on the role of teachers on educational attainment, but none of them focussed particularly on the matter of school choices. Instead, teachers have been accounted for in the quality of schools and their motivational effect on pupils' school achievement. There is some evidence that teachers' qualifications can influence tenth grade mathematics scores, although unobservable school and teachers' characteristics seem to account for the students' achievement (Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997). In general, teachers' experience and degree level have been shown to be relatively unimportant predictors of outcomes (Hanushek, 1997). According to Wetzel (1998), teacher-student relationship mostly aligns to the pupil's appropriate behaviour in the social situation of the class, following school

rules. In terms of teacher-child relationship, evidence shows that a good relationship can help children to adjust better to the school environment from early years and to develop a positive attitude towards learning (Birch & Ladd, 1996).

This consideration agrees with the evidence shown in chapter 2; teachers' perception of pupils' was not associated with pupils' plans after compulsory schooling, as it does for parents and peers.

The evidence from the interviews suggests, on the other hand, that school characteristics are very important in shaping pupils' future plans. The role of school resources on students' educational attainment has been the focus of many studies, including the very famous Coleman's report in 1966. The Coleman report, though, did not find differences in school resources (which sometimes favoured black children) to be the main problem for disadvantaged students, as much as the school composition and socio-economic background variables. In general, all the studies that followed were not able to overturn Coleman's conclusions. There is no evidence that teacher-pupil ratio, teacher education and experience and spending per pupil make a significant difference in students' educational attainment (Burtless, 1984). According to Hanushek (1997) and Chubb & Hanushek (1990), the resources going into schools could affect students' achievement indirectly, throughout policies. The more effectively the school would plan for the resources to be used the better the students will be affected by it, which is what matter the most is the learning environment. When the school policy focuses on getting pupils the best learning instruments for them to be high achievers, students are going to be positively affected by it and they would feel staying on in school and aim to a university degree as a natural progression.

4.6.4 The nature of peer relationships

Generally speaking, pupils perceive their friends as someone they share their time with, both in and outside school. Because peers experience similar situations, that is school challenges, adolescence issues and more, they feel at ease sharing those with each other.

Girls especially have deeper relationships. Not only they would ‘hang out’, but they would help each other in case of problems. Boys are less ‘involved’ with their friends and tend to root their relationship on membership to a sport team or other activity.

Sharing and discussing options for the future does not mean asking for advice. The fact that peers are perceived as being in the same situation, with the same amount of experience and information, make them not as trustworthy as parents or older siblings. Moreover, the fact that friends would choose a different course or college does not affect pupils’ own choices. No one within the interviews appears to be worried about losing touch with their friends; the main focus is on what is best for them. The easy access to communication devices, such as mobile phones and internet, especially social networks and the kind, could partly explain this attitude, although this area has not yet received focus (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

These results are perhaps unexpected, although all the quantitative studies available do show a weak association between the social composition of the school and educational attainment. Even the results obtained in chapter 2 indicated a strong association between peers’ plans and individual school choices. In the light of the students’ interview, results from chapter 2 can be interpreted as the fact that pupils discuss future plans with their peers and know what their friends will do. Whether they are affected by it is not really supported by the data. As discussed in the previous section, school composition is an important variable in defining the

school environment, which can affect students' formation of their future choices about education. It cannot, on the other hand, measure peer group effects.

The cases of students following their friends in their school choice (as seen for some of the apprentices), is related to the situation where the student is uncertain about his future plans and end up, in fact, not making any choice, but just following others'. The fact that most of these students would then realize their mistake, would eventually lead them to make a decision for themselves and change their plan, like in the case of the apprentices.

The (weak) evidence in the association between school composition and school dropouts shown by quantitative studies (Evans et al., 1992; Robertson & Symons, 2001), might be more an effect of the school environment (as discussed earlier), than of a direct effect of peer relationships. Pupils, in fact, do not seem to perceive social background differences among their peers, or if they do, they are not important. When describing the type of friendships they have, pupils tend to focus on personal characteristics, activities in common and similar, nothing deeper.

All the students count among their peers some who share the same plans and others who do not, but this does seem to be an issue for their friendship, nor they think less of their friends for not wanting to go to university, for instance. Age, of course, is a key aspect: pupils aged 15-16 are still developing their personality and they value more social aspects of relationships, such as 'likeability' and social acceptance (Hawley, 2002). Evidence from studies in the area of psychology shows that peer relationships change over time, starting from just active or pretend playing in childhood and evolving to engage in organised activities, such a sports, or 'hanging out' and gossiping during adolescence (Zarbatany et al., 1990).

4.6.5 The need for independence and the search for their own identity

As mentioned above, at this age, students value their peers for their character, the fact that they can share experiences with them, and not on the basis of their school choices. At age 15-16 pupils are searching for their own identity and making future plans is an important part of this. Those students who are certain about their future plans are the most representative of this group. Despite being pressured by parents (or teachers sometimes) into some course or subject which is more appropriate (i.e. which leads to a more prestigious job), pupils have developed their own plans, based on what they like or they are aspiring to become. Statements such as “that is not who I am” or “I do not really like it” when referring to what their parents would like for them, are very representative of the students’ feelings.

Along with following their own preferences, another common theme among the students is that they are looking for independence. This is the case of students who chose apprentice schemes and whose future is focused on an early entry in the labour market. Although full-time education would have given them a better chance in the labour market, they do not like school and work-based training is seen as a good compromise.

Parents are those who behave in a rational way, weighing costs and benefits, while pupils tend to look at their preferences or, in the case of those uncertain about the future or who decide at the last minute, at the easiest option. To be more specific, middle class (well-educated) parents and, sometimes even more, working class (uneducated) ethnic minority parents are those who pressure their children most about ‘making the right school choices’. Ethnic minority students are those more concerned with making their parents proud, although they would still make their own choice in terms of subjects and university courses.

Whether middle class parents are concerned with their children school success can be explain by Breen & Goldthorpe approach; the same approach is less applicable for the student themselves, especially those uncertain about the future. The latter did not, in fact, engage in weighing different options, let alone doing that according to a rational choice approach. Their uncertainty is mostly related to the need to develop their own identity and understand what they 'like'.

4.6.6 The lightness of school decision making at age 15-16

As mentioned earlier, part of the students describe in their accounts a process of school decision making, where they might have changed their minds about a course or subject, or pondered different options. These students are a ethnic minority and are especially those who knew all along what they wanted to do and worked toward this goal. Those are also what Morgan would refer to in his model of prefigurative and preparatory commitment (2004). Although this model focus on decision making at university level, it indicates a commitment by the individual who "envision himself successfully choosing a future plan" during the years preceding the event. Once the individual has decided to go to college, through the support of significant others, he would commit in order to fulfil this plan, by getting good grades and choosing academic subjects, etc.

