

Widening Participation in Higher
Education: An Interpretative
Phenomenological Analysis of the Aspirations
of Young People Living in Low Participation
Neighbourhoods

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by

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Abstract

As part of the policy of widening participation, higher education institutions are required to provide effective, targeted outreach programmes to raise the aspirations of certain groups of young people to aspire to higher education. Whilst research, particularly in the short-term, suggests that these outreach programmes are successful at raising aspirations, there is a lack of interpretative research approaches that examine aspiration as a construct of everyday lived experience.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a research approach, a series of interviews were conducted with five students across Years 9 and 10. The students all lived in Low Participation Neighbourhoods and attended the same secondary school in the south of England. The interviews explored experiences, perceptions and reflections on their current life and possible future selves.

Through the creation of three super-ordinate themes: 'Empowerment'; 'Familiarity'; and 'Broadening Horizons', the study found that the participants do not lack aspiration, indeed they all have some form of aspiration towards higher education as well as aspiring to 'middle-class' professions. The study found that these aspirations are firmly set within the contexts of their individual lives and experiences and that the young people attach a worth to certain aspirations which makes them, in the context of their lives, seem realistic and desirable.

The implications of this study are that it should be recognised that aspirations in young people are based on what happens to them in their own everyday world. It, therefore, creates possibilities to develop outreach programmes that recognise and encompass the wider everyday experiences of these young people. This would provide a more nuanced and bespoke approach to supporting young people in embracing and nurturing their aspirations, as opposed to a primary focus on 'raising' aspirations towards higher education.

If their 'capacity' to aspire can be increased, then ultimately the young people will feel empowered and confident in deciding whether higher education is for them, so that one day they may become exactly what they once dreamed of becoming.

Dedication

In memory of Woody

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Abbreviations

BU	Bournemouth University
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LPN	Low Participation Neighbourhood
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
NNCO	National Networks for Collaborative Outreach
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-economic Classification
OFFA	The Office for Fair Access
OFSTED	The Office for Standards in Education
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
RCT	Randomised Control Trial
TEF	The Teaching Excellence Framework
UCAS	The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
WP	Widening Participation

Preface

More than at any other stage in life, the teenage years are a time of possibility, a time of promise and worry about who or what you may become (Oyserman and Markus 1990). With this in mind, in November 2016 I met Megan, a Year 10 pupil, for the fourth time. We talked about, amongst other things, her attitudes towards school, her home life and what types of things she did with her friends. We also discussed her aspiration to become a psychiatrist or work in law and order (in Megan's words: "*like a lawyer, maybe a detective, stuff like that or a like a mystery journalist*").

Megan also talked about her local neighbourhood:

My area has a reputation for being I guess chavvy. Maybe people who are chavs¹ don't really have a great attitude, don't really want to go to university, they just want to leave school, not do any extra study, just get a job, move in to an apartment and stuff like that I guess (Megan interview 3 - page 1)

She went on:

A lot of my area is just stuff like council flats and stuff like that so you're not really going to expect someone from like a council flat to go to university really (Megan 3-1)

This appeared to be a particularly pertinent thing to say because Megan herself has clear aspirations to study at university later in life. What experiences in her life so far have created such an aspiration, one that differs so much from her perception of the life chances of young people living in her local neighbourhood?

¹ <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/chav>.

This, therefore, is a study of aspiration. It is about the aspirations of five young people. Whilst, as this thesis will demonstrate, their lives may be different to one another, these young people share some common ground. Firstly, they all attend the same school, located in an urban area along the south coast of England. Secondly, and crucially, they are all brought together (probably unknowingly to them) because they live in areas of the country where the progression of young people in to higher education (HE) is low. Defined as Low Participation Neighbourhoods, this, coupled with the school that they attend, makes them a key target group for HE outreach programmes that aim to increase the numbers of young people from disadvantaged and under-represented groups entering HE. Therefore, whilst this is a study of aspiration, it is firmly set in the context of the widening participation agenda, and in particular, HE outreach programmes.

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Finally, to Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie, thank you for sharing your experiences with me, I hope I have done you justice.

² All names and places have been anonymised throughout.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Development of Widening Participation policy and practice

With concerns over low levels of social mobility, widening participation (WP) has become a major part of government social policy over the past twenty years. Because WP can be used in a multitude of settings and is linked to a wide range of policies and practice (Andreshak-Behrman 2003), definitions of WP vary. For the purposes of this thesis, I define WP as:

“Widening participation to higher education is about ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access higher education, get the support they need to succeed in their studies, and progress to further study and/or employment suited to their qualifications and potential” (Atkins and Ebdon 2014, p.6).

The importance of this definition is that it demonstrates how the WP agenda has evolved to encompass the whole student higher education (HE) lifecycle, from access to employability, as opposed to earlier definitions of WP that were concerned with tackling social inequalities in access to HE (HEFCE 2006) - that is, focusing solely on admission to HE.

The need for a more socially equitable HE system is not a new phenomenon and according to Lewis (2002), the merits of WP have been clear to all for a long time. The Robbins Report (1963), for example, which is recognised as the catalyst for a rapid expansion of the university sector, explicitly stated that:

“Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so” (Robbins 1963, p.8).

Within the academic literature it is generally acknowledged that 1997, with the publication of the Dearing Report and the election of a Labour government, was the start of the modern-day drive to widen participation in HE (Stevenson et al. 2010; Bowes et al. 2013b; Cotton et al. 2013; Harrison and Waller 2017). Although WP had been concerned with issues such as ethnicity, gender and disability, WP policy began to focus on the under-representation of potential students from lower socioeconomic groups (Greenbank 2007), described by Newby (2005) as the “last frontier of participation in higher education” (p.4).

I now discuss some of the key developments within WP policy and practice over the past 20 years that has led to it becoming such an important part of government social policy and explain how raising aspirations through pre-HE outreach programmes has become a key part of this agenda.

1.1.1 The Dearing Report

In early 1996, with growing tensions within the sector about the future of HE funding, a number of universities threatened to introduce top-up fees in response to reductions in funding (Parry and Fry 1999). Consequently, later that year, the Conservative government established the first national enquiry into HE funding since Robbins, under the chair of Sir Ron Dearing, to:

“Make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years” (NCIHE 1997, p.3).

Whilst the report had been commissioned under a Conservative government, by the time of publication, a general election had been held and a new Labour government had come into power. The new education minister, David Blunkett, accepted its central recommendation, to introduce tuition fees. This

signalled an end to the notion of 'free' higher education. Critics argued that charging students for fees would discourage rather than encourage wider access and that HE outside the upper-middle classes would remain a 'novelty' (Scott 1998). Although initially there was a reduction in the number of 'under-represented' groups applying to HE (Chitty 2004), admissions from under-represented sections of society continued to rise (The National Audit Office 2002).

Dearing recommended that, when allocating funds:

"They give priority to those institutions which can demonstrate a commitment to widening participation, and have in place a participation strategy, a mechanism for monitoring progress, and provision for review by the governing body of achievement" (NCIHE 1997, p.107).

Whilst Dearing felt that as the proportion of those in the higher socio-economic groups increased, as well as the level of parents with HE qualifications, there would be a natural increase in demand for young people entering HE, Dearing was less able to predict:

"[...] how successful the education system for pupils up to the age of 16 will be in raising the attainments and aspirations of those from lower socio-economic groups so that a greater proportion of them will seek higher education" (NCIHE 1997, p.64).

Thus, here we see the implication from Dearing that progression to HE from certain groups of young people was dependent on them having the aspiration to do so.

1.1.2 New Labour, Aimhigher and the 50% target

Within the 2001 Labour Party general election manifesto, the party made a commitment to: “Open higher education to half of all young people before they are 30” (Labour Party 2001, p.20). This commitment has become a key driver of the WP agenda.

Newby (2005) argues that this drive to widen participation was made on a utilitarian need for the economy to remain competitive in an ever-increasing competitive global marketplace. To do this required recruiting potential students from lower socio-economic groups, as the numbers entering HE from within the middle class were insufficient to meet the forecasts that predicted a large percentage of jobs in the new century would require graduate level skills (Watts 2006). The consequences of not achieving this could be an increase in the proposed skills deficit, which ultimately would hinder economic growth (Bowes et al. 2013b). In 2009, for example, it was predicted that by 2020 over 40% of all jobs would require a graduate level qualification (Department for Children Schools and Families 2009). This was supported by The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) who noted that the sector had reached saturation point in terms of traditional entrants and to achieve the 50% target there would be a need to recruit from non-traditional groups (HEFCE 2006). This movement into the ‘working class’ was made on two assumptions. Firstly that there was a proportion who aspired to HE and secondly that this group would achieve a sufficient level of attainment that would enable them to benefit from HE (Watts and Bridges 2006).

The growing WP agenda coincided with increased participation rates from all social backgrounds (Brown 2011), with, for example, a 23% increase in full-time home acceptances to degree courses between 1994-2000 (Gilchrist et al. 2003). Despite this rapid growth, by the end of the century, whilst participation rates had increased for women and some minority ethnic

groups, there was little or no change in the relative social composition of entrants (Egerton and Halsey 1993; Reay et al. 2001; Lewis 2002) and WP policy began to focus on the underrepresentation of potential students from lower socioeconomic groups, as opposed to a focus on gender.

Established in 2004 (as part of the 2004 Higher Education Act), through an amalgamation of Partnerships for Progression and Excellence in Cities, Aimhigher was the flagship New Labour policy initiative (linked to their 50% target) to widen participation in HE for young people from disadvantaged social groups, with approaching £1billion being spent on it through its lifetime (Harrison 2012).

The programme brought a collaborative approach to WP and outreach. According to Passy (2012), one of the key benefits to a collaborative approach to outreach was that it encouraged partners to focus on how best to design interventions that would benefit the learners rather than meeting individual institutional interests. Initial guidance suggested the overall aim of the programme was:

“To widen participation in HE and increase the number of young people who have the abilities and aspirations to benefit from it” (HEFCE 2004, p.7).

This was to be achieved through five initial objectives, the first of which was to raise aspirations and motivations of young people from under-represented groups to enter HE, thereby returning to the idea proposed by Dearing, that HE participation levels were dependent on levels of aspiration.

1.1.3 The creation of Access Agreements

The 2003 HE White Paper and the subsequent 2004 Higher Education Act created a more formal system of ensuring institutional commitment to WP. The key component of the Act was that from September 2006 all new (home) HE students would be liable to pay variable tuition fees of up to £3,000 a year. However the mode of payment meant that up-front fees were abolished; instead students would be expected to pay back fees once they had graduated (The Commons Library 2015). Greenbank (2006) concludes that this policy was in line with the government's adoption of market values and the economic benefits of HE. As with the Dearing Report in 1997, the case for WP was clearly stated:

“Education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege. We must make certain that the opportunities that higher education brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background” (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p.67).

In terms of aspirations, as Dearing had done back in 1997, the assumption was still being made that the aspirations of young people from non-traditional backgrounds were in some cases a barrier to HE progression. However, aspirations were also becoming more closely aligned to attainment.

“Success in opening up higher education to all who have the potential to benefit from it depends on building aspirations and attainment throughout all stages of education [...] young people and their families need to be encouraged to raise their aspirations and achieve more of their potential in examinations prior to entry to higher education” (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p.68).

With fears that the introduction of tuition fees of up to £3,000 a year could narrow rather than broaden access to HE, the Act saw the creation of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) with an overlying philosophy that HEIs that set fees above the standard level (£1,200) should plan how they will safeguard

and promote access (Clarke 2004, para 2.1)³. To achieve this, OFFA were given a remit to:

“Regulate the charging of higher tuition fees by institutions offering higher education courses. No institution may charge fees for full-time students above the standard level without an access agreement that you have approved” (Clarke 2004, para 3.1).

Clarke (2004) noted the need to raise the aspirations of groups of young people who otherwise might not consider HE. As part of this, Clarke recommended that when institutions attracted a narrow group of students, they should consider putting more money in to outreach, particularly focusing on participation from the poorest backgrounds.

OFFA define outreach as:

“Raise awareness, aspirations and attainment among people from disadvantaged or under-represented groups” (OFFA 2017a).

Each higher education institution (HEI) responds to this by providing (both collaboratively and independently) an extensive programme of activities such as summer schools, mentoring, taster days, campus visits and a range of other activities, aimed at encouraging young people (including primary school age), with the potential, to consider HE as a future option. Increasingly, rather than providing a one-off activity, this is being done through a structured programme of activities run over several academic years. Programmes range from large generic group activities to smaller, targeted, subject specific activities. According to OFFA (2017c), institutions spent £136.1 million on outreach activity through 2016-17 Access

³ Following the publication of the 2011 White Paper (Students at the Heart of the System), as part of the revised funding structure, where tuition fees were increased to a maximum of £9,000³ a year, any HEI wishing to charge more than the new basic £6,000 fee for full-time students (with the figure revised for part-time students) were required to produce revised access agreements.

Agreements. This compares to £92.6 million in 2013-14, with predictions that by 2021-22 the figure will have risen to £196.9 million (OFFA 2017d).

1.1.4 The National Collaborative Outreach Programme

The start of the academic year 2014-15 saw the creation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO). Rather than providing a specific programme of activities (such as the case in Aimhigher) 34 local networks (as well as four national networks) were created, with each network creating a single point of contact to help schools establish what outreach activities were being run in their local area. However, in 2016, HEFCE announced that from academic year 2016-17 a new National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) would be rolled out, with £30 million being allocated in the first year and £60 million each year thereafter⁴ (HEFCE 2016). The creation of NCOP came on the back of the announcement in the same year from the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, that he wished to see a doubling of the percentage of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE by 2020, compared to 2009 levels.