The majority of students' behaviour though cannot be explained by the Morgan model. Several of them made their decision about post-compulsory school in year 11 or are still uncertain about it; some students would say they will stay in school and enter A-levels, but will wait to make a choice about university in year 13. Even some of the apprentices, who entered A-levels with plans to apply for tertiary education, dropped out of it after less than a year, as they could not cope.

The general idea behind this behaviour is the “lightness” of school decision making by 15-16 years pupils. They tend, in fact, to perceive school choices at this stage as reversible; “I tried but did not like it” is, in fact, how they would describe their experience, as a trial and not a final choice.

4.5 Conclusions

This chapter has presented the process of school decision making of pupils age 15-16 from the pupils’ perspective. The focus was primarily on peer relationships and whether they have a role in the school decisions, which lead to consider the role of family and teachers. Although peer relationships do not seem to affect the majority of students in the sample in the same way as teachers, parents and older siblings are role models and the most trustworthy sources of information.

Trust is, in fact, the most important aspect for the students looking for advice for their future plans. And trust is more important than experience and the amount of information possessed by the source, which explains why parents are those most involved in discussions about future plans. Parents are the closest relationship and those who want the best for their children.

On the one hand, there are middle class parents who not only feel confident but also compelled to guide their children throughout their future choices. A-levels and university are the natural course of action, although they would also have a say about the subjects of choice, according to their experience and knowledge of the labour market. On the other hand, there are working class parents, who do not have the knowledge and experience to give advice to their children, so they let them free to make their own choices, supporting them on the process. Working class ethnic minority parents also lack experience about education, but this does not stop them encouraging their children to stay in school and achieve tertiary education.

There is, in fact a strong expectation for ethnic minority pupils to do well in school and achieve the best they can, which is what their parents could not do for themselves.

Older siblings can act as substitutes for their parents when the latter feel they cannot help their children. Siblings are also a crucial source of information, when the students can follow their own school choices. In this case, in fact, not only will the sibling become the advisor, but he will also become the major source of help in case of difficulties once in the course of choice. Moreover, the fact that their sibling has chosen and succeed at a particular course would give them more confidence to pursue the same.

Peers are those who share the same experiences, such as in school, and who they spend their time with outside school. Pupils, in particular girls, confide in their friends and trust them for 'everyday' matters, but they would not trust them in school matters. In general, pupils do discuss their future plans with peers, but that is perceived more as sharing their plans than a need for information. Peers can become models to follow in case the student is uncertain about his future plan and following a friend become the easiest choice.

Teachers have the experience and knowledge about education, but they are not perceived as trustworthy as family (or friends), representing the last resource in case of help with school decisions. Teacher-student relationship is formal and, even when the teacher is perceived as friendly and helpful, it remains an unequal relationship, in terms of the teacher being the 'authority' over the pupil.

The school environment, on the other hand, is strongly perceived by the students. A school with more resources and driven to academic excellence would try to push its students to achieve and stay on in the educational system longer. On the other hand, a school with no resources, in a deprived area, would focus more on getting its students to complete compulsory school the best they can.

On the one hand, students discuss their plans with their parents and share them with their friends, but on the other hand they want to have some independence. In particular when parents are pushy towards the choice of subjects or a particular course, students tend to focus on their own preferences in terms of what they like and what they feel more compatible with their own identity. While parents' suggestions are rational and consider the costs and benefits of them, pupils' ones can be more related to personal preference, even when they are good at most subjects.

Considering the state of the decisional process in year 11, most students are certain about what to do, although the majority of them came to that decision during the year or just a few months before the end of it. As seen with the apprentices though, school choices are not definitive and can change after a few months into the new course. Another part of students is still uncertain, not only about the next stage but also for a general future plan. Students whose parents are not encouraging and whose school results are not so good are those represented most among this group.

Finally, school decision making seems to be a short-term process, if not a last minute decision, for the majority of students. The students who made their mind up about their future a long time ago are, in fact, a small group. They have been working hard from the early stages of school to successfully achieve their plan and they are very focused on it. The majority of students, on the other hand, tend to perceive each school stage as a separate one, so that a new choice can be made at the end of each.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

This thesis has examined the role of significant others – parents, teachers and peers – on the school decision making processes of children aged 15-16. This age marks, in fact, the end of compulsory schooling and the need for pupils to make their first crucial decision about the future. They can enter the labour market full-time (or part-time) or they can enter post-secondary education. The nature of the English education system makes the choice of a course in post-secondary education crucial because it will affect their final educational attainment. Although A-levels are not the only courses qualifying for university, they are the best choice in terms of academic preparation and prestige and therefore the transition to tertiary education will be more straightforward for pupils who achieve A-levels compared to vocational qualifications such as BTECs.

Among the explanations for pupils' school choices, especially at this early stage, there is the influence of significant others. Parents affect their children's cultural resources, which accompany them from their first day at school; they support them and encourage them to do well in school, affecting their educational aspirations and therefore attainment. Teachers' style of interaction with children and their expectations concerning their performance can also affect children's school success. Finally peers – schoolmates and neighbourhood friends

– can represent models to imitate, which can result in either better or worse educational attainment.

This chapter will bring together the results from the earlier chapters that considered the different roles of significant others in children’s school choices at the end of compulsory schooling in England.

The major questions that have been considered in this thesis, and that will be discussed here in the light of the overall findings, are how plans after the end of compulsory schooling differ among students of different social and ethnic backgrounds, and how far the influence of significant others can explain these differences. The results of these analyses, with the link to other potential explanatory mechanisms, will be the focus of the next sections. In addition, some policy implications of the results will be highlighted.

5.1. Students’ educational aspirations and plans after the end of compulsory schooling

The thesis began with the analysis of the formation (and change) of educational aspirations of students during the years of preparation for GCSEs (years 9 to 11). The variable that was used for this was the students’ intentions after the end of year 11, which were identified as leaving full-time education, entering post-secondary education or, in case of unsure pupils, ‘do not know’. Generally speaking, this first part of the thesis aimed at identifying the general pattern of educational aspirations and the main explanatory factors that would be further analysed in the following chapters, in particular chapter 4.

Overall, the majority of students have stable aspirations over the years, which indicates they have some kind of plan for the future. Moreover, the vast majority of those are high aspirations, i.e. to enter post-secondary education. The rest of the students, who show unstable aspirations, can be divided in three groups: (1) students whose intentions become to stay in school; (2) students whose intentions become to leave education; and (3) students whose intentions keep changing with no specific pattern until year 11.

The two main explanatory factors for these results are social class and ethnicity. Working class pupils are those most likely to have unstable aspirations and, in particular, to start year 9 with low aspirations (or without a plan). Although a big percentage of them become part of group (1) in the following years, working class pupils remain the group with the lowest educational aspirations, representing most of groups (2) and (3). Concerning ethnicity in general, ethnic minority students represents those with the highest and most stable aspirations. The biggest ethnic minority groups in England are represented by (south) Asians and Blacks (African and Caribbean) and they both maintain very high aspirations compared to White English students. They also tend to fulfil their aspirations, as the distribution of students in year 12 shows, and as previous studies have indicated (Rothon, 2007).

Although these results give an interesting general picture concerning the development of educational aspirations among students in years 9 to 11, the qualitative results give some further considerations; in particular concerning the type of course students are planning to enter and their future beyond post-secondary education. Although the majority of students might be certain about staying in education after year 11, they are less certain about the course or subjects to choose. Working class students, in particular boys, tend to leave this decision to a late stage, which sometimes ends up with them 'going with the flow' and entering a course they will then drop out of after less than a year due to the lack of advice and

indecision about their future. This is what the apprentice students in the sample have experienced. On the other hand, middle class students tend to make their plans quite early, at least about the level of education they would like to achieve (usually tertiary education). Ethnic minority students, again, indicate a very interesting situation; despite their (lower) social class, they have very high aspirations and specific plans, which not only include achieving A-levels in chosen subjects, but also a university course and a specific job. The practice of planning ahead is one of the main characteristics that differentiate ethnic minority and middle class White English students from working class White English ones. The main explanatory factor for these results seems to be parental aspirations and expectations. In particular, parental aspirations⁸⁰ are the strongest influence on the formation of pupils' own aspirations, and their strength does not weaken from year 9 to year 11. Although the quantitative analyses do not show any interaction effect between parental aspirations and social class and ethnicity, the qualitative results shed some more light on the issue, in particular on the encouragement and guidance that middle class and ethnic minority parents offer to their children. In the case of middle class parents, the perception is that children need to be guided through scholastic decisions as they will dictate their future success, in line with the parents' own experience. In the case of ethnic minority parents, children are encouraged to be high achievers and to pursue a professional career, which will give them a better social and economic position in the future. On the other hand, working class parents also want what is best for their children, but tend to leave them free to decide without interfering.

On one hand, parental aspirations and their behaviour towards their children's educational plans can be explained using a rational choice approach (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997); children's aspirations, on the other hand, cannot be explained by the B&G model. Among the

⁸⁰ Parental expectations have proved to be endogenous, as they tend to change according to changes in pupils' own intentions, or school performance.

explanations that emerged from the students' accounts, two are the most recurrent: the search for their own identity and the search for independence. Making future plans and following their preferences in terms of courses and subjects is the way pupils of age 15-16 construct their own identity. Despite being pressured by parents into some course or subject which is more prestigious, pupils develop their own plans based on what they like or what they are aspiring to become. The other criterion for choosing a course, especially vocational courses and apprenticeship schemes, which allow an early entry in the labour market, is the search for independence. Although A-levels (and tertiary education) would give better opportunities in the labour market, some students settle for work-based training which is seen as a good compromise, especially when they do not like going to school. The fact that students do not like school is one of the main reasons for them entering vocational training (if not dropping out altogether), such as BTECs and apprenticeship schemes, which do not include examinations.

Although the majority of students have stable plans throughout the years, most of these plans are very general, like stay on in post-secondary education. Many students make their decisions about post-compulsory school in year 11 or are still uncertain about it. Some students say they will stay in school and enter A-levels but will wait to make further plans in the next years. In some cases, as for the apprentices, plans were changed shortly after starting post-compulsory education because they could not cope with or did not like the course. All these examples give the idea of the "lightness" of school decision making at age 15-16, which goes against the idea of long term plans (Morgan, 2005). Many students tend to perceive school choices at this stage as reversible and each school transition as separate from the others.

In summary, this section has argued that educational aspirations and plans vary among students on the basis of social class and ethnicity. On one hand, ethnic minority and middle class pupils have higher and more stable aspirations compared to White English working class pupils as they also receive more encouragement and guidance from their parents. On the other hand, the majority of students make their school choices based on their preferences, rather than a rational consideration of costs and benefits, and they tend to favour short term plans which can be changed along the way. The next section will focus on the explanatory factors of pupils' school choices: parents, teachers and peers.

5.2 The role of significant others

This thesis has followed various well-established theories and (international) results in the sociology of education that links the influence of significant others to children's educational attainment. The focus has been on the effects of family⁸¹, teachers (and the school environment) and peers. Some of the results have been expected, such as those regarding the strong influence of parental resources, and the weak role of teachers, while results concerning (in particular) the role of peers gave a different perspective in the light of previous research. This section will summarize the main results with regards to the effects of each of the above significant others.

⁸¹ We refer here to the immediate family, i.e. parents and siblings.

5.2.1. Family

Overall, parents proved to exert the strongest influence on children's school choices. Moreover, these influences cannot be reduced to parental education and economic resources, but are mainly represented by parental aspirations and encouragement. The analyses in chapter 2 showed that parental aspirations and expectations do not mediate the direct effects of social class (which are mainly channelled through academic ability), and there was no significant interaction effect between the two. Also, parental aspirations are very stable throughout the years, indicating their heterogeneity nature. These results were partly confirmed by the qualitative interviews in chapter 4 (which mainly refer to the situation of advantaged White English children and disadvantaged ethnic minority ones). For both groups, parental guidance and encouragement to school success and high educational achievement have been constant in their upbringing, especially for ethnic minority children. Working class pupils indicate a quite different situation: parental aspirations are not perceived and parental support exists in the form of leaving the child to make his own choices. In other words, the results achieved indicate that all parents, despite social class and ethnicity, have high aspirations for their children's education. However, they have a different way to transmit them to their children, or, in the case of working class White English pupils, fail to transmit them at all. Instead what they transmit to their children is the need to make their own decisions and their support for any decision they will make.

Despite being low-educated and not able to guide their children throughout school choices, parents remain the first and most important role models. Among all significant others, parents are the most trustworthy and the people who most children go to for important decisions such as plans for the future. Although teachers might be more well-informed and experienced about school matters, they represent the last source student would go for advice.

Although the overall results show that aspirations and encouragement are the strongest parental resource, the thesis also focused on the role of different types of parental involvement in children's school success according to the results of previous research in the field. There were three types of involvement highlighted by the analyses of chapter 3: participation in school-related activities (which included parental aspirations and expectations), supervision of children's school work, in particular in the form of help with homework and feelings towards the scholastic institution. On one hand, the results showed some effects of participation in school-related activities and feelings towards the scholastic institution on pupils' school choices at age 16, while supervision of children's school work did not bear any effects.