NCOP reintroduced the idea of the need for a more formalised collaborative approach to outreach. As with Aimhigher, the partnership approach was clear, with 29 consortia comprising of HE providers, colleges, schools and other organisations such as third sector bodies being tasked with running outreach programmes. However, one clear difference from Aimhigher was the explicit nature of whom exactly the programme wished to target, specially stating the need to target:

“[...] geographical areas where the HE participation of young people is both low and much lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment” (HEFCE 2017)

⁴ This funding is additional to the widening access allocation given to HEIs.

Whilst there was an increasing focus on attainment within the NCOP programme, HEIs were reminded that “attainment-raising activity should not be a main focus of NCOP funding” (HEFCE 2017). This being said, the specific focus on aspirations was less explicit than it had been during Aimhigher.

1.1.5 The 2016 Higher Education White Paper

The publication of the 2016 HE White Paper (Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice) has ensured that the WP agenda will remain a key part of government policy for the foreseeable future, particularly around social mobility. The White Paper led to the creation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), with a fundamental principle to create a link between the funding of HE teaching and quality (as opposed to merely quantity). The first TEF results were published in the summer of 2017, with institutions being graded gold, silver or bronze.

In terms of WP, crucially this included a clear commitment within the White Paper to:

“Put providers’ performance in achieving positive outcomes for disadvantaged students at the heart of the TEF” (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2016, p.49),

with institutions being required to publish application, offer and progress rates, broken down by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background.

Initially TEF was designed to assess whether institutions would be allowed to raise tuition fees but this has been delayed, to be phased in over a number of years (BBC 2017). In year two of TEF (affecting students from the autumn

of 2018) judgments will be made against criteria that cover - Teaching Quality, Learning Environment and Student Outcomes & Learning Gain. As part of this assessment, account will specifically be taken on the outcomes from disadvantaged groups (Gov.UK 2016).

1.1.6 The importance of Low Participation Neighbourhoods

In terms of who are considered under-represented or disadvantaged and therefore considered a target group for outreach, OFFA (2016a) suggest the following groups (the list is not exhaustive):

- people from lower socio-economic groups or from neighbourhoods where higher education participation is low (i.e. LPN);
- people from low income backgrounds (household income of up to £42,875);
- some ethnic groups or sub-groups, including white males from economically disadvantaged backgrounds;
- disabled people;
- mature and part-time learners;
- care leavers;
- carers;
- estranged young people and students;
- students from gypsy and Traveller communities;
- refugees.

Despite being a proxy for disadvantage (as opposed to more direct measures such as the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)) and the continuing ambiguity as to which groups comprise WP students (Stevenson et al. 2010), the targeting of young people living in LPNs has been a key aim of WP outreach programmes for some time.

Guidance from HEFCE (2007) to Aimhigher partnerships some ten years ago had, for example, required partnerships to target learners from under-represented communities, including those living in areas where participation in HE is low. This remained the case in 2013 with OFFA (2013) suggesting that HE access could be improved by targeting outreach programmes at students living in LPNs and schools with low levels of HE participation. The policy interest in LPNs, according to Harrison and McCaig (2015), is due to the concentration of educational disadvantage within LPNs that enables them to be seen as the appropriate target for intervention and resources. Statistically, the focus on LPN can be explained by the fact that:

“Currently, young people from the most advantaged neighbourhoods are nearly two-and-a-half times more likely to go to higher education than young people from the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods” (OFFA 2017d).

Since 2011/12, LPN data has been constructed using POLAR3⁵ (Participation of Local Areas) data. POLAR3 is based on HE participation rates of people who were aged 18 between 2005 and 2009 and entered an HE course in a UK HE provider or English or Scottish further education college, aged 18 or 19, between academic years 2005/06 and 2010/11⁶. The data is drawn from a number of sources, including the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the Data Service, Scottish Funding Council, The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and HM Revenue and Customs (HESA 2016).

POLAR3 classification is formed by ranking 2001 Census Area Statistics by young participation rates for the combined 2005 to 2009 cohorts. From here,

⁵ In October 2017 HEFCE announced the introduction of POLAR4 datasets, to replace POLAR3. For the purposes of this thesis, LPN has been defined based on POLAR3 datasets.

⁶ It should be noted that entrants to HE courses at further education in colleges in Wales are not included.

five quintiles are formed; each representing 20% of the UK young cohort, with '1' being those wards with the lowest participation and '5' the wards with the higher participation. Students are then assigned to one of these five quintiles, based on their home postcode. Those students whose postcode falls into quintile 1 are defined as being LPN students.

As well as being a key target for outreach programmes, the importance of LPNs must be seen within a wider WP context. 1999 saw the introduction of the first sector-wide performance indicators. This was in line with an overall growth of performance monitoring of the public sector, based on the needs for greater accountability and efficiency (Pugh et al. 2005). Originally published by HEFCE, responsibility transferred to HESA in 2004. The indicators currently cover the following areas: WP indicators; non-continuation rates; and employment of graduates (HEFCE 2015b). In terms of WP, three key performance indicator markers were identified⁷: state school marker; NS-SEC; and low participation marker. Thus, institutions became ranked on their relative performance in the number of LPN students that they recruited.

It should be noted that the use of LPN as a suitable tool for identifying target learners has been open to critical assessment. These criticisms centre around the issue of who may (or may not) reside in LPNs (although HEFCE (2014) do point out that the use of POLAR data only focuses on a particular form of disadvantage, i.e. participation in HE). Harrison and Hatt ((2010)2010), for example, suggest that using geographical data (such as LPN) as a means of targeting can omit learners who may be from lower socio-economic groups but living in more affluent or rural areas. Indeed, research conducted by Harrison and McCaig (2015) found that that more disadvantaged young people (in terms of NS-SEC, low income etc) actually live outside of LPNs than within LPNs and because of this, disadvantaged

⁷ Based on young full-time first-degree entrants.

young people not living within an LPN will be less likely to be targeted for outreach programmes or activities. In a broader critique of area-based initiatives, Rees et al. (2007) also suggest that this approach downplays the differences between individuals (in terms of factors such as wealth) within those areas. Despite these reservations, the prominent use of LPN as a means of identifying WP students is likely to remain.

As Chapter 3 will demonstrate, a gap in the existing academic literature is the relatively small number of studies with a focus on specific WP groups. The decision to focus on young people from LPNs was made therefore on the basis that it would provide the sector with a phenomenological insight into the lives of a group of young people from a key target, but little researched, WP group. This was opposed to more, generalised nomothetic accounts of WP students often found in the literature. This would fit with the requirements of IPA studies that seek to represent a perspective rather than a population (Smith et al. 2009).

1.2 Rationale

In section 1.1 I demonstrated how WP has become an important part of social policy for successive governments. This is likely to remain that way for the foreseeable future, with a recent report by The Social Mobility Foundation (2017) finding:

“A stark social mobility postcode lottery exists today, where the chances of someone from a disadvantaged background getting on in life is closely linked to where they grow up and choose to make a life for themselves” (p.2).

Whilst this has led to an increased emphasis being placed on WP and outreach programmes, the problem of being able to provide a robust evidence base that demonstrates tangible impacts of outreach programmes

has long been the Achilles heel of the sector, with a 2012 governmental report offering the following summary:

“To date, the amount of money invested has not been matched by efforts to better understand what really works. This is unacceptable and must change. Overall, it is unclear what impact the significant expenditure on outreach has had and some research has suggested that much of the progress of recent years in broadening the social intake of higher education has been driven by improving GCSE results rather than the efforts of universities” (Milburn 2012, p.35).

According to Doyle and Griffin (2012), Aimhigher for example, was unable to provide a consistent body of evidence that demonstrated young people progressing into HE as a direct result of Aimhigher interventions and that specific ways of measuring the impact of Aimhigher were not built in sufficiently at the beginning of the programme. Harrison (2012) argues however that part of the reason for this perceived lack of progress was confusion over the implementation of the policy aim. This, Harrison (2012), goes on to suggest, led to the adoption of an outcome measure that underestimated increases in participation rates from target groups.

A review of the current academic literature into outreach programmes (see Chapter 3) found a predominance for studies that examine programme effectiveness. In terms of aspirations, findings from this type of research generally tell us that outreach has a positive but short-term impact on young people’s aspirations. However, this approach has often been framed within a deficit approach that can be perceived as individualising the blame on non-participants for the divide in HE participation levels and placing responsibility on the learner to do something about it (Tight 1998). This deficit approach can be said to stem from the policy belief that aspirations are a key precursor to future attainment, life outcomes, raising skills and economic competitiveness (Social Exclusion Task Force 2008; St Clair and Benjamin 2011) and are highly correlated with background (Harris 2010). Therefore, on the policy assumption that aspirations are too low amongst particular groups

of young people (St Clair and Benjamin 2011), programmes have been designed to raise the aspirations (and attainment) of these groups of young people, to aspire to HE as a future option.

One of the key weaknesses of this approach to aspiration is that it fails to take account of the context of the lives that outreach participants live. As Hart (2013) suggests:

“Aspirations in themselves tell us little about the histories, power dynamics and discourses, norms, values and cultures that have shaped, enhanced, diminished and adapted them” (p.336).

To address this gap in the research, the overall aim of this study is to explore, through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the aspirations of five young people defined as ‘WP’ students, living in LPNs. Each young person was interviewed individually on four separate occasions over two school years (Years 9 and 10). In adopting such an approach, the thesis goes past purely defining what their aspirations are, it seeks to examine how these aspirations are shaped by their everyday experiences of life, whether it be schooling, relationships, family life and so on.

The two key research questions of this study are:

- What are the aspirations of young people living in LPNs?
- How are these aspirations shaped by their lived experience?

1.2.1 The research journey

Having provided the academic rationale for this study, I now discuss my own personal research journey that has led to the creation of this study.

This PhD arose through a funded studentship at Bournemouth University (BU). Originally, the aim of this PhD was to develop a framework for evaluating Fair Access outreach programmes. This was so that BU could better understand what is helpful and unhelpful in their approach to WP outreach, and therefore better justify spending on outreach work. The initial proposal was based on the premise that, as guided by OFFA and HEFCE, the University wanted to provide evidence that outreach was effective, suitably targeted and raised aspirations.

Reflexivity can be described as the ability to recognise that all aspects of ourselves and our contexts influence the way we research (Fook and Gardner 2007). According to Willig (2013), there are two types of reflexivity: personal and epistemological, with personal reflexivity involving:

“Reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research” (p.10).

Therefore, after reflecting on my previous experiences and by seeking answers to questions such as ‘why am I carrying out this study?’ and ‘what am I hoping to achieve with this research at the start of my PhD?’ (Langdrige 2007), as well as acknowledging similar attempts to create frameworks and evaluation toolkits (Hatt 2007; Dent et al. 2014; CFE Research 2015; Hayton and Bengry-Howell 2016), a prompt decision was made to move away from this initial plan.

Finlay and Evans (2009) suggest that the researcher needs to find a topic that excites them, or at the very least interests them. They go on to suggest that the researcher needs to believe in their project and value it. From 2004 to 2011 I worked as a researcher on the nationally funded Aimhigher programme which aimed to raise the aspirations of young people from under-represented groups and disadvantaged areas to aspire to HE. At the start of

the programme I was very much a quantitative researcher, developing tools to assess the impact of different programmes and events on the participants. As the programme matured so did the research requirements and a more mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative techniques was required. This included conducting large numbers of focus groups and interviews with young people, teachers, other school staff and parents. However, the predominant focus of the research remained on examining the usefulness of outreach activities.

Although I often looked at the aspirations of these young people, it was primarily in the context of how outreach could positively impact upon aspiration. As the Aimhigher programme reached its end of life, I grew frustrated at the inability as a researcher to look beyond this norm. I realised that as a researcher in this field, I knew very little about the lives of the young people with whom I interacted and that this was a significant limitation in the research that I had previously undertaken. I passionately believed that research needed to look at the wider lives of the young people who took part in these outreach programmes. Rather than replicating or integrating approaches to measure outreach, it was clear that a more individualised understanding of the young people themselves was needed.

My primary reason for undertaking this PhD, therefore, became driven by my previous research experiences and my desire to look at aspiration from a fresh perspective; one that gave voice to participants and that stripped away prior assumptions and stereotypes. I wanted to examine what they had, not what they lacked.

1.3 What is aspiration?

Up until this point, I have discussed aspiration from a narrow WP policy perspective. Whilst there is often the assumption made within policy that aspirations need to be 'raised', what is missing from policy documents is a clear understanding as to what aspiration is; what it represents. As this subsection will demonstrate, aspirations do not have a single meaning (Best 2017) and are complex and multi-dimensional (Social Exclusion Task Force 2008). Archer (2014), suggests that aspirations can be seen as "cultural and social products" (p.24) that can tell us something about a young person and their social context. This is further reflected in the Archer et al. (2010) definition of aspiration:

"From intensely held goals and desires to looser, more nebulous interests; from 'high' or lofty ambitions to more prosaic, mundane or realistic expectations" (p.78).

St Clair and Benjamin (2011) also note this variance in aspirations, suggesting aspirations are a compromise between what is desired and what is possible, with some individuals holding aspirations closer to pragmatic expectations and others clinging to escapist hopes. Quaglia and Cobb (1996) question whether aspiration refers to personal goals, expectations or dreams. Quaglia and Cobb (1996) and the Social Exclusion Task Force (2008) both suggest that aspiration is two dimensional, in that as well as looking to future, aspirations involve being inspired in the present to work towards future aspirations. Brown (2011) suggests that aspirations are emotional impulses that motivate people to work towards an anticipated better future. Gottfredson (1981) provides a basis for aspiration being something developmental, that is, it will change over time, whilst Kasser and Ryan (1996) argue that aspirations are based on intrinsic and extrinsic needs.

It is important at this point to note that aspirations do not exist in a vacuum and are entangled with other emotions such as anticipation, inspiration or fear, emotional attachments to other people or places or characteristics related to self-esteem and self-efficacy (Social Exclusion Task Force 2008; Brown 2011). Indeed, perceived self-efficacy, for example, can influence aspirations and the level of commitment to those aspirations due to the influence of self-efficacy on adaptation and change (Bandura et al. 2001).