On the other hand, the results did not support the hypotheses of differences in parental involvement in children's education with regards to social and/or ethnic background. Although this could be partly explained by the sensitive nature of the questions asked in the survey⁸² used for the analyses, part of the results was supported by the qualitative data. All students in the sample reported that their parents participate in school meetings and speak regularly with the teachers; in middle class families mostly both parents attend, while in working class families it is usually one parent. The qualitative data did not provide specific information about parental feelings towards school, so results could not be discussed further. Concerning parental involvement in the form of helping with homework, not only did the qualitative data show a different picture, but they also provide some new insights. Much as expected, only middle class, well-educated parents help their children with homework while working class parents, especially ethnic minority parents whose first language is not English, cannot help with homework. They might offer to help, as the students report, but they do not

⁸²Parental lack of participation in children's education is, in fact, considered quite negatively by others, therefore parents might feel a social pressure to give a positive response when interviewed face to face.

have sufficient knowledge to be able to do so. The fact that parents cannot help with homework does not necessarily represent a problem though; older siblings are, in fact, a crucial source of help because they have the knowledge and familiarity with how school works. Older siblings can also become a substitute role model when parents do not feel able to advise their children regarding school decisions. In case where there are no older siblings, students can also find help from school mates.

5.2.2 Teachers and the school environment

Overall, the results concerning the role of teachers in children's school decisions suggest that teachers' influence is very small. This thesis has highlighted two possible types of effects: teachers' consideration of students' school performance and teachers as source of information and advice for future school choices. The data file provided us with rather little information to link the role of teachers to pupils' educational plans; the only information available was, in fact, the teachers' evaluation of the students with regards to performance, which was repeated in all the waves. Moreover, this variable reflects the point of view of the students, i.e. his/her perception of the teachers' evaluation of his/her school performance. The results in chapter 2 suggested that this measure is not correlated to pupils' intentions about post-secondary education. Although this result might need to be further explored with better measures, it is supported by the qualitative interviews (and previous research).

In general, pupils perceive teachers as 'authority' and, although they might consider them friendly and helpful, they remain someone who evaluate their work and 'affect' their school results. For this reason, in particular, teachers are not considered as trustworthy in the same way as parents and siblings are. Although most students would consider them as very experienced and qualified to give advice in school matters, they would rarely ask them for

advice about the future. Teachers tend to be addressed for help as the last resource, in cases where students are still very uncertain about their future by the end of year 11, or the pupil does not have other sources of information and advice. Having said that, another resource that students seem to use is the careers service, which has proven to offer a good service, especially in terms of different school choices and subjects offered.

A significant result suggested by the thesis is the importance of the school environment with regards to resources, policies, and school composition. The better the resources of a school, the more middle class families it would attract, resulting in the school being able to focus on getting their students to achieve better results for its own prestige. This also relates to the effect of the overall composition of the school, which has been highlighted by various studies.

5.2.3 Peers

Generally speaking, the results of this thesis indicate a very small influence of peers in children's school decisions. Although the results in chapter 2 suggested a strong correlation between children knowing what their friends' plans were at the end of compulsory education and their own aspirations, further research in chapter 4 did not confirm that. On the other hand, this thesis confirms the results of previous research about the effects of school composition. As mentioned in the previous section, school environment is a crucial factor in 'shaping' students' aspirations and school conduct. In the case of peers influence, the fact that most of pupils' schoolmates are planning to enter A-levels and then university can have a positive impact on pupils' own future plans.

Overall, most children share their plans with their peers. Discussing options is perceived by most pupils as a normal activity, especially as all (or most of) their friends are the same age

and in the process of making the same decisions for the future schooling. Discussing options, though, very rarely consists of asking for advice; because although peers are going through their same experiences, they are not perceived as well-informed or trustworthy in the same way as parents and older siblings are. Moreover, friends' intentions, even when different from their own, do not seem to affect pupils' own choices. As mentioned earlier, the focus of pupils is on their own interests and what is best for them. None of them is worried about being separated by their friends. These cases could be referred to as peer influence.

However, peers can represent a source of influence in some cases: when students are very uncertain about their future plans and cannot receive help from their family or when peers are older and more experienced. In the first situation, students do not really make a choice in the end, but resolve their uncertainty by just following others' choices; some apprentice students were among those. In the second case, children had older friends, usually outside school, who, because of the choices they already made and qualifications already achieved, are perceived as experienced and trustworthy, and consulted them for advice on future plans.

Concerning the nature of peer relationships, this is mainly based on values such as 'likeability' and social acceptance. Common hobbies and memberships to the same clubs and sport teams are also at the root of friendships. Pupils do not perceive differences in social background with their friends; or, if they do, they do not consider them as important. When asked about their relationships with friends, their focus is on personal characteristics and common interests.

Finally, chapter 4 did not highlight major differences with regards to social class and ethnicity; most pupils perceive their friends as someone they share their time with, both in and outside school. Peers experience similar situations, from school challenges, adolescence issues and more and therefore they feel at ease sharing those with each other. However, some

ethnic minority children, especially girls, tend not to see their schoolmates much outside school and instead spend a lot of time with relatives, such as cousins and family friends.

5.2.4. Summary

In summary, the results found in this thesis suggest that the parents (and siblings) are, among significant others, the real influence. They are perceived as trustworthy and they represent the first source of advice and information in important matters like school choices. Teachers, albeit being perceived as well-informed and experienced by children, are not trusted for advice, primarily due to their role as authority figures. They are, however, a source of information, in the case of very uncertain students who do not receive help from their family. Finally, peers are mostly those with whom children share plans for the future, along with common interests and their free time outside school. They do not represent, though, a source of information and are not generally trusted for advice in school matters. Only in the case of uncertain students, friends' plans can represent a good option to follow.

5.3. Gender differences

Gender differences were considered for all of the outcomes and some of the results have already been mentioned in the previous sections. Overall, gender differences with regards to children's educational aspirations can be explained according to previous research; not only do girls have higher and more stable aspirations than boys across all social classes and ethnic groups, but they are also less likely to change their plans towards dropping out of school, compared to boys. Girls are also still overrepresented in post-secondary education, in

particular with respect to A-level courses, whereas vocational education is still preferred by boys.

Some gender differences were highlighted by the qualitative interviews with regards to peer relationships; firstly, girls are keener to discuss their plans about the future with their friends and this is perceived as natural in a relationship. Whereas some boys feel the same way, many others do not feel comfortable in discussing school decisions with their friends and prefer to share common interests such as sports and hobbies. Secondly, as I mentioned earlier, ethnic minority girls see their schoolmates only at school and tend to stay with relatives, such as cousins, when outside school. This was not the case with ethnic minority boys, whose friends at school were also seen outside school, perhaps, along with some neighbourhood friends.

5.4 Theoretical implications

The previous sections summarised the findings of the analyses in this thesis; in this section we will discuss those findings in the light of the literature considered.

The main findings about the nature of educational aspirations only partly support the B&G theory of relative risk aversion; a differentiation based on social class can be observed mainly among White English pupils. On the one hand there are middle class pupils, whose aspirations are the highest and most stable over the years leading to the end of compulsory schooling; on the other hand there are working class pupils, whose aspirations are less stable and tend to change and become final by year 11. However, this is not the case of ethnic minority pupils; despite their social disadvantage, their aspirations do not differ from those of White English middle class pupils. These results, which were confirmed by the qualitative

data, indicate a different mechanism than the one hypothesized by B&G. According to the B&G theory, children (and their families) are driven in their decisions by a pressure to avoid social demotion, which is stronger than academic ability or the chance to fail in school.

While this mechanism can be observed for middle class White English children, it does not apply to working class and ethnic minority children; the latter, in particular, show strong aspirations of social mobility, which are supported by families with little or no economic resources. Not only do ethnic minority children have high aspirations, but they are also overrepresented in post-compulsory and tertiary education. The situation for working class children is also different: the fact that their educational aspirations (and achievements) are lower than that of middle class children can be explained by a different attitude toward school. The qualitative interviews show that sometimes working class pupils do not like going to school and although they are aware of the advantages of having a good qualification, they do not like schoolwork and examinations and prefer, for this reason, vocational education such as BTECS or apprentices.

According to the above, the rational approach, in particular the B&G theory, seem to be applicable only to middle class children, whose school decision processes suggest the main aim to avoid social demotion. This statement is especially suggested by the qualitative results, which indicated that even when middle class children did not have a specific plan for the future (in terms of subjects to choose and a future job), their general idea was to stay in school and achieve tertiary education.

The differences in the school decision processes, with regards to social class and ethnicity mentioned so far could be better explained by the 'ethnic choosing' model by Ball et al. (2002). This model suggests two different types of choosers – embedded and contingent – on the basis of family background. On the one hand, embedded choosers represent middle class

pupils, whose parents have a high level of education and who are expected to stay in school and achieve tertiary education, as their parents did before them. On the other hand, contingent choosers indicate working class pupils, whose parents are not well educated and their school decisions are based mainly on parental encouragement and support, as they cannot count on a great amount of economic resources and information about school choices from the family. A clear example is ethnic minority children, whose parents have been pushing them to be high achievers and to aspire to a prestigious job, to ensure a better future for them.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of students have a general idea about their future plans, such as stay in school, while only a ethnic minority of them developed a specific plan and are working to achieve it. The quantitative results show, in fact, that a part of the students, especially working class White English students, have unstable intentions over the years leading to the end of compulsory education and tend to reach a final decision in year 11. However, as the qualitative data show, part of those students whose aspirations are to enter post-secondary education did not make long-term plans and are still uncertain about the subjects to choose and the career they would like to pursue. These results suggest a different situation than the one hypothesized by Morgan's model of prefigurative and preparatory commitment. The idea that pupils make long-term plans, based on the influence of significant others and other factors, and then make their choices in order to achieve those plans, only concerns a small part of pupils. These pupils are mostly ethnic minority and part of middle class White English, whose school choices and future plans are decided in the early years. For the rest of pupils it is different; firstly they do not consider their educational careers as long-term plans, but rather as a sum of different stages. In this way they can make a decision for every stage separately. Although Morgan sees school choices as a complex set of choices and plans, the qualitative data revealed the 'lightness' of school choices; not only do children

tend to make short-term plans but, in some cases, those choices are considered as reversible, so that they can decide to 'try' to enter a course with the option of changing their choice in case they do not like it.

The fact that the majority of children make short-term plans and keep their options open can also be explained by a process of identity construction, which Morgan does not consider in his model. At the age of 15-16 pupils are still forming their identity and their preferences in terms of what they like or dislike and the sort of adults they want to become. The choice of course and subjects is an important part of this process and although pupils can receive some help from their significant others, it is ultimately their decision.

Concerning the role of significant others, the results of this thesis show that family – parents and older siblings – are the only real influence on children's school decision processes. Again, this does not support Morgan's model, which suggest the important role of peers and teachers on children's formation of future plans. According to the qualitative results, peer relationships are mainly for sharing experiences and hobbies and spending time together, while teachers are considered mainly as authorities.

Parents, as the most trustworthy people, are asked for advice and trusted with discussions about future plans. Although they might not be able to help their children economically, they can encourage them and support them in their choices, as the model by Ball et al. indicates. Moreover, as the results of this thesis indicate, parental aspirations for their children's education are not directly related to social class. This result does not support the B&G theory, which claims, again, that families are driven in their choices, by a pressure to avoid downward mobility.

However, there are differences among parents with regards to social class; parental involvement in children's education can be different, especially in the way parents support

their children. This is related to a lack of confidence by parents with low education, which prefer to let their children make their choices instead of guiding them, as middle class parents do. These class differences only apply to White English families though, while, as seen before, ethnic minority parents' guide their children through school choices and encourage them to make the best decisions for their future, despite their lack of education or economic resources.

5.5. Policy implications

Some of the findings from this thesis suggest the need to focus on their policy implications.

Concerning children's school choices at age 15-16, there is a need for more information to be available for the students with regards to the characteristics and organization of post-secondary education. Although the career service has proven a very important means for students to know about different courses and sixth form colleges available in their area, some of the students, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, do not know what to expect from each course. The case of the apprentices, who dropped out of A-levels after just a few months, is a clear example of this.

Concerning parental involvement in children's education, there is a significant problem with lower class White English parents; the fact that they are not well-educated and are not familiar with the school system, prevent them to help their children in the school decision process. A career service should also be available for parents to provide them with information about different courses and where they lead. Lower class parents need to be more confident about their role as advisor and help their children with school choices especially in the transition to post-secondary education. The main issue with lower class children is, in

fact, their uncertainty about future plans, due to the fact that parents leave them to make their own choices.

Also concerning parental involvement in children's education, the results pointed out that less educated parents are not able to help their children with homework. Although older siblings can step in and provide help, the problem remains for those children who do not have older siblings (or they do not live with them). Schools should all include in their schedules a 'homework after class group', which aims to provide peer to peer and teacher to student help with homework. Some schools already have this but it needs to be extended to all schools, especially those in the most deprived areas.