One of the key debates, within the academic literature, is whether aspirations are different from expectations. As MacLeod (2009) suggests, aspirations are an individual's preferences that can be said to be relatively unaffected by anticipated constraints. This is opposed to expectations that take these constraints into account. Wicht and Ludwig-Mayerhofer (2014) propose that (when talking about occupational aspirations) there is a difference between idealistic and realistic aspiration. A realistic aspiration is framed by the belief of what one can expect to achieve given your own resources and circumstance. An idealistic aspiration can be seen as an expression of desires or wishes that can be independent or detached from existing circumstance. According to Gottfredson (1981), an idealistic aspiration is formed when preferences, the 'wish', are given greater weight than perceptions of accessibility. Conversely, a realistic aspiration is formed when the reverse is true. The idea of a preference being given greater weight suggests an element of choice is involved in the distinction between realistic and idealistic aspirations. This is slightly reconceptualised by Sellar and Gale (2011) who suggest realistic aspirations are formed when possibility informs desire as opposed to possibility being given more 'weight' than desire.

Watson et al. (2002) suggest that researchers in this field have, over a number of years, used a paradigm that distinguishes between an ideal and a realistic career, with Wicht and Ludwig-Mayerhofer (2014) suggesting that a realistic aspiration can be referred to as an expectation. Lupton and Kintrea (2011) and Reynolds and Pemberton (2001) see there being a difference

between what an individual can hope to achieve and what they expect to achieve and for that reason, an aspiration is distinguishable from an expectation. Gutman and Akerman (2008) make a distinction between expectations and aspirations, with expectations implying a realistic assessment of future outcomes and an aspiration reflecting hopes and dreams.

In terms of aspiration to HE, studies such as Reynolds and Pemberton (2001) and Croll and Attwood (2013) found a strong correlation between the likelihood of progressing to HE at a relative young age (in the case of these studies, at aged 14/15) and eventual progression to HE, whilst Chowdry et al. (2009) note that on average those young people (at 14) who report they are likely to apply and get the grades to enter HE score 18 points higher at GCSE level. Anders and Micklewright (2013) argue however that between ages 14 and 17 the percentage who report they are 'very' or 'fairly' likely to apply to university falls by around 10 points. Chowdry et al. (2009) note a similar trend, suggesting that a great deal of young people who aspire to HE at around 14-16 do not ultimately apply. This may be because, as suggested by Gutman and Akerman (2008), young people's aspirations can decline as they mature and they grow in their understanding of the world and the barriers they may face. This idea is conceptualised by Gottfredson's (1981; 2002) four stage theory of circumscription and compromise. Within the theory, all young people progress through the four stages, albeit at a faster or slower pace than others, dependent on cognitive ability (Gutman and Akerman 2008). The premise behind the theory can be described as:

"The young child has a fairly positive view of all occupations of which he or she is aware, but with age each of the developing self-concepts is used as an additional criterion by which to make more critical assessments of job-self compatibility" (Gottfredson 1981, p.549).

A brief overview of the theory is presented in Figure 1 below:

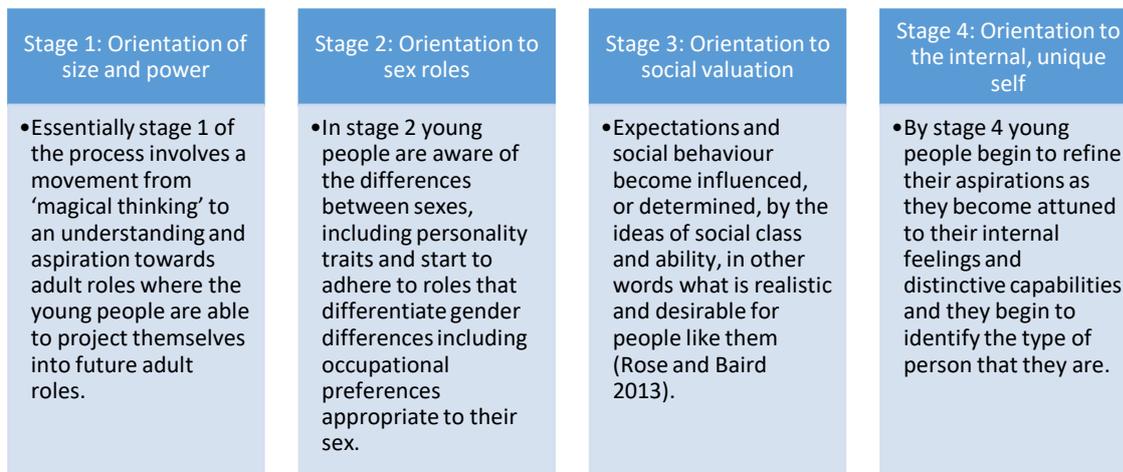


Figure 1: Four stage theory of circumscription and compromise (Adapted from: Gottfredson (1981; 2002)).

Studies such as Gale and Parker's (2015b) have shown how realistic and idealistic aspirations, particularly to HE, can become very much merged. Their study demonstrated that 58% of students surveyed selected their first-choice occupation that would require a university degree but 73% stated that they would need a university education to achieve their first-choice occupation. This suggests that, an aspiration, realistic or not, does not necessarily equate to reality. An aspiration to study at university will not always translate to actual university participation (Lamont et al. 2014), particularly in the example provided by Gale and Parker (2015b) when a university education would not be required for the young person's chosen career path.

It can be argued that a realistic aspiration has a negative connotation in that it could denote modest rather than high aspiration (Spielhofer et al. 2011). As Boxer et al. (2011) point out, neither an aspiration or an expectation acts independently of each other. Boxer et al. (2011) found that young people whose aspirations exceeded their expectations had higher levels of

emotional and behavioural difficulties and exam anxiety, possibly caused by a frustration in not believing they are likely to achieve to the level they would like.

According to Wicht and Ludwig-Mayerhofer (2014) the link between idealistic and realistic aspirations is dependent on what theoretical approach is taken. Rational Action Theory looks at differences between different groups of people in relation to the cost-benefit considerations they apply. Choices will then ultimately be guided as to what is realistic. In this approach, it is assumed that individuals will prefer to have high incomes and prestigious jobs and therefore idealistic aspirations will not vary a great deal. Because of this, idealistic aspirations will be a reflection of a pure preference for a particular job or occupation, irrespective of realistic aspirations. Idealistic and realistic aspirations therefore become independent of each other. In cultural and context-based learning theories however idealistic aspirations can be seen to express subcultural norms and values that are reflected in realistic aspirations. In other words, realistic and idealistic aspirations become interwoven because a 'wish' that does not take in to account whether the desired outcome can be attained, plays an important role in the formation of what become realistic.

1.4 Chapter summary

In this opening chapter I have discussed the underpinnings of this study through a discussion on the development of WP policy and practice. I provided the academic rationale behind the study as well as outlining my own personal research journey that led to the creation of this study. I then introduced the concept of aspiration. The remainder of this thesis is set out as follows:

- In Chapter 2 I discuss the ways in which aspirations have been portrayed in wider policy;
- In Chapter 3 I review the current academic evidence base of WP outreach programmes, with a specific focus on what the existing evidence tells us about the aspirations of young people from WP backgrounds;
- In Chapter 4 I provide the theoretical underpinnings for my methodological approach;
- In Chapter 5 I provide information on the practical use of IPA;
- In Chapter 6 I introduce the five participants and outline some of their aspirations;
- In Chapter 7 I provide a detailed interpretative phenomenological account of how the aspirations of participants are influenced by their lived experiences;
- In Chapter 8 I discuss my findings in relation to the extant literature;
- In Chapter 9 I discuss the implications of my research findings;
- In Chapter 10 I revisit my research questions and offer conclusions.

Chapter 2: The Policy of Aspiration

In Chapter 1 I discussed the use of aspirations within WP policy and practice. In this chapter, through the creation and presentation of a five-stage model of aspiration (see Figure 2), I contextualise this by setting it within a wider policy context to understand that the strong focus on aspirations within WP policy and practice does not sit in isolation.

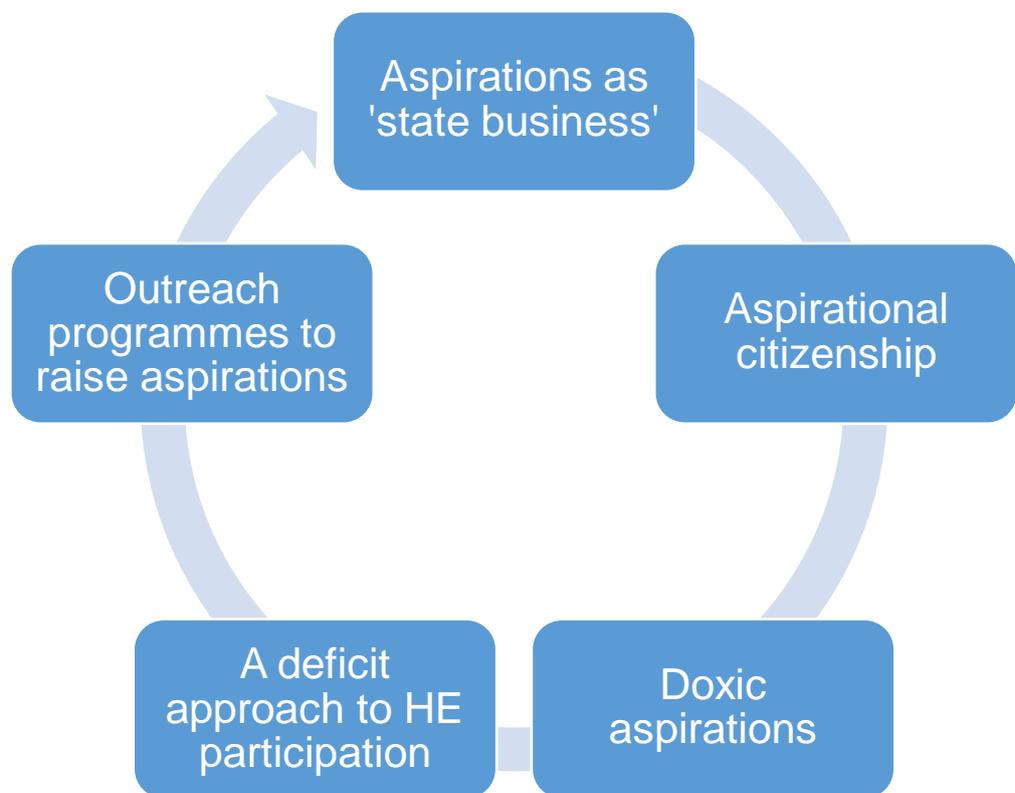


Figure 2: The Aspiration Cycle

The importance of doing so is demonstrated by Brown (2011), who asserts that there is a disconnection between the ways in which aspirations have been represented in policy and the actual aspirations of young people. Brown goes on to suggest that this has exaggerated the gap between the:

“[...] lived experience of young people and the futures they are encouraged to anticipate for themselves” (p.8).

2.1 Aspirations as ‘state business’

In his first Labour party conference speech as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown asked:

“How much talent that could flourish is lost through a poverty of aspiration: wasted not because young talents fail to reach the stars but because they grow up with no stars to reach for?” (BBC 2007)

Thus, Brown is implying a greater importance to aspiring to become rather than the actual becoming. The broad focus on aspiration was still evident in 2015, with David Cameron using his keynote speech at the Conservative party conference to describe the party as “The party of aspiration” (The Independent 2015). These examples provide evidence of what Rose and Baird (2013) describe as the aspirations of young people becoming ‘state business’.

The aspirations of its citizens, particularly the young, have long been a source of interest and concern for government. In 2003, for example, a report by the Department for Education and Skills (2003) identified four conditions that needed to be met for a student who is capable, to actually enter HE. This included the student having the aspiration, or desire, to realise their potential by gaining an HE qualification. A 2005 Schools White Paper explicitly stated that:

“More than anything it is a White Paper about aspiration. We must have the highest aspirations for every child whatever their talents and ability” (Department for Education and Skills 2005, p.5).

This is reaffirmed by Bowes et al. (2015) who indicate that aspirations as well as attitudes have a significant impact on whether an individual applies to HE. Recent research by Wiseman et al. (2017) suggests that when young people aged 13/14 state they are 'very' or 'fairly' likely to apply to university, that increased the probability that they will enter HE by 10 percentage points.

In 2008 and 2009, a whole raft of governmental reports were published that focused on the aspirations of young people (Department for Children Schools and Families 2008; Social Exclusion Task Force 2008; Department for Children Schools and Families 2009; Learning and Skills Council 2009; The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009). The 2008 report 'The Extra Mile: How schools succeed in raising aspirations in deprived communities' for example, highlighted the cultural barriers of low aspirations, with some pupils coming to school with a 'lid' on aspiration. The 2009 report 'Quality, Choice and Aspiration: A strategy for young people's information, advice and guidance' noted the importance of parents and their aspirations and that if parental expectations of education were low then it was hard for parents to have high aspirations for their children.

St Clair and Benjamin (2011) suggest that within government policy, aspirations can be seen to be used within three connected propositions:

1. Low aspirations lead to low achievement;
2. Some people from poorer backgrounds have depressed aspirations, affecting their ultimate job prospects;
3. Raising aspirations will break this cycle and lead to improved social and economic outcomes.