Finally, more attention should be paid by policy makers to ethnic minority families. Although ethnic minority children are overrepresented in post-secondary and tertiary education, most of them come from poor backgrounds and lack economic resources. Moreover, many ethnic minority parents who migrated from very poor countries, albeit having some degree of education, cannot use their qualification in the new country and end up in low paid jobs. This is a big issue for ethnic minority parents and it should be addressed: some educational courses, especially English language classes, should be more available to ethnic minority parents who want to achieve better expendable qualifications and improve their economic situation.

Appendix A

Principal component analysis

For each of the years considered, pupils are asked a set of 12 questions about his feeling towards school. These are all closed questions (which are listed below in the component matrix), with ordinal response scales that goes from totally agree to totally disagree. As some of the questions refer to positive feelings and some to negative, I recoded the negative response scales, so they go from totally disagree to totally agree. The first step is performing a reliability analysis, which gives me a Crombach's alpha of 0.8, so very reliable. After that I performed a principal component analysis; following are the results⁸³:

⁸³ The component analysis for wave 2 and 3 gave the same results, therefore there are not displayed here.

Table A.1: Component matrix (wave 1)

	Components		
	1	2	3
I am happy when I am at school	.618	.259	-.278
Most of the time I don't want to go to school	-.767	.348	.463
People think my school is a good school	.369	.385	.026
On the whole I like being at school	.695	.244	-.257
I work as hard as I can in school	.537	.383	.141
I am bored in lessons	-.796	.238	-.451
The work I do in lessons is interesting to me	.634	.309	.152
I get good marks for my work	.441	.520	.008
School is a waste of time	.479	-.048	-.151
I don't want to go to school	.767	-.348	-.463
I count the minutes until the class ends	.501	-.316	.293
I am bored during the lessons	.796	-.238	.451
Work in lessons is a waste of time	.549	-.018	.152

According to the component matrix and the scree plot below, I only used the first component in my successive analyses. Also the first component only represents almost 40 percent of the variance explained.

Figure A.1: Plot of the eigenvalues of the correlation matrix

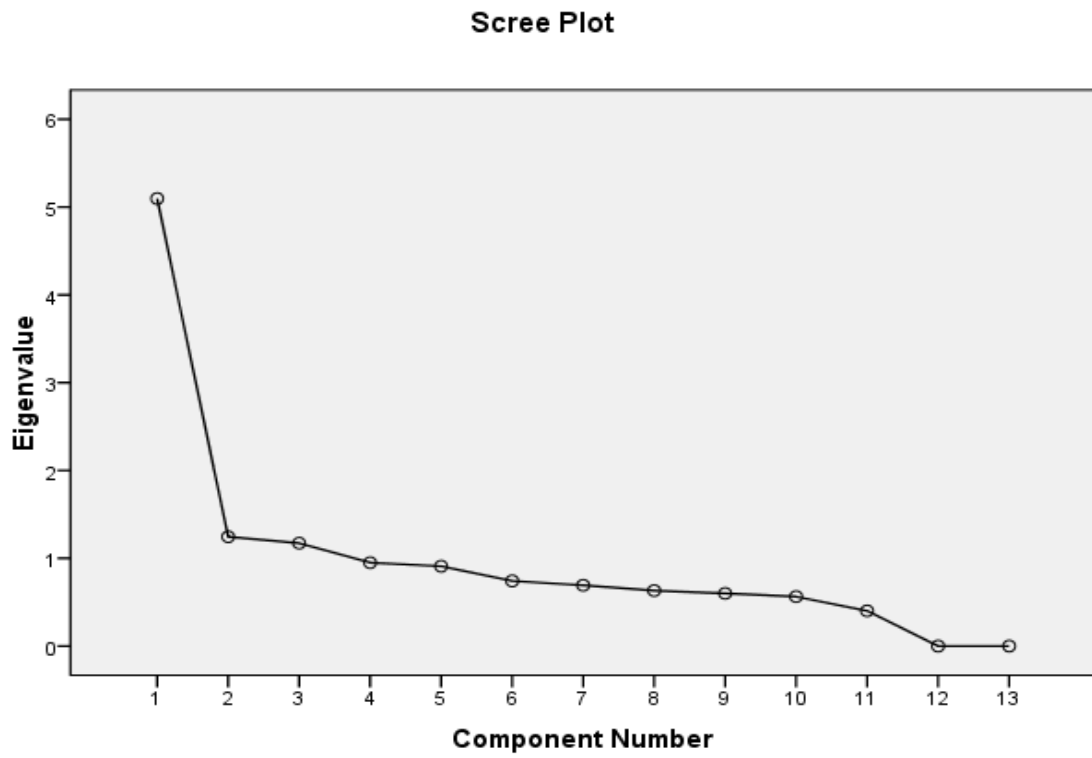


Table A.2: Distribution of pupils by school choices, ethnic origin and gender (row percentages).

	Ethnicity	In full time	In full time	Else	N
Males	White	75.3	11.2	13.5	4008
	Asian	92.8	1.3	5.9	966
	Black	91.1	1.4	7.5	439
	Mixed/other	85.1	3.0	11.9	402
	N	4656	480	679	5815
Female	White	80.9	6.7	12.4	3823
	Asian	93.3	.7	5.9	976
	Black	93.9	1.7	4.4	479
	Mixed/other	88.6	2.7	8.6	475
	N	4874	285	594	5753

Appendix B

Cluster analysis

The result of the cluster analysis is a three – cluster solution. Table B.1 reports the cluster distribution: in terms of their relative size, cluster 1 and 3 account for the 41% and 42.5% respectively, while cluster 2 is the smallest one, accounting for 16.5% of the sample.

Table B.1: Cluster distribution

Clusters	%	N
1	41	3699
2	16.5	1487
3	42.5	3837
Total	100	9023

Table B.2 reports the distribution of individuals within each cluster, according to the variables included in the analysis. In general, it is possible to identify some main differences between the three groups; parents in cluster 1 show a high level of

participation in school-related activities, such as attending school meetings and paying for private classes; they have high aspirations and expectation concerning their children's education, but they clearly experience their children's school as unfriendly and not easy to deal with. They also feel unprepared concerning school matters and therefore unable to help their children. We can refer to cluster 1 as 'supportive parents'.

Cluster 2 clearly refers to parents who are not involved in their children's education; they have the lowest rate of participation in school meetings, they would not pay for private or extra classes and their aspirations and expectations concerning their children's education are the lowest. They do, though feel at easy at school, and consider themselves well-prepared to deal with school matters. The fact that they have special arranged meeting with teachers and discuss their children' matters with them in the highest percentage is perhaps indicative of the fact that their children have issues with their school performance. We can refer to this group as the 'low-commitment parents'.