A key rationale for a focus on aspiration is demonstrated by Goodman et al. (2010) who suggest that the aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of parents and children can potentially have an important role in explaining poor

attainment levels at school for certain groups of young people. As Best (2017) suggests, policy often identifies low aspiration as being the key reason for underachievement. This link between aspiration and attainment is key, given that prior attainment is a key predictor of HE participation and can help to explain differing participation levels (Chowdry et al. 2013; CFE Research 2015). Stanley and Goodlad (2010) conceptualise this into a simple linear model that suggests that: $\text{Aspiration} + \text{Awareness} + \text{Attainment} = \text{Progression}$. A literature review conducted by Duckworth et al. (2009) suggested that aspirations may have an impact on later attainment, independent from other influences. They provide an example from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England that the aspirations of young people aged 14 to stay in education post-16 boosted their national test scores by an additional 1.6 points compared to young people who did not share the same aspiration.

Studies such as Chowdry et al. (2013) and Vignoles (2008) have shown that once prior attainment is taken into account, the socio-economic gap between those from the least and most deprived backgrounds is minimal, with HEFCE reporting that over 90% of all young people who achieve the top A-level grades (AAA,AAB,ABB) progress into HE (HEFCE 2015a). However, the link between aspiration and attainment would appear to be contested ground. Gorard et al. (2012) concluded that there was not enough evidence to suggest a causal link between aspirations/expectations and educational outcomes. Cummings et al. (2012) found no evidence that changes in attainment are mediated by changes in aspiration, locus of control or valuing school. In their analysis of Excellence Challenge (the precursor to Aimhigher), Emmerson et al. (2006), using Labour Force Survey data, found that participation in the programme did not have a positive and statistically significant effect on attainment or HE participation and were only able to offer a suggestion that participation may have had a positive impact on post-16 participation. This would appear to suggest that establishing a direct causal link between aspiration and attainment is fraught with difficulties, particularly given that the aspirations of young people are very changeable and are

therefore volatile (Gorard et al. 2012) and that high aspirations do not necessarily predict high attainment (Duckworth et al. 2009).

2.2 Aspirational citizenship

The focus on the aspirations of certain groups of young people can be situated within a wider movement from a policy of expectation, where the onus is on the state to ensure citizens received equal outcomes (Sellar et al. 2011), to the development of an aspirational state, with the aspirational citizen:

“[...] eager to take on greater responsibility for themselves and the well-being of their communities” (Raco 2009, p.436).

Raco (2009) suggests that this movement to a policy of aspiration has involved a number of other fundamental changes. These include a policy focus that is actor rather than society-centred, a focus on responsibilities-based policies rather than rights-based policies and thus the state becomes an enabler or facilitator rather than a provider. Consequently, policy becomes focused on aiming to change individual actors within society so that they are able to better perform their responsibilities (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011).

The government report ‘Unleashing Aspirations’ (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009) provides a prime example of this policy in action. The premise of the report is that social progress is ultimately driven by the aspirations of citizens to better themselves. The report saw the need to create an aspirational society by unleashing aspiration (through making 88 recommendations to central government, the professions and other organisations) and, in particular, the need to raise the aspirations of those who do not believe they will progress.

The Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition agreement (Cabinet Office 2010) provides further examples:

“Wherever possible, we want people to call the shots over the decisions that affect their lives” (p.7);

“There has been the assumption that central government can only change people’s behaviour through rules and regulations. Our government will be a much smarter one, shunning the bureaucratic levers of the past and finding intelligent ways to encourage, support and enable people to make better choices for themselves” (p.7).

According to Reay (2013), the idea of aspirational citizenship is symptomatic of a wider trend of individualism in society, where the onus is on the individual to aspire to secure their own success while structural constraints remain down-played. It suggests that those who do not demonstrate their pursuit of self-maximisation through such things as education, are perceived to lack the necessary information that is required to appreciate the benefits of such self-capitalising behaviour (Sellar 2013).

2.3 Doxic aspirations

This form of aspirational citizenship has created ‘doxic’ aspiration; that is, aspirations become based on desirable futures of populist ideologies (Zipin et al. 2015), or as Marx and Engels (2001) put it:

“For each new class which puts itself in the place of the one ruling before it, is compelled [...] to represent its interest as the common interest of all members of society [...] it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones” (p.94).

In this line of argument, despite varying aspirations, it is the aspirations of the dominant that are counted worthy of distinction (Gale and Parker 2015b) and those with the most powerful capital create a norm wherein HE is a

desirable, or indeed legitimate, future. The application of 'high' aspirations is then applied when individuals aspire to:

“[...] peruse self-maximisation through education and subsequent advancement through labour market opportunities” (Sellar 2013, p.248).

Consequently, the middle-class citizen is then formed as an aspirational target for others to aspire to emulate (Raco 2009; Brown 2011). Because of this, Reay (2012) suggests, education policy focuses remorselessly on social mobility and raising the aspirations of the working-class to become essentially middle class. As a result, an aspiration towards HE is framed as means for the working class to aspire to become more middle class (Loveday 2014). Wolf (2011), for example, suggests that this has translated into an almost universal phenomenon amongst parents of young children to aspire for their children to progress into HE. This leads Jones (2012) to suggest that the very concept of aspiration has been re-defined as something that is concerned with individual self-enrichment and climbing up the social ladder to become middle class.

This drive towards a middle-class status is nothing new. In her critique of New Labour education policy, Gewirtz (2001) voiced several concerns over this concept. This included the thought that there are reasons, such as poverty and poor living conditions, why working-class parents do not behave like the archetypal middle-class parents. Secondly, Gewirtz questions whether middle-class norms are really values that should (or need to) be universalised. As Keller and Zavalloni (1964) add, the middle class have their own set of psychological hardships such as anxiety over self-worth due to not living up to expected achievements (such as a university education) which can be contextualised as being because of personal shortcomings in not taking chances afforded to them. This points to high aspirations being expressed through extrinsic needs, such as material acquisition, enhanced consumption and individual choice (Raco 2009). Consequently, low

aspirations are attributed to the fault of the individual whilst the structural constraints faced by these young people are largely ignored or down-played (Callender 2003; Reay 2013).

As MacLeod (2009) notes, the social immobility of the working class can be sealed by the formation of depressed, or stunted, aspirations. A report by the Cabinet Office (2011), for example, noted a:

“poverty of aspiration that holds back too many young people from under-represented backgrounds” (p.56).

The Social Mobility Commission (2016) noted the need for young people in disadvantaged areas to raise their aspirations to enable them to consider ‘top’ jobs, whilst raising the issue that poverty of ambition can become a barrier to upward social mobility.

2.4 A deficit approach to HE participation

The depiction of some groups of society having a ‘poverty’ of aspiration, with low aspirations being put down to a lack of effort or laziness (Harwood et al. 2015), has led many (Gewirtz 2001; Archer 2007; Fuller et al. 2011; St Clair and Benjamin 2011) to imply that policy has adopted a deficit approach to non-HE participation. In other words, there is an implication that groups of individuals and communities fail to recognise the value of HE participation (Burke 2012) and by not aspiring to or giving a relative low priority to HE are seen to lack aspiration or are less ambitious than a middle-class norm (Keller and Zavalloni 1964). It can also be conceptualised as individualising the blame on non-participants for the divide and placing responsibility on the learner to do something about it (Tight 1998). As an example, this can clearly be seen within the 2003 White Paper, which assumed that if aspirations

among non-traditional students were raised then HE applications from these groups would simply increase.

Gartland (2012) suggests that such an approach is located within a neoliberal discourse of individualism. By implying that it is up to an individual to raise their aspirations, HE becomes something that is seen as being of benefit to the individual and that blame is put onto the young people themselves for their own failure (Ball et al. 2000; Evans 2007). The 2012 White Paper (Students at the Heart of the System), stated, for example, that one of the barriers to those from less privileged backgrounds accessing the professions was their lack of aspiration to enter them. The 2010 Schools White Paper (The Importance of Teaching) linked a deeply embedded culture of low aspiration that is strongly tied to long-term unemployment (Department for Education 2010). In doing so it can be said that the problem of social exclusion can be put down to deficiencies of the individual rather than political responsibility (Mavelli 2014).

Whilst a deficit approach implies some form of inadequacy on behalf of an individual, an alternative structuralist viewpoint of aspiration sees educational and career choice as largely the outcome of constraints placed upon a young person, whether that is institutional, economic or cultural. By viewing aspiration through this viewpoint, as opposed to being as a result of an individual motivational trait, the effects of an unequal distribution of social, cultural and economic capital can be considered (Bok 2010). In this model, young people internalise assumptions about their future that reflect the nature of their class, gender or ethnic background. These constraints can also result from what assumptions are held by others towards themselves (Rose and Baird 2013). Essentially, in this model the young person has no control over these structural constraints. Boxer et al. (2011) for example, suggest that young people adjust their predictions of their future success based on perceptions of 'others like them', such as parental educational achievement or from their neighbourhood. Boxer et al. (2011) do point out

however the possibility that young people will adjust their future plans based on personal factors (such as academic grades).

Whilst several studies (Calder and Cope 2004; Lupton and Kintrea 2011; St Clair and Benjamin 2011; Bradley 2012) suggest that these constraints can impact some young people's ability to convert aspirations into a reality, they all suggest that despite this, the aspirations of young people were often high. As Schoon and Parsons (2002) suggest, the 'desire to excel' can counterbalance educational limitations of young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Siraj-Blatchford (2010) suggests that when parents become aware of their child's potential and the active role that they could play in realising this potential then social disadvantage can be overcome. Furlong and Biggart (1999) suggest that personal confidence can enable aspirations to remain high, irrespective of class or areas of residence.

Research by Alloway et al. (2004) into the aspirations of young people in 'regional' areas of Australia found that for some, aspirations were seen as a means of escaping their local community and that aspiring to further education and training was their 'ticket out of town'. Brown (2011) reports that WP practitioners noted that aspirations of the young people they worked with were often seen as an alternative, a way out of their expected adult lives. In this sense, aspirations begin to take on a 'dream-like' state. In their study of five inner city comprehensive schools, Strand and Winston (2008) noted, for example, that 80% of White British students aspired to achieve at least five good GCSEs but available data from the schools involved in the study indicated that only 34% of pupils achieve these grades. In an Australian study, Gemici et al. (2014) found what they described as 'somewhat unrealistic' career aspirations of 15 year olds. They reported that around 45% of males and 60% of females in their study aspired to a job in the top 20% of jobs by status.

Within the structuralist viewpoint, Schoon and Parsons (2002) offer two analytical models to examine the effects of social structure on teenage aspiration and eventual occupational attainment. The mediating model assumes that the influence of parental social class on occupational attainment operates via educational achievement and aspiration and that the two are correlated. The contextual system model develops this concept further by suggesting that parental social class is mediated through the family context and parental aspirations. Whilst the mediating model demonstrates the strong impact parental social class can have on aspiration and career choice, the contextual systems model demonstrates how individual choices are embedded in interconnected contexts. Schoon and Parsons (2002) conclude that the formation and development of the aspirations of young people involves interaction between oneself, others and wider sociohistorical contexts and that any one factor taken in isolation cannot be considered the prime cause. Parental expectations can, for example, provide a complex framework for young people to formulate their educational self-schema via parental confidence in their child's ability and their own educational attainment and socioeconomic status (Garg et al. 2002).

Within policy there is some acknowledgement of the wider contexts in which aspirations are set. A report by the Social Exclusion Task Force (2008), for example, recognised that aspirations are inextricably linked to a wide range of social and environmental factors such as role models, differing levels of guidance and opportunities. The report goes on to acknowledge that some young people living in very deprived communities have high aspirations. The 2015 Green Paper (Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice) acknowledges that the reduced social capital of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can limit access to information and opportunities thus making it harder for them to achieve their aspirations. Despite this, the ways in which the notions of 'raising' aspirations towards HE has been generally depicted in policy, has led to a deficit view of low aspiration of young people from WP backgrounds.

2.5 Outreach programmes to raise aspirations

The next stage of the model is WP outreach programmes themselves. Earlier I provided a definition of outreach programmes that included the need to raise aspirations from groups of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

By their very definition however, this suggests, that aspirations amongst people from disadvantaged backgrounds must be low in the first place and that aspirations can be raised by the programme of activities provided. This then implies that aspiration can be understood as an emotional state that can be affected by intervention (Brown 2011). These programmes can be seen as a reaction to the deficit approach apparent in policy (indeed, Baxter et al. (2007) suggest the deficit approach can undermine WP initiatives), insofar as they address the concerns over HE progression rates by trying to tackle individual deficit (e.g. low aspiration), rather than more systematic, societal inequalities that may impact on an individual's chances in life (Brown 2011) or paying little attention to HE culture and practise as well as governmental policy (Archer 2007). In other words, the programmes focus on the ability to change the minds of individuals rather than collective circumstances (Archer 2007), or seek to fill the gaps that individuals and their backgrounds are unable to provide (Byrom 2009).

Mavelli (2014) suggests that because WP initiatives emphasise the 'non-traditional' student, they actually contribute to the reproduction of a 'normal' student and thus to the reproduction of a class-based system. Finally, according to Hoskins and Barker (2017) aspiration-raising programmes construct a perspective that individuals simply need to select an appropriate pathway, work hard, stay motivated and success will naturally follow. Despite these negative connotations, research from Baxter et al. (2007) suggests that the stigma of deficit had not filtered down to the participants themselves.

The concept of relative distance (Keller and Zavalloni 1964) brings in to question the whole context in which the phrase 'low' aspiration and the need to 'raise' aspirations is applied to young peoples' lives. The premise behind the concept is described by Keller and Zavalloni as:

“We should thus be prepared to find class determined variations in aspirations not because the individual class members are more or less ambitious but because the classes themselves are nearer to some goals than to others” (p.60).