The third cluster is composed by parents who are committed in every dimension; they have the highest rate of participation in school-related activities, they have the highest aspirations and expectations for their children future and they feel like they belong to the scholastic environment and are very knowledgeable about school matters. We will refer to this cluster as 'all round parents'.

In general, the main differences between the groups concern their attitude towards school and education, which differentiate the first group, of supportive parents, and parental aspirations and expectations, which differentiate the low-committed parents from the others. These results also suggest that participation in school-related

activities is not related to feelings towards education, as groups 1 and 2 demonstrate. We also expected to find substantial differences within the groups concerning the practice of helping with homework, but this is not supported by the results in table 3.3. Even low commitment parents report in the same very high percentage, compared to the other groups, to help their children with homework.

Table B.2: percentage of parents within each cluster reporting that they...

	Supportive parents	Low-committed parents	All round parents
attend school meetings	88.3	70.1	89
Have specially arranged meetings	22.2	36.1	25.2
talk to teachers about pupil's schooling	31.5	33.4	30.7
Talk to teachers about next year's plans	45.6	44.6	46.6
Get involved in pupil's education	33.4	22.8	32.2
Paid for private classes	18.1	4.4	18.5
Paid for extra classes	15.4	5.6	14.1
Help with homework	70	72.6	72.2
Make sure pupil does homework	36.4	38.3	37.3
Want their children to start A-levels	96.6	15.6	99.9
Expect their children to start A-levels	95.9	9.5	99.5
Talk often about day at school	44.1	44.9	46.9
Think it's Easy to deal with school	34.6	68.4	83.8
Thinks school gives clear information about pupil	27.2	72	93.6
Thinks school helps parent to get involved	3.4	54.1	86
Have Knowledge about school to help pupil	11.8	48.9	73.8
Have enough knowledge about qualifications	13.5	22.5	27.8

Table B.3: distribution of type of parental involvement by pupils' current activity

	Supportive	Low-committed	Rounded	N
Full-time job	5.6	7.2	6.3	511
A levels	70.2	70.0	70.3	5801
Vocational/apprentice	11.6	11.2	10.7	923
Else	12.6	11.6	12.7	1031
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	8266

Table B.4: Pupil current activity (at age 16-17) by type of parental involvement in education and social class.

		Full-time job	A-levels	Training/ apprentice	Else	N
I	Supportive	4.3	79.9	7.8	8.0	1406
	Low-committed	4.7	79.4	9.0	6.9	577
	Rounded	5.8	78.1	7.7	8.3	1486
	Total	5.0	79.1	8.0	8.0	3469
II	Supportive	6.2	68.4	13.5	12.0	275
	Low-committed	13.0	67.0	11.0	9.0	100
	Rounded	5.2	70.4	13.1	11.3	291
	Total	6.8	69.1	12.9	11.3	666
III	Supportive	10.6	68.0	11.8	9.6	322
	Low-committed	8.1	63.0	16.3	12.6	135
	Rounded	8.2	65.2	12.3	14.2	365
	Total	9.1	65.9	12.8	12.2	822
IV	Supportive	10.4	56.3	16.3	17.1	240
	Low-committed	11.3	57.7	12.4	18.6	97
	Rounded	12.0	59.9	17.4	10.7	242
	Total	11.2	58.0	16.1	14.7	579
V	Supportive	5.7	60.2	15.9	18.2	527
	Low-committed	12.4	55.9	13.4	18.3	186
	Rounded	7.2	65.5	11.0	16.3	502
	Total	7.3	61.7	13.5	17.4	1215
Non employed	Supportive	4.1	63.4	13.6	18.9	566
	Low-committed	4.2	67.8	12.3	15.7	236
	Rounded	4.0	62.8	12.8	20.5	556
	Total	4.1	63.9	13.0	19	1358

Table B.5: Pupil current activity (at age 16-17) by parental involvement in education and ethnicity.

		Full-time job	A- levels	Training/ apprentice	Else	N
White	Supportive	7.5	64.9	13.2	14.4	2299
	Low-committed	10.1	64.4	12.4	13.1	894
	Rounded	8.7	64.5	12.8	14.0	2380
	Total	8.5	64.6	12.9	14.0	5573
Asian	Supportive	1.2	83.2	7.0	8.7	601
	Low-committed	.8	84.5	7.1	7.5	239
	Rounded	.8	82.2	7.3	9.7	589
	Total	1.0	83.0	7.1	8.9	1429
Black	Supportive	1.3	79.8	9.7	9.2	238
	Low-committed	1.7	83.5	7.8	7.0	115
	Rounded	1.8	86.1	5.7	6.4	280
	Total	1.6	83.3	7.6	7.6	633
Mixed/Other	Supportive	3.2	78.5	8.8	9.6	251
	Low-committed	3.8	69.2	13.5	13.5	104
	Rounded	1.5	79.2	5.0	14.2	260
	Total	2.6	77.2	8.0	12.2	615

Table B.6: cross-tabulation of type of parental involvement in education and social class, ethnicity, parental education and family structure.

	Supportive	Low-committed	All-round	N
A: by family social class				
I	40.5	16.6	42.8	
II	41.3	15.0	43.7	
III	39.2	16.4	44.4	
IV	41.5	16.8	41.8	
V	43.4	15.3	41.3	
Non employed	41.7	17.4	40.9	
Total	41.1	16.4	42.4	
A: by ethnicity				
White	41.2	16.1	42.7	
Asian	42.1	16.6	41.3	
Black	37.9	17.9	44.2	
Mixed/Other	40.8	16.5	42.8	
Total	41.1	16.4	42.6	
C: by parental education				
Degree	41.0	16.9	42.1	1533
Higher education	38.4	15.8	45.7	1314
A levels	41.3	17.2	41.6	1367
GCSEs	42.7	16.0	41.3	1998
primary and below	39.6	14.5	45.8	661
No formal qualification	42.1	17.2	40.8	1440
Total	41.1	16.4	42.5	8313
D: by family structure				
married couple	41.1	16.4	42.5	5925
Lone parent	40.9	16.2	42.8	2308
No parent	41.1	19.5	39.4	231
Total	41.1	16.4	42.5	8464

the same way, it is socially unacceptable for parents not to participate in school related activities and not to be supportive of their children's education. This issue need to be researched further and it might be useful for future surveys to try to capture parents' behaviour concerning their children's education in a different way.