Consequently, a 'structural' view suggests that levels of aspiration should not be compared in absolute terms but relative to the positions of those who hold them (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2002). As Gutman and Akerman (2008) suggest, what may be deemed a 'high' aspiration for one individual may be viewed as 'low' for another individual with different life circumstances. Keller and Zavalloni (1964) provide the example of aspiring to go to university. Studies such as James (2000) which showed that a lower percentage of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds thought that they would progress to HE, compared to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, suggest that on face value middle-class students have higher aspirations to study at HE level. Keller and Zavalloni (1964) suggest however that university is far more of an accessible option to the middle class than the lower class and is indeed a middle-class 'norm'. This challenges the idea that all young people have the same distance to run to achieve the same outcome and Porter (1968) questions whether a middle-class pupil aspiring to a university level education is a particularly ambitious aspiration. Conversely as a young person from a lower class has further to travel to achieve a university education, to achieve this goal requires greater ambition and aspiration. Keller and Zavalloni (1964) equate distance to travel to aspirations to occupations using the same premise that unless account is taken of the relative distance to travel required by an individual to a profession, there is no adequate means of comparing aspiration. Gutman and Akerman (2008) therefore suggest that the very notion of comparing

high against low aspiration is subjective and that comparing them makes the implication that low aspirations imply a lower level of commitment to learning.

Keller and Zavalloni (1964) introduce the idea of the relative value placed on differing goals and use the example that if a group of people are more concerned with economic matters than prestige that does not mean they are any less ambitious but instead demonstrates a different priority placed on success goals. In other words, a lack of aspiration to study at HE does not mean aspirations are any lower than someone who aspires to HE. Appadurai (2004) suggests that the poor just like any other group express horizons in choices which are often expressed in specific goods that are:

“[...] often material and proximate like doctors for their children, markets for their grain, husbands for their daughters, and tin roofs for their homes” (p.68).

These aspirations, no matter how varied can be seen to be part of a system of ideas formed by wider ideas around, for example, the significance of material assets and the nature of worldly possessions. Because of this, Keller and Zavalloni (1964) summarise that the aspiration to obtain a university education, and career aspirations, are not a good indicator of the ambition of an individual because of the differences in accessibility but also because they “do not tap all types of ambitiousness” (p.66). Keller and Zavalloni (1964) suggest, for example, that within different social groups, the drive for security be comparable to the drive for respectability in the sense that both are something to be achieved and guarded. Take for example the ‘Hallway Hangers’ within MacLeod’s (2009) ethnographic study. This group generally rejects societies definition of success and instead form their own sub-culture based around loyalty and masculinity.

2.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the ways in which young people's aspirations have been portrayed in policy. I outlined the way in which aspirations have become 'state business', based on the notion that aspirations can be seen to be a precursor to future attainment and life outcomes. I suggested that this has led to the development of the aspirational citizen:

“[...] eager to take on greater responsibility for themselves and the well-being of their communities” (Raco 2009, p.436).

Set within a neoliberal discourse, this has created doxic aspirations where those with the most powerful capital create a norm where certain aspirations (such as an aspiration to enter HE) are defined as desirable. I suggested that this has created the deficit approach to non HE participation where groups or communities of individuals are seen to not value HE participation (Burke 2012) and are therefore perceived to have low levels of aspiration. Thus, this can be said to put 'blame' on non-participants with responsibility placed on the learner to do something about it (Tight 1998). I went on to suggest that outreach programmes, based on their definition, can be seen as a reaction to this discourse, given their aim is to raise aspirations towards HE.

In the next chapter, I move on to a literature review of the current evidence base surrounding WP outreach programmes.

Chapter 3: A Literature Review of the Existing Evidence Base

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the existing research base within the field of WP outreach, particularly in relation to the body of research that relates to the aspirations of outreach participants. I will discuss both the strengths and weaknesses of the current evidence base and seek to answer the following two questions:

- What approaches have been taken to examine young people's aspirations within the field on WP outreach?
- What do the findings of these studies tell us about the aspirations of young people who participate in WP outreach programmes?

In doing so I will demonstrate how my study can make a useful and original contribution to the existing knowledge base.

3.1 Search process

The first stage of conducting the review involved the identification of keywords that would enable as broad a search as possible of the relevant literature. This was done through the development of a mind-map (see Appendix 1). An initial scoping exercise was undertaken in 2015 with a more systematic search being undertaken during the summer of 2016. A final review was then undertaken in the summer of 2017.

A number of Boolean searches were undertaken through the BU mySearch catalogue (see Appendix 1). Some initial restrictions were placed, as displayed in Table 1.

Search Criteria	Included	Excluded
Year of publication	Published in 2007 or later	Published pre 2007
Type of publication	Academic Journal	Magazines Dissertations/ Thesis News Reports Reviews All other sources

Table 1: Literature review criteria

Once the searches were completed, a scan of each result was undertaken, based on the title and abstract, to assess the suitability of each article. Following the searches, an Excel spreadsheet was created of all possible articles. At this stage, the articles were read in more depth and a number were then excluded based on a further set of criteria (Table 2). Banerjee (2016), Raven (2015c), Richardson (2010) and Thiele et al. (2017), for example, were all excluded on the basis that the papers contained no specific references to participants' aspirations.

Excluded
Based on overseas research/data
No specific reference made to aspiration
Not related to WP outreach

Table 2: Literature review exclusions

This left a total of 35 articles, which formed the basis of this review. An 'Article Reference Sheet' (see Appendix 1) was then written up for each article. This outlined the purpose of the study, methods used (including participant information), findings and a researcher comment box that provided a very brief synopsis of the overall paper.

3.2 Setting the context

Before I attempt to answer the questions that I posed at the start of this chapter, it is important to set this literature within a broader context. This is because, despite aspiration-raising being a key component of outreach programmes, there is a lack of robust evidence that suggests that the widespread use of aspiration-raising activities actually lead to the outcomes assumed by this policy (Cummings et al. 2012). This has led to an increasing emphasis being placed on an improved evidence base. Guidance from OFFA in preparing 2017-18 Access Agreements, for example, asked institutions to:

“Review your evaluation plans alongside the development of your access agreement, so that you have a strong rationale to inform your activities and programmes to improve access, student success and progression” (OFFA 2016b, p.5).

This lack of evidence has led to several reviews that have identified weaknesses in the current research evidence base. Perhaps the most comprehensive of these reviews was conducted by Gorard et al. (2006). The authors made several observations including:

- A substantial proportion of research reports do not actually report new research evidence or analysis of any kind;
- Research reports do not provide evidence that can support the conclusions drawn;
- Missing or inappropriate comparators;
- Issues with sampling.

Other, more recent, reviews have provided similar observations. Cummings et al. (2012), for example, summarised that the standard of evaluation was generally poor, with a lack of adequate control measures and statistical

techniques. They noted that instruments used to measure aspiration were relatively unsophisticated. Moore et al. (2013) noted the need for better data to support evaluation whilst CFE Research (2015) acknowledged the lack of robust comparator groups and that there are few common approaches to the collection, recording and dissemination of WP practice. Doyle and Griffin (2012) suggested that there is a general tendency for evaluation to focus on the outreach events themselves, as opposed to focusing on progression to HE. This corroborates with research from Maras et al. (2007) who noted that evaluation tends to focus on outcomes such as participant numbers as opposed to actual impact. They add that the focus of research is generally focused on either individual or social factors, as opposed to a combination of the two, whilst Dent et al. (2014) pointed out the often short-term nature of evaluation.

This rather fragmented picture suggests that very few studies provide definitive answers about 'what works' (Rudd 2011). Gorard (2013) went as far as suggesting that because there is only a limited pool of young people who could be affected by WP interventions (due to lack of attainment), aspiration-raising activities can do little if anything to alter that. Chowdry et al. (2009) suggested that a focus on raising aspirations may be ineffective if there is an underlying, unobserved cause of low aspiration and outcomes.

It is important at this juncture to note the inherent difficulties and challenges in measuring the impact of outreach programmes, particularly at a national level. These complex issues mean that there is no 'quick fix' or solution to improving access (Atkins and Ebdon 2014). Complexities include: differing institutional approaches to WP meaning what is 'successful' in one institution many not be transferable to another; difficulties in disaggregating particular programmes from the wide range of factors that affect HE participation; lack of nationally available evidence; time and capability; difficulties in establishing a direct link between policy and changes in participation rates; complexities of attributing cause and effect responses to specific

interventions; and the longer term nature of outreach work (Andreshak-Behrman 2003; Passy et al. 2009; Harris 2010; CFE Research 2015).

Doyle and Griffin (2012) provided the example of Aimhigher and point out that the project was unable to provide consistent proof that the programme lead to greater progression rates to HE due to parallel or similar schemes running at the same time and that the impact was not built in from the start of the programme. This concurs with evidence provided by Cleaver et al. (2003) who found that in the early years of the programme most partnerships placed a low value on monitoring and evaluation, instead focusing on project implementation. Harrison (2012) raised the issue that any improvements in HE participation made during Aimhigher may have been simple coincidence. In a similar vein, Passy (2012) offered a number of additional factors that may have contributed to increased participation rates from disadvantaged young people. These include the increasing population of young people, increases in government spending on post-compulsory education and new HE qualifications.

Doyle and Griffin (2012) offered a retort to the criticisms of Gorard et al. (2006) suggesting the criticisms were potentially excluding and contradictory, calling their methodology prescriptive and reductive. They went on to challenge the criticisms of practitioner-led research by pointing out that although this method needs to be rigorous it is a “perfectly valid mode of enquiry” (Doyle and Griffin 2012, p.84). HEFCE (2006) warned that by setting the evidence bar too high there was a risk that institutions would be discouraged in attempting to measure the effectiveness of interventions.

As a middle ground, Moore et al. (2013) offered a more pragmatic approach that focused on the likelihood that an outcome was influenced by a particular intervention without actually attributing change solely to it. Such an approach

recognises that identifying effective WP programmes/activities is complex but:

“Robust evidence should be able to provide sufficient confidence in the results to enable us to determine a relationship between an intervention or approach and the outcome, which would allow us to form a judgement about the effectiveness of the activity” (OFFA and HEFCE 2013, p.56).

This pragmatic approach is evident within a wide variety of the grey literature. In their review of the impact of Aimhigher, Moore and Dunworth (2011) offered a number of examples. A tracking study by the South-East region found that 27% of Aimhigher participants who lived in the most disadvantaged HE participation areas (POLAR2 quintile 1) progressed to HE compared to a national average of 18% from the same POLAR quintile. A report from the Peninsula partnership (South West) found that 45% of Aimhigher participants were in HE by the age of 20, compared to the regional average of 29%. Other reports such as Aimhigher Greater Manchester (2011) found that in 2010, national statistics showed a 30% increase in progression to HE from young people in the lowest socioeconomic groups in the lifetime of Aimhigher. Similarly, a tracking study by The Kent and Medway Progression Federation (2013) found that participants who took part in at least four outreach activities (such as campus visits, subject tasters and summer schools) were more likely to progress to HE than participants who took part in between one and three activities. Research at Nottingham Trent university noted that outreach participants achieve on average four higher grades over their best eight GCSEs than expected, compared to their school's added value scores (Woolley 2017). The author noted however the difficulties in being able to isolate the effect of outreach compared to what would have happened if the young people had not taken part.

A pragmatic approach is supported by governmental guidance into policy evaluation. The 'Magenta Book' provides several examples of when

empirical impact may not be feasible. Some of the situations would appear pertinent to WP outreach research. This includes: when there is a complex relationship between outcome of interest and driver of interest; the effect builds up over a long period of time; and when data is not sought until after the policy has been established (HM Treasury 2011).

Having provided a broader context, I now provide a review of the existing academic literature.

3.3 Part A: What approaches have been taken to examine young people's aspirations within the field of WP outreach research?

3.3.1 Research focus

Based on the work of Sellar and Gale (2011), this review identified three main strands of research resulting from a focus on aspiration interventions or programmes. The first is related to a focus on programme effectiveness. This is clearly observed within many studies that focus on the relationship between outreach programmes and the aspirations of participants, measuring aspiration to see the direct relationship between outreach and aspiration. It can be said that the research becomes relational in the sense it is attempting to determine whether the outcome of a variable is dependent on another (Elmes et al. 2012) i.e. is progression to HE dependent on levels of aspiration? Several examples include: Hatt et al. (2008) sought teachers' perceptions of the Aimhigher programme to measure the extent to which the programme had raised aspirations (as well as other factors such as HE awareness and attainment); Miller and Smith (2011) wanted to find out which Aimhigher activities and interventions were considered to be the most effective at aspiration raising; la Velle et al. (2013) examined the impact of a particular school/university partnership in the South West of England; Lewis (2014) conducted research to assess whether a programme that centred on archaeological excavation could raise aspirations in a wider educational

sense; and Hammond et al. (2015) examined whether a healthcare summer school was effective at raising aspirations.

This approach to aspiration is perhaps unsurprising given the repeated calls for robust evidence, evident within policy documents, as to 'what works'. In their review of WP, back in 2006, for example, HEFCE had been clear that there was a need to improve the evidence base as to what works and why (HEFCE 2006). A National Audit Office report (2008) had also called for a more robust evidence base, with the joint OFFA/HEFCE national strategy stating that:

“An improved evidence base, and a robust approach to evaluation, are critical in helping the sector and partners to understand which of their activities are most effective and have the greatest impact on access, student success and progression, so enabling effort to be focused on these areas” (Atkins and Ebdon 2014, p.9).

Much of this research tends to focus on a specific intervention or programme. Of particular interest is research on mentoring/student ambassador schemes (Ylonen 2010; Gartland 2012; Wilson et al. 2014; Bracke 2016) and summer schools (Byrom 2009; Hatt et al. 2009; Lasselle et al. 2009; Hammond et al. 2015). Other studies, whilst having a broader focus, were generally situated within the context of an individual institution or area (Brown and Garlick 2007; Harrison 2010; Hayton et al. 2015; Lewis 2017). This leads to an overall focus on localised, relatively small-scale research. It should be pointed out that despite this, studies such as Harrison and Waller (2017) and Maras et al. (2007) offered a much broader examination of outreach programmes in general.

The national Aimhigher programme, which ran between 2004 and 2011, was the focus of several studies. Again, however, these studies were often situated within a specific Aimhigher region such as the South West (Baxter et al. 2007; Hatt et al. 2007; Hatt et al. 2008), Kent and Medway (Dismore

2009), Lancashire (Piggott and Houghton 2007), South East London (Ylonen 2010) and Herefordshire and Worcestershire (Miller and Smith 2011). Doyle and Griffin (2012) did offer a broader focus to Aimhigher research, reviewing the general Aimhigher literature to assess the impact of the programme and its contribution to widening participation to HE in the UK. They focused on several areas ranging from government publications, conference proceedings and peer reviewed journal articles.

This approach should be set in the context of the broader literature on raising aspirations within WP outreach. Much of this literature focuses on what activities, or groups of activities, appear to be the most 'successful'. A review of WP interventions in 2006, for example, found that summer schools, mentoring and campus visits were seen as the most effective programmes (HEFCE 2006). This finding appears to be conducive with a wide number of reports published since, which mention some or all of these activities (Carpenter et al. 2010; Roberts and Weston 2010; Kerrigan and Church 2011; Bowes et al. 2013b; Moore et al. 2013; Riddell et al. 2013). The success of these particular activities may be because using an HE environment dispels misconceptions whilst improving learner attitudes and aspirations (HEFCE 2006). Moore et al. (2013) do offer a cautionary word that these types of activities may be seen as being the most effective because they may be easier to measure.

Those studies that look at the direct impact of outreach on aspiration can be said to support the deficit-based approach to aspiration in the sense that they aim to establish whether a particular intervention or programme has changed the students (Baxter et al. 2007), thereby suggesting that the 'blame' for unequal patterns of HE participation lies with the young people themselves (Archer 2007) and that it is up to the individual to raise their aspirations to HE (Gartland 2012). This approach tends to ignore the idea that aspiration is developed as a result of the social and cultural contexts within which individual's live their lives (Turok et al. 2009). This can decontextualize and

individualise the problem (Devincenzi 2011) and situates educational disadvantage as one of motivation alone (Taylor 2008). According to Bok (2010), the general result of this approach has been that aspirations have been portrayed in policy as a personal motivational trait that emphasise individual responsibility, which can be affected by intervention. Drawing upon the work of Appadurai (2004), Bok (2010), goes on to suggest an alternative reframing of aspirations as a cultural category that rejects the deficit approach.

Despite these limitations in terms of the breadth of research, this type of research focus should not be dismissed for several reasons. Firstly, if an activity or programme does not work it is important to understand if this is because of the intervention itself or the intervention being poorly executed (Archer et al. 2014a). Piggott and Houghton (2007) were interested in, for example, examining how access to summer schools and HE could be improved for disabled learners. The measurement of 'soft' outcomes such as short-term changes in aspirations, confidence etc. adds additional layers to the overall evidence (Carpenter et al. 2010). As Hatt (2007) added, not only does evaluation need to be related to objectives, it needs to provide an opportunity to capture unintended outcomes. Additionally, Sellar and Gale (2011) state that this type of research makes an important contribution to research knowledge as the evaluation provides evidence of the effectiveness of a programme in relation to a given set of assumptions and objectives. Harrison and Waller (2017), for example, concluded that there are ongoing questions about the nature of outreach activities, with there being an absence of a clear epistemology for assessing what actually constitutes 'success' within these activities, leading to a danger that the activities become unfit for purpose.

This of course does not suggest that studies with a broader research focus do not exist within the literature, with several studies considering wider structural inequalities. This is in line with Sellar and Gale's (2011) assertion

that another major strand of research resulting from a focus on aspiration is research that examines how structural inequalities can shape aspiration. According to Sellar and Gale (2011), the benefit of this approach being that it acknowledges that young people's aspirations are formed within fields of social power and that structural inequalities serve to reproduce social structures. Brown and Garlick (2007), McHarg et al. (2007) and Nicholson and Cleland (2017), for example, were all interested in programmes concerned with applications to medical education in terms of influences on young people's aspirations and decision to study medicine. In a similar vein, Harrison (2010) conducted research to investigate what motivates young people to study drama in HE by understanding the ways in which learners' contexts (such as school attended and demographic background) impacts their career intentions and decision making.

Several studies, such as Lasselle et al. (2009), Wilson et al. (2014), Hayton et al. (2015), whilst focusing on one specific institution or programme, broadened their research to look at wider social issues. Lasselle et al. (2009), looked primarily at the direct impact of a summer school on participants, but were also interested in how attitudes to HE are impacted by family and school. Similarly, Wilson et al. (2014) whilst considering the benefit of mentoring, wanted to investigate the young people's social networks. As well as looking at outreach practices within an individual institution, Hayton et al. (2015) attempted to explore factors that affected potential students in relation to prior artistic development and decision-making processes.

Sellar and Gale's (2011) third and final strand of research resulting from a focus on aspiration interventions is described by the authors as a body of research that identifies students' aspirations, not just educationally but within broader life trajectories. Whilst Sellar and Gale (2011) suggest that there is a substantial amount of this literature available, within this review there were a limited number of studies that provided a wider, more holistic in-depth

exploration of young people's aspirations (both educationally and in a wider sense) and the experiences that create and shape these aspirations.

In one such study, Brown (2011) considered the emotional geographies of young people's aspirations. He suggested that the idea that HE is deemed as the most acceptable aspiration overlooks the wider ambitions young people have for their future lives and therefore there is a need to holistically engage with the differing emotions that young people experience when imagining their future lives. The importance of this kind of research is emphasised by Brown's assertion that there is a disconnect between the actual aspirations of young people and the ways in which aspirations are represented in policy.

Using Sen's capability approach, Campbell and McKendrick (2017) rejected the 'poverty of aspiration thesis' by researching young (WP) people's aspirations and their perceptions of their own capabilities. According to Campbell and McKendrick (2017) the primary objective of using the capability approach being the ability to peruse human development by evaluating what people can do or be. The capability approach focuses on an individual and their ability to convert resources into achievements that are deemed valuable within the context of a given society. The capability approach is central to Richardson et al. (2017) in their study of young WP students with mental health issues. They argued that such an approach is important for 'marginalised' groups in that it captures:

“[...] a sense of human agency, opportunity and freedom, alongside developing the practical means for social and environmental recognition of this agency” (p.49).

They go on to suggest that 'capability' is something that is seldom available to those suffering with mental ill health.

Byrom (2009), whilst being primarily interested in the impact of Sutton Trust summer schools on young people's progression to HE, explored and identified 'trajectory interruptions' that took the young people away from what would be expected for similarly categorised young people. Byrom (2009) used focus groups to discuss various aspects of the young people's lives such as hobbies, family, education and choice of 6th form. In a similar vein, McHarg et al. (2007) wanted to identify the influences on a young person's decision to study medicine and how these findings could be applied to outreach programmes.

3.3.2 Data collection approaches

In 3.3.1, I reviewed the literature to identify the three different strands of research approaches, each with their own differing focus. In this sub-section, I review the approaches to the collection of data.

The majority of studies included in this review employed qualitative approaches to data collection, with many combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to offer a mixed-methods approach. In the context of researching WP outreach, the benefit of a qualitative approach is the ability to gain a rich description as well as an in-depth understanding of individuals' feelings and perceptions (Glover et al. 2016).

A common approach to mixed methods is the use of a questionnaire, supplemented by either interviews or focus groups. This is particularly focused on triangulation, where more than one method is used to study the same research question, and the complementary nature of mixed methods, where researchers are able to gain a fuller understanding, whilst clarifying a given research result (Hesse-Biber 2010). la Velle et al. (2013), for example, employed a triangulated approach using a pre and post model of evaluation to assess the impact of outreach programmes on a particular cohort. Pupils

completed a 'pre' questionnaire, with a sample taking part in a focus group that focused on their historical experiences of relating to HE. Following the intervention, the same process was undertaken, with the focus group this time focusing on the actual intervention. Likewise, Harrison (2010) conducted interviews, which included a quantitative element in the form of a short questionnaire, before re-interviewing the same participants. An example of the complementary use of a mixed methods approach is provided by Hatt et al. (2009) in their review of summer schools in the South West of England, who used qualitative evidence to explore the reasons behind quantitative findings.

As well as the prominent use of questionnaires and focus groups/interviews, a number of mixed methods studies use secondary data to supplement primary data collection methods. Miller and Smith (2011), for example, collected funding data and budgetary information, whilst Lewis (2014) made use of application forms and performance assessments and Hatt et al. (2009) medium and long-term tracking data to add an additional layer of evidence whilst providing progression to HE data.

Only a limited number of studies adopted a quantitative only approach to data collection through the administering of questionnaires (Hatt et al. 2008; Lasselle et al. 2009; Lewis 2014; Hammond et al. 2015; Bracke 2016), all of which looked at the impact of specific programmes on pupil aspiration. The most comprehensive study was undertaken by Maras et al. (2007) who examined the attitudes towards HE and general and academic self-concept and identification with peers, family and school of 2731 young people between 13 and 16 years of age. This was then matched against data on the academic attainment and social backgrounds of participants.

Enriching understanding can be undertaken using multiple perspectives. Around half of the studies included in this review took this approach.

Examples include: Baxter et al. (2007) included young pupils who were part of the Aimhigher cohort, parents, teachers and Aimhigher co-ordinators; Piggott and Houghton (2007) included co-ordinators, FE learning support managers and young people in school years 9 to 13; Prior (2010) surveyed teachers and students, whilst conducting a focus group with project staff; and Lewis (2014) included relevant staff members as well as learners.

One of the benefits of such an approach is the ability to provide commonality as well as diversity (Larkin and Griffiths 2004) by viewing an experience through multiple lenses. Mentoring in particular appears to be conducive to the use of multiple perspectives in that it allows the dynamic relationship between mentor and mentee to be explored (Wilson et al. 2014), with Gartland (2012; 2015) and Wilson et al. (2014) taking such an approach.

In terms of qualitative data collection, the existing body of research uses a wide body of theoretical approaches or frameworks. This includes phenomenology and the lived experience (Piggott and Houghton 2007; Miller and Smith 2011), action research (Brown 2011; Wilson et al. 2014; Hayton et al. 2015), grounded theory (Ylonen 2010), framework analysis (McHarg et al. 2007), ethnographic data (Brown and Garlick 2007), participatory photography (Raven 2015b), the capabilities approach (based on the work of Sen) (Campbell and McKendrick 2017; Richardson et al. 2017) and social capital and habitus (Byrom 2009; Hayton and Bengry-Howell 2016; Nicholson and Cleland 2017). In researching the role of student ambassadors, Gartland (2012; 2015) draws upon a 'diverse concepts and theories' including a constructivist approach to grounded theory and ethnography.

The depth in which the authors go into the theoretical underpinnings of their approach as well as outlining the actual research process varies between studies. Miller and Smith (2011) provided comprehensive details concerning

their methodological approach. In using phenomenology, they outlined the benefit of such an approach, the sampling technique used, data collection and analysis processes as well as relevant ethical issues. However, the phenomenological approach was taken in interviewing Aimhigher professionals rather than the young participants themselves, therefore the study was unable to shed much light on the lived experience of the participants. In presenting a novel approach to WP research, Raven (2015b) offered a detailed account of the approach and design in using participatory photography with WP research. In some other studies, it is less clear as to which theoretical approach or framework has been applied, whilst others do not provide much depth as to the benefits of a given approach. Despite this, the use of multiple approaches to research can help to add to the rich theoretical tapestry (Doyle and Griffin 2012) required to better understand WP outreach programmes and the young people who take part in them.

One of the key weaknesses with existing research is the lack of research that appears to identify specific WP target groups. It is often not clear as to exactly which groups of WP students are included in the research. Often it appears that the young people are merely identified as being WP students or more colloquial groups are identified, such as being from 'deprived communities', 'deprived boroughs' or disadvantaged groups. The primary reason for this may be down to the prevalence of research that focuses on programme effectiveness, thereby establishing 'what works' becomes the research priority. The drawback to such an approach is that it has created nomothetic accounts of aspiration, that is, generalised claims can be made about the aspirations of WP students, without acknowledging the possible nuances between differing groups, as well as within particular groups themselves.

Of course, this does not suggest that studies that identify specific groups of WP students do not exist. Piggott and Houghton (2007), for example,

conducted research with a group of disabled learners, whilst Richardson (2017) focused on learners with mental health issues. Raven (2015b) although not specifically focusing on one particular WP group, noted the prominence of pupils from particular POLAR and Index of Multiple Deprivation groups in his research. Despite this, the sector would benefit from studies that take a more ideographic approach. This is important in the context of Brown's (2011) assertion that there is a growing gap between the:

“lived experience of young people and the futures they are encouraged to anticipate for themselves” (p.8).

What can be perceived as a gap in the current evidence base is the small number of studies that focus solely on the voice on the WP student, with only around a quarter of the studies included in this review taking that approach. Whilst there is undoubted value in research that seeks multiple perspectives, indeed some studies do not include young WP students at all (e.g. WP practice managers (Harrison and Waller 2017) and ambassadors and ambassador co-ordinators (Ylonen 2010)), there is a danger that without research that focuses purely on the voice of WP participants, their voice will be diluted or indeed lost from the debate.

3.3.3 Summary

This review has identified the predominance of research that focuses on the effectiveness of outreach programmes by measuring aspiration to see the direct relationship between outreach and aspiration. Much of this research focuses on a certain programme or type of intervention and is often small scale and localised. The review identified a band of studies that seek to examine structural inequalities that young people from WP backgrounds face. There is a small amount of research that seeks to identify the aspirations of young WP students, not just educationally but within broader life trajectories.

The review found that the majority of studies use qualitative approaches to data collection with many studies using a mixed methods approach using qualitative and quantitative approaches. In terms of qualitative approaches there was not one dominant approach or theoretical framework with a wide range of approaches being used, such as phenomenology, ethnography, action research, a social capital and habitus lens and the use of the capabilities approach.

The review found that many studies seek to obtain multiple perspectives by including diverse groups (such as teachers, practitioners, ambassadors and HE students). There was however, a relatively small number of studies that focused purely on the voice of the young WP students themselves. As well as this, the review identified a small number of studies that focus on specific WP target groups, with it often not being clear as to exactly which groups of WP students are included in studies. This has created generalised, nomothetic accounts of the aspirations of young WP students. There is, therefore, a gap in the literature for more ideographic approaches to data collection that seeks to put the lives and experiences of WP students at the heart of the research process.

3.4 Part B: What does the research tell us about the aspirations of young people from WP backgrounds?

Having discussed the approaches that have been taken to examine the aspirations of outreach participants, I now move on to discuss what the existing evidence base tells us about the aspirations of young people on WP outreach programmes. To do so, I refer back to Sellar and Gale's (2011) typology of the three types of research created by a focus on programmes that aim to raise aspirations of young people: programme effectiveness; structural inequalities; and identification of aspirations.

3.4.1 Programme effectiveness

Studies that seek to examine programme effectiveness look at the direct impact that WP interventions can have on a young person's aspirations. The evidence from this body of research is generally positive and suggests that outreach can have an immediate and positive impact on participants (Hatt et al. 2007), such as an immediate increase of 26% in the number of participants intending to apply to university (Lewis 2014). la Velle et al. (2013) went as far as suggesting that for a school/university partnership in the South West of England, the effect was "ground-breaking [...] upon the levels of aspiration of the pupils targeted" (p.410). The reason for this immediate positive impact can be because they create 'wow' moments, such as "I'm thinking about it [going to university] - thanks to them" (Prior 2010, p.186), that act on an emotional level by altering the young people's perceptions about what is possible (Brown 2011).

Baxter et al. (2007) found that Aimhigher was able to offer young people a way of becoming better informed about HE whilst allowing them to explore whether HE was an option that could further their career plans. Other studies of Aimhigher provide similar findings. Hatt et al. (2007) suggested that without the Aimhigher programme, the decisions of young people with no parental HE experience would be less informed, whilst their chances of success being more tenuous. In a study of teacher perceptions of the Aimhigher programme, Hatt et al. (2008) reported that 96% of respondents felt that the Aimhigher programme encouraged young people to aspire to university. Research from Miller and Smith (2011) reported an overwhelmingly positive reaction to Aimhigher and noted that low and medium intensity activities were the most effective in raising aspirations. Dismore (2009) found that Aimhigher was key to young people's motivations and raising their aspirations, noting in particular the benefit of mentoring.

Other research that focuses on individual, localised programmes (as opposed to the national Aimhigher programme) report similar findings. In terms of summer schools for example, Lasselle et al. (2009) found that summer school attendance provided participants with a significant confidence boost and noted the strongly positive impact that the summer school had in participants wanting to pursue an application to the host institution. Hammond et al. (2015) found that summer schools appeared to reinforce aspirations but noted the difficulty of assuming a direct causal link between summer schools and increases in HE application rates. Reporting on a three day programme entitled the Higher Education Field Academy, Lewis (2017) noted a positive impact on attitudes and skills of learners that Lewis suggests will help participants to aspire and achieve in the school environment which will then support HE progression. The apparent success of summer schools may be down to their ability to replicate the HE experience which enables young people to feel more confident about 'fitting in' (Hatt et al. 2009).

Many of the findings of this type of approach, whilst demonstrating a positive impact, can only provide a short-term 'snapshot' of aspiration. As la Velle et al. (2013) suggested, whilst studies may show short-term gains in levels of aspiration, it is not known whether they survive over time and that short-term influences may only have transient effects (Casey et al. 2011). Harrison and Waller (2017) suggested that it is unclear that raised aspirations simply translate into improvements in attainment. Through tracking learners one or two years after taking part in an outreach programme, Lewis (2017) was able to report that 80% of participants were still planning to continue in education and progress on to A-Levels; a percentage, Lewis notes, which is very close to the figure collected in feedback provided immediately after the programme.

One of the few statistical studies, undertaken by Chilosi et al. (2010), estimated that being targeted by the Aimhigher programme increased the

probability of entering HE by just over four percentage points. The authors themselves urged caution however, due to limited sample size and inaccuracies within the data sets used. Similarly, a report conducted by HEFCE found that summer school participants were on average over twice as likely to be accepted to HE as young people who were similarly disadvantaged but did not participate in a summer school. Again, the authors urge caution pointing out the possibility that the type of young people who participate in summer schools may have higher HE progression rates anyway, irrespective of attending the summer school (HEFCE 2010).

Morris et al. (2009) found a small, but statistically significant, link between the probability of a young person with average attainment (35.3 GCSE points) entering HE. They found a 10.3% probability that a young person from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools (the pre-cursor to the Aimhigher programme) would enter HE, compared to a 9.2% probability for a young person from non-Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools. However, when they examined young people with higher attainment they found that the probability of a young person from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools entering HE was lower than if a young person attended a non-Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge school. Emmerson et al. (2006) were unable to offer a positive and statistically significant effect between participating in Excellence Challenge and attainment or HE participation and were only able to offer a suggestion that participation may have had a positive impact of post-16 participation

In a wider context, research by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF and The Sutton Trust 2014) found that, on average, aspiration-raising activities had no or little positive impact on attainment (which plausibly could impact eventual progression to HE). They offered three possible explanations. Firstly, that young people actually have high aspirations. Secondly, that when aspirations are low it is not clear that interventions raise aspirations. Thirdly, that even if aspirations are raised it is not clear that an

improvement in learning follows. The report noted the need for more rigorous studies, whilst Cummings et al. (2012) noted that a change in aspiration did not impact on educational attainment.

Despite these limitations, this does not suggest that this evidence should be discarded. By researching aspiration, studies provide recommendations on how, by gaining a greater understanding, research can enhance outreach programmes. This includes the need for early intervention to raise aspirations (McHarg et al. 2007), the value of low and medium intensity activities (Miller and Smith 2011), the benefit of activities that give students higher levels of autonomy (Maras et al. 2007), the benefit of academic involvement in outreach programmes (Harris and Ridealgh 2016), the importance of role models (McHarg et al. 2007; Ylonen 2010), the value of bringing young people onto a university campus (Glover et al. 2016), the need for closer collaborative work between HEIs (Harrison and Waller 2017) and the critical role of assessment in programmes that provide evidence that demonstrate how knowledge, skills and attitudes can be affected (Lewis 2017).

la Velle et al. (2013) interestingly reported that the problem of aspiration towards HE progression may not actually lie with the young people themselves, or their parents but with their school teachers. la Velle et al. (2013), therefore suggested that teachers may need to develop more positive attitudes towards young people and their aspirations. In researching the role of ambassadors Gartland (2012) provided some challenging findings, suggesting that the primary contribution of ambassadors is not one of widening participation but promotion of their own institution and courses and that the outcome of ambassador work is more likely to maintain the existing stratification within HE rather than challenging it.

It must be noted that many studies acknowledge the problematic nature of raising aspirations and the true impact that outreach programmes can have on aspiration and future life choices. When assessing the impact of an access-to-medicine programme, Brown and Garlick (2007) for example, acknowledged that WP projects only play a very marginal part of a much larger process, with there being a need to target educational aspirations outside the school environment, with a particular focus on the family environment of 'troubled' students (Taylor 2008). Byrom (2009) suggested that it is problematic to assess the success of WP interventions as being the sole contributing factor in young people considering HE. Taylor (2008) went on to suggest that WP initiatives situate educational disadvantage as one of motivation alone, which can obscure structural barriers (Gartland 2012) and therefore WP initiatives need to:

“[...] engage with - and beyond - such interpersonal positioning in order to erode continued structural inequalities” (Taylor 2008, p.155).

Hatt et al. (2009) argued that raising aspirations is a series of steps (created, personalised, developed and consolidated) as opposed to a 'one-off'. The authors described how each step needs to be successfully negotiated before a young person is able to apply to HE. They found that because of this, the role of summer schools was not to create HE aspiration but to nurture and develop. In a similar finding, Taylor (2008) suggested the need to finely tune aspirations rather than attempting to raise aspirations, whilst Prior (2010) and Doyle and Griffin (2012) both raised the difficulty of being able to attribute a simple cause and effect response to WP interventions.

3.4.2 Structural inequalities

Whilst there is an intrinsic value in the body of research that looks at the direct impact that WP outreach can have on young people and their aspirations, the key weakness of this approach is that it fails to put the

results in the context of the young people's lives. It tells us little about the lives that WP students live or the barriers they may face.

To understand inequalities that WP students may encounter, several studies examine the issue of social capital and how inequalities within society can constrain aspiration. The benefit of such research is the ability to illuminate the realities of inequalities and an increased understanding of the ways in which WP students may struggle to engage with HEIs and their institutional processes that other more advantaged peers may be more familiar with (Wilson et al. 2014). Taylor (2008) suggested that focusing on raising aspirations does little to address structural inequalities, whilst Lasselle et al. (2009) suggested that attempting to raise aspirations involves tackling social and cultural obstacles as well as economic barriers to HE. Despite these obstacles, Brown and Garlick (2007) suggested that many 'working-class' students learn to adapt their identities in order to perform 'being a medical student' and that those students who succeed are those who can see themselves as belonging in the education system, regardless of social and cultural backgrounds.

Based on the work of Bourdieu, Sullivan (2001) stated that cultural capital is about familiarity with the dominant culture of a society and that cultural capital will vary with social class, which helps to create different patterns of privilege and inequality (Brooks 2008). This then "serves to reinforce the privileged place of the middle class within the education system" (Gartland and Paczuska 2006, p.109). Nicholson and Cleland (2017), for example, suggested that applicants to medical education from lower social-economic groups experience persistent disadvantage and conclude that WP activities (and policy) need to focus on effectively increasing the social capital of young people from under-represented groups.

Focusing on fine art degrees, Hayton et al. (2015) emphasised the importance of HE applicants having the 'right sort' of cultural capital and indicated that standard WP activities related to raising aspirations will not solve this issue. The authors noted that students lacked knowledge about arts careers as well as having limited access to 'soft' information (such as connections to alumni), whilst some found the 'arty' environment alien. Hayton and Bengry-Howell (2016) therefore suggested that there is a need for HEIs to be responsible for delivering 'enabling' interventions that facilitate personal change to participants.

McHarg et al. (2007), in researching why people apply to medical school, suggested that when there is no relevant learning experience in a young person's environment, medical schools need to intervene at an early stage to plant the idea that anyone with the right ability and attributes can apply. The authors went on to suggest that this initial aspiration can then be built upon by a progressive build-up of positive experiences such as improved academic performance, meeting a role model, caring for a relative and parental reinforcement. McHarg et al. (2007) found that for young people who had made a successful application to medical school, they had had to overcome barriers such as being the first in their family to enter HE, not being perceived as doctor 'material' at school and a lack of support within the school environment. They had overcome these barriers primarily through family support as well as by using role models. McHarg et al. (2007) are able to conclude that a key target for outreach programmes should be teachers and home support and that when a young person has no relevant learning experience, there is a need for intervention to plant the seed. They suggest that of particular importance is the use of positive role models, such as students from non-traditional medical student backgrounds.

Piggott and Houghton (2007) provided some insight into the lived experience of disabled learners and participation in summer schools and how their learner journeys were often restricted. They found that disabled learners

were often restricted in summer school attendance because special educational needs teachers and co-ordinators were not aware or told about summer schools. They found that learners with special education needs often feared an unknown place, worried about the kind of activities they would undertake and most significantly were uncertain if a support worker or family member would be able to accompany them to the summer school.

From a theoretical perspective, this kind of research can be situated within the work of Appadurai (2004) and his concept of the capacity to aspire. Appadurai suggests that the poor just like any other group express horizons in choices which are expressed in specific goods that are:

“[...] often material and proximate like doctors for their children, markets for their grain, husbands for their daughters, and tin roofs for their homes” (p.68).

These aspirations, no matter how varied, can be seen to be part of a system of ideas formed by wider ideas around, for example, the significance of material assets and the nature of worldly possessions. Therefore, the capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity that forms part of “wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive for larger cultural norms” (Appadurai 2004, p.67). Although aspirations for the ‘good life’ exist in all societies and having desires for the future is not only an attribute confined to the most powerful and rich (in monetary terms) in society (Bok 2010), Appadurai’s key argument is that the capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed within society. The more powerful and rich you are the greater your capacity to aspire because you are more likely to be conscious of “the links between the more and less immediate objects of aspiration” (p.68). Conversely, it is this capacity to aspire (rather than aspiration per se) that needs to be strengthened within poorer communities. Central to this is the notion that the capacity to aspire is a navigational capacity.

Because of this, for certain groups aspiration may be weaker, whilst other, more powerful groups, may be able to “explore the future more frequently and more realistically” (Appadurai 2004, p.69). Strand and Winston (2008) apply this concept to aspiring to HE. They suggest that an individual’s capacity to aspire to HE may be strengthened if they have previous positive experiences in navigating educational contexts. Gale and Parker (2015b) provide an example of how, for some young people, this navigational capacity can be restricted. They found that although almost half (47%) of students in their study stated that they relied on information from family concerning post-school options and 67% had HE aspirations, only 10% had a parent who had obtained a university degree and 18% had a sibling who had been to university. Baker et al. (2014) found that whilst aspirations of young people to study at HE level were relatively high across all income groups, the gap between aspiration and the expectation that these aspirations would be met grew the lower the family salary. They conclude that the issue may be an absence of opportunity for aspirations to be realised rather than a problem of low aspiration. Calder and Cope (2004) agreed, suggesting that the aspirations of young people classed as disadvantaged were similar to those of a control group and that the real problem was that these young people found it harder to equate how they could fulfil their life aims. This leads Archer (2014) to suggest that aspirations are social and cultural products that tell us something about the social contexts of the young person expressing those aspirations.

3.4.3 Identification of aspirations

Whilst investigating structural inequalities is a vital part of outreach research in that it enables outreach to be set within a wider context, it can be argued however that this kind of research is still deficit-based in that it seeks to examine what young WP students lack in their ability to progress into HE. What is conspicuous by its absence in the current evidence base therefore is more in depth, outwardly looking research that focuses on the actual lives of young WP students.

When this area begins to be explored in more depth, Brown (2011) is able to offer a number of insights into the lives of young people (defined as working-class WP students). Brown found that the young people were aspirational but many focused on questions of emotional well-being and security, rather than aspiring to academic success (such as the desire to study at HE level) and had developed holistic aspirations for most parts of their adult lives. For the majority, their ultimate goal was to lead a comfortable life with a secure stable family life.

Campbell and McKendrick (2017) suggested their research provides evidence that is critical of the idea of a 'poverty' of aspiration. They found that the majority of the young people had an aspiration to continue in post-school education, with over half expressing an aspiration to go to university. Importantly, they additionally found that these young people were confident in the acquisition of the capabilities needed to succeed in HE. Dismore (2009) offered some context to the HE decision-making process, demonstrating how complex the HE decision-making process is for young people from lower socio-economic groups. This included the influence of family, the conflict between independence and fear of moving away as well as the desire for employability.

Studies that suggest that young WP students have higher aspirations than that portrayed in policy are supported by several studies within the grey literature and within the wider academic literature. Archer et al. (2014b), for example, found that the aspirations of young people were generally comparable across all social-class backgrounds, whilst Atherton et al. (2009) reported a higher percentage (85% compared to 66%) of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds compared to higher socio-economic backgrounds aspiring to HE. In their study of young people in disadvantaged settings Kintrea et al. (2015) found high levels of aspiration. Similarly, Turok et al. (2009) challenged the idea that there is a poverty of aspiration amongst young disadvantaged people. The impact of this, according to Brown (2011),

is that WP initiatives fail to contextualise HE progression within the wider ambitions young people have for their future.

In providing insight into individual learner trajectories, Byrom (2009) found that a group of 'aspirational working class' young people strategically used their knowledge of the education system to their advantage, thereby denying places on a summer school to peers who would have more likely have benefited from attendance at such an event. Gaining this insight allows Byrom (2009) to suggest that schools should seek to identify the young people who would benefit the most from outreach intervention. This raises an important question for WP when young people attend aspiration-raising programmes when they have previously stated their consideration of HE as a future career path prior to attendance. Byrom concluded that the summer school did not present a significant 'interruption' in student's respective habituses and that other influences such as their school contexts influenced their educational journeys at an earlier stage. McHarg et al. (2007) suggested that the aspiration to become a doctor can come from being exposed to the possibility at a young age and that the aspiration can grow over time.

Campbell and McKendrick (2017) found that environmental factors, such as parental influence, were deemed to be more helpful to the young people in making future decisions than more formal social arrangements such as outreach and careers advice. Harrison and Waller (2017) suggested a more predominant role for family over official careers advice in making post-16 decisions. In the context of outreach this is an important finding as it suggests that outreach is only one small piece of the jigsaw.

Despite this, this does not mean that these studies do not acknowledge the significant role of outreach. Harrison and Waller (2017) indicated (in relation to students progressing in drama) a disparity between aspiration to progress

and the information, advice and guidance available that allows young people to make informed decisions. Therefore, in this case, outreach can help the young people in closing this gap by increasing their knowledge and allowing them to make informed and accurate decisions. Campbell and McKendrick (2017) suggested that 'social arrangements' such as outreach give increasing opportunities for agency freedom and sustained programmes appear to have a positive impact in helping young people in making positive choices post school.

3.4.4 Summary

The distinct types of research used to examine WP outreach programmes tell us a variety of things about the aspirations of young WP students. Studies that look at programme effectiveness generally tell us that outreach has a positive but short-term impact on young people's aspirations. The key weakness of this approach is that it fails to take account of the context of the lives that outreach participants live. In order to address that, there is a body of research that focuses on structural inequalities and the barriers that young people from WP backgrounds may face. This body of research then explains the ways in which outreach programmes can be designed to help to reduce some of these inequalities. This research can sit within the work of Appadurai (2004) and the capacity to aspire. Appadurai argues that it is the capacity to aspire rather than aspiration per se that needs to be strengthened within certain communities.

This approach however, it can be argued, still sits within a deficit approach to HE participation in so much as it seeks to examine what WP students lack in their ability to progress into HE. The final body of research attempts to provide a more holistic view of young people's aspirations, generally reporting that aspirations of young people from WP backgrounds are often higher than that portrayed in policy. Despite this, there are still a lack of studies that not only engage with the broader aspirations of WP students (i.e.

more than just an aspiration to progress into HE) but seek to establish how these aspirations are developed, shaped and restricted by the lives in which the young people live.

3.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the current academic research literature around WP outreach programmes. As well as discussing the benefits of the various approaches in this field, I identified several weaknesses and gaps in the literature. One study such as this one cannot obviously cover all the deficiencies. This study, given that it follows the lives of five young people from one school in one part of the country is, for example, small scale and localised, much like the majority of the existing research base.

However, in discussing the current research base, I have identified three key areas where this study can offer an original contribution to knowledge. These are: to give voice to outreach participants; a specific focus on young people living in LPNs; and a novel methodological approach to WP research.

To give voice to outreach participants

In the literature review I outlined that within WP outreach research, there is a lack of studies that not only identify the aspirations of the young people taking part in outreach activities but that also focus on the broader life trajectories of these young people. I identified the relatively small number of studies that have a pure focus on the voice of the young people. This study therefore seeks to contribute to this knowledge gap by rejecting the deficit approach that suggests that outreach participants need to raise their aspirations towards a future that includes applying to and entering HE. It seeks to build on existing studies such as Brown (2011) and Campbell and

McKendrick (2017) by focusing on the lived experiences of a group of young WP students and how aspirations are developed through these experiences. By obtaining these insights a deeper account of individual experience will emerge (Willig 2013).

A specific focus on young people living in LPNs

The literature review identified a lack of studies that focus on particular groups of WP students. I explained how this has led to a proliferation of nomothetic studies that enables researchers to only be able to make probabilistic claims about individuals. This study, therefore, offers an original contribution to knowledge by conducting an ideographic study of a small group of WP students. This will allow for much more personalised accounts of aspiration to emerge. Given their prominence as one of the key target groups for outreach and the lack of research that examines their lived experiences, young people from LPNs became an obvious choice for this study.

A novel methodological approach to WP research

The literature review uncovered only two studies that adopted a phenomenological approach (Piggott and Houghton 2007; Miller and Smith 2011). Therefore, as the following chapter will detail, the use of IPA is a novel, challenging way of studying the aspirations of WP students. In taking such an approach, the study aims to open up new ways in which the lives of WP students can be understood. This will add value to the existing evidence base as well as complementing other emerging methods, such as participatory photography (Raven 2015b) and life history (Raven 2015a), as a means of enriching our understanding and appreciation of the lives of WP students.

Chapter 4: Methodology: Theoretical Underpinnings

In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical underpinnings to my methodological approach. In doing so, I justify my use of IPA as the most effective means of answering my research questions. I start by offering my epistemological standpoint.

4.1 Epistemological standpoint

Epistemology is concerned with how and what we know about the world; in other words, epistemology is interested in the nature of knowledge (Eatough 2012). As a researcher, the importance of understanding one's epistemological view of the world is that one's epistemological standpoint will affect and indeed lead the methodological approach adopted within a research study (Langdrige 2007) and how as a researcher one will uncover knowledge of social behaviours (Cohen and Manion 1991). Therefore, the first step in any methodological decision-making process must be a clear understanding as to how knowledge is created. This in turn will then allow the researcher to consider the answers to questions such as: what understanding am I aiming for? And: what kind of knowledge can I gain? (Finlay and Evans 2009).

There are many ways of viewing how knowledge is created. Crotty (1998) broadly identifies three such ways: objectivism; constructionism; and subjectivism. This compares to Denzin and Lincoln (2005 cited by Finlay and Evans (2009)) who identify four approaches: positivist and postpositivist; constructivist-interpretative; critical; and feminist-poststructural.

In terms of how these viewpoints vary, an objectivism view of the world, for example, sees that:

“Things exist as meaningful entities independently of consciousness and experience, that they have truth and meaning residing in them as objects” (Crotty 1998, p.5).

This compares to a subjective viewpoint that acknowledges that although the world exists, different people will see the world in very different ways (Cohen and Manion (1991). For the purposes of this thesis, two opposing viewpoints are discussed: a positivist viewpoint (which using Crotty’s (1998) typology can be situated within objectivism) and an interpretivist viewpoint (which can be situated within subjectivism). In essence, a positivist is aiming for ‘truths’, whilst an interpretivist explores multiple meanings and interpretations (Finlay and Evans 2009).

A positivist perspective suggests that there is a relatively straightforward relationship between the world as well as our understanding and perceptions of it (Willig 2013). In this way, the world can be described in terms of variables and how these variables interact with each other and can be measured (Ashworth 2011). Crucially, this involves a viewpoint that, with a need to produce some form of objective knowledge, the researcher acts as an impartial observer who stands outside of the direct phenomenon and in other words, with the need to remain objective, detached and value-free (Langdrige 2007), findings of one researcher can be replicated by another (Finlay and Evans 2009). Whilst a positivist approach has a long history, it is generally acknowledged, particularly within the social sciences, that this has been superseded by a ‘post-positivist’ viewpoint, that whilst a ‘real’ world is still assumed, our understanding and observation of it is necessarily selective, or partial, and therefore only an approximation (Willig 2013).

Positivism is often associated with quantitative methods of data collection, with its use of controlled experiments, representative sampling techniques, focus on words such as ‘reliability’ and ‘prediction’ and its statistical and

deductive data analysis process (Eatough 2012). On reflecting on my previous research experience, it became apparent that I had adopted a positivist position in terms of knowledge creation. Much of my work, particularly when working within the Aimhigher programme, had been concerned with measuring the impact of the programme on participants. This was in line with much of the published research in this field, as the literature review demonstrated. I often constructed questionnaires that sought answers to questions such as:

What outreach activity appears to be the most effective at raising aspirations?

Is there a difference in the responses of males to females or from different year groups?

I was then able to produce objective *facts* about the impact of outreach programmes and activities. As the Aimhigher programme matured there became a greater need for a mixed-methods approach that looked to examine the impact of the programme in greater depth using focus groups and interviews. However, although more qualitative approaches were developed, a fundamental desire to seek the *truth* remained. In this sense, a qualitative approach still entailed searching for variables involved in a situation and that the person remains a part of the natural system of causes and effects (Ashworth 2011). This was in line with the reporting requirements of Aimhigher partnerships which required objective findings that considered the effectiveness of the programme. As a researcher, this view of the world became a source of frustration in that it did not give me the freedom to examine the wider lives of outreach participants. Therefore, from the outset, this thesis sought to examine the lives of the young people who took part in WP outreach programmes from a different epistemological position.

I did not want to start with the viewpoint that the aspirations of young people living in LPNs were low and then go on to examine how best to raise them. I

wanted to take a step back and explore their everyday lives, their experiences of home and family life, their school life and so on, and how through these experiences, their aspirations for the future were shaped. This would enable aspiration to be viewed from a fresh perspective. Rather than producing a nomothetic account of aspiration, I wanted to examine human experience at an idiographic level where the idea is to develop detailed descriptions of the experiences of a few (Langdrige 2007). To achieve this required a change of mindset from the positivist one that I had adopted through much of my research career.

Whilst a positivist viewpoint sees the need to produce some form of objective knowledge, an interpretivist denies the possibility of capturing the *truth*. They argue that there is not one *reality* but many and, dependent on each individual's perspective, what might be true for one person may not be the truth for another. Interpretivism sees the distinctiveness of a human being as opposed to the natural order (Bryman 2015) and that experiences are "socially, culturally, historically and linguistically produced" (Finlay and Evans 2009, p.19). This means that knowledge can be seen as being personal and subjective and leads to a change of role for the researcher, from one of an observer to one of involvement (Cohen and Manion 1991), i.e. the researcher becomes part of the world they are studying (Finlay and Evans 2009). It became clear that if I wished to explore the aspirations of a group of young WP students in far more depth than I had previously done, an interpretivist position was required, so as to put the analysis of language and meaning at the heart of the methodological approach (Bryman 2015). Given that this study is concerned with how every day experience can shape aspiration, an interpretative position was more applicable as it sees experiences being socially, culturally and historically produced (Finlay and Evans 2009).

In the initial stages of the process, this need to take a different view of the world (in research terms) that strayed from my previous work experience did

not come easily. My supervisors frequently reminded me, through feedback of written work, of the need to *think* in an interpretivist way, to move away from the language of positivism. Slowly through a process of reflection, feedback and immersing myself in the relevant literature I began to adopt this new viewpoint.

4.2 Selecting a methodology

As Langdrige (2007) suggests, a methodological approach will be determined by the epistemological position of the researcher. Having decided on an interpretivist position, the next decision was the selection of a suitable methodology. Whilst it became apparent that a qualitative methodology was most appropriate, with its concern for meaning and interest in how individuals make sense of the world (Willig 2013), it was not assumed that by merely selecting a qualitative approach it would necessarily see an interpretivist epistemological position being adopted. A 'Glaser' approach to Grounded Theory for example, would adopt a positivist epistemological position whilst a 'Charmaz' approach would adopt a social constructionist position (Sutcliffe 2016).

In selecting an appropriate method, Breakwell et al. (2012) suggest a thought process that includes questioning:

- Is the method compatible with the theoretical assumptions of your research question?
- Will the method allow for the collection of key information needed to address the research question?
- Will the method allow