Appendix C

Information sheets and survey for qualitative research

Information sheet for students

Information sheet for parents

Questionnaire for interviews

Department of Sociology
University of Oxford
Manor road
Oxford
OX1 3UQ
UK
Telephone: 01865 2 81740

Dear Student,

My name is Elisa Forestan and I am a research student at Oxford University. The topic I am working on is the choices that young people make about what to do after compulsory school.

The general aim of this project is to study how your parents, teachers and friends affect your school choices for next year. In particular, I would like to focus my attention on your aspirations and expectations for the next years, both concerning education and a future job.

To conduct my research I need your help. If you are willing to help my study, I would like to ask you some questions about these topics. I will need to record your answers with a tape recorder, but your information will always remain anonymous, even when I will use them to write my research.

The interview will happen during school time and in school. Both the head teacher and your teachers have agreed to my research, so if you need more information you can ask them.

With this form you declare that:

- You have read the participant information sheet previously provided by me
- You had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and have received appropriate and satisfactory answers and additional information
- You are aware that you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by advising the researcher of this decision
- You understand that this project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee
- You have been informed that the researcher will be the one storing and using the data and that the data will be stored also after the end of the project
- You agree to participate in this study

Participant name (printed).....

Participant signature.....

Date.....

Department of Sociology

University of Oxford
Manor road
Oxford
OX1 3UQ
UK
Telephone: 01865 2 81740

Dear Parent/Guardian

My name is Elisa Forestan and I am a research student at Oxford University. The topic I am working on is the choices that young people make about what to do after compulsory school.

The general aim of this project is to study the factors affecting individuals' school choices after compulsory education. In particular, I would like to focus my attention on how parents, peers and teachers affect pupils' aspirations and expectations, both concerning education and a future occupation.

The purpose of the study is to put some more light on the processes concerning differences in educational attainment among individuals and how family background and school background, for instance, are interrelated.

To conduct my research I need your child's help. I would like to ask him/her some questions about these topics. I will need to record his/her answers with a tape recorder, but the information will always remain anonymous, even when I will use them to write my research.

The interview will happen during school time and in school. Both the head teacher and teachers have agreed to my research, so if you need more information you can ask them or, of course you can contact me.

With this form I inform you that:

- The project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee;
- The head teacher of the school has given his/her consent to the project;
- Your child/children can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by advising the researcher of this decision;
- The researcher will be the one storing and using the data; that the data will be stored anonymously also after the end of the project.

With this form you declare your consent for your child/children to participate to the study.

Parent/ Guardian name
(printed).....

Parent/ Guardian
Signature.....

Date.....

Questions to guide the interview

During this interview I am going to ask you about your plans for the future, your experience in this school and your relationship with your peers and family.

Let's talk about your future plans:

What is your plan for next year?

When did you decide what to do next year?

What about university? Do you want to go to university?

How many options did you consider? Are they all the options you have? Did you research about different schools and universities? Did someone help you with your research?

What job would you like to do in the future?

Thinking about your choice for next year, did someone affect your choice?

Did your parents have a role in your choice for next year?

Did your teachers affect your choice? Did they advise you to make a particular decision? How do you regard their opinion concerning your future plans?

What about your school friends? What are they doing next year? do you think they have been affected in their choice from someone, like parents or teachers? Do you agree with their choices?

Do you talk to your school friends about future plans? Which aspects do you consider most when thinking about next year plans?

What subjects are you interested in studying at the next level?

Now I will focus on relationship with friends and your feelings towards the school environment:

Do you have many friends at school?

Are your friends in your same stream, is it low or high?

Are your friends in your sport, drama....group?

Do you see your school mates only at school or also outside school?

Do you have different friends outside school? Neighbourhood friends for instance?

Do you feel comfortable around your school mates? And around your friends outside school?

(if the interviewee feel comfortable around one of the two) why do you not feel comfortable with them? How do they differ from the other group?

Do you like going to school?

Would you say your school represents a friendly environment?

What about sport, arts and this kind of activities (or extracurricular); do you do any at school? And outside school?

What do you do at weekends?

What do you enjoy doing in general?

And what do you not like to do..but maybe have to?

Do you think having a good education is important for future success? Why?

Now I am going to ask you some questions about your relation with your parents and their role in your education:

How often do you talk to your parents about things that matter to you?

How often do you talk to your parents about your day at school?

Do your parents help you with homework? How often? Do you ask them to help you or do they offer to do so?

Are your parents happy about how you perform in school? How do you regard their opinion about it?

Would you say your parents are involved in your education, i.e. do they go to parents' evenings, have arranged meetings with your teachers, they talk with you about school reports?

Did your parents guide you in the choice of subjects in year 10? Or did you choose them?

Do your parents talk with you about your future plans? What would they like you to do when you finish compulsory school? Are their plans the same as yours?

To finish, I would like to ask you some questions about your family background:

Who do you live with?

Do you have brothers and sisters?

Is your mother employed?

What is her job (or if not currently working, what was her most recent job)?

What about your father? Is he employed?

What is his job (or if not currently working, what was his most recent job)?

What is your mother highest qualification? And your father?

How would you describe the neighbourhood you live in?

Table C.1: Qualifications and learning from age 16 to 19⁸⁴

Course name	Course specification	Entry requirements	Years of completion	Qualification ⁸⁵ and UCAS points to enter higher education
A levels/AS levels	Focus on traditional study skills; subjects are mostly academic, some can be applied (work related)	At least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C	2; Students can complete just one year (AS level) or continue on the second year (A2) and achieve full A levels.	Level 3 ; The AS level is scored out of 300 points, while A levels are scored out of 600 points.
BTECS, City Guilds, OCR Nationals	Work-related qualifications, available in a wide range of subjects, related to a specific sector or industry	For a level 2 GCSEs at grades D-G; for level 3 GCSEs at grades A*-C	1 or 2 (depending on the course).	Technical certificate, (level 1 -3, depending on the course). 240 points can be achieved at level 3 only.
Apprenticeships	Work related qualification on a specific job	Need to be 16 or over. Might need certain grades in GCSEs maths and English.	Between 1 and 4	Depending on the apprenticeship: (mainly) technical certificate (see above); NVQ at level 2 or 3; Key skill qualification.
Higher/Advanced Diplomas	Designed in partnership with employers and universities, it offers practical skills for both work and further studies	Higher: 5 GCES at grades D-G; Advanced: 5 GCSEs at grade A*-C	2	Higher: equivalent to 7 GCSEs at grades A*-C; level 2; Advanced: equivalent to 3 and a half A levels; level 3

⁸⁴ Department of education, <http://www.education.gov.uk/16to19>,

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/QualificationsExplained/DG_10039018.

⁸⁵ The national qualification scheme refers to the how qualifications compare in terms of the demands they place on learners.

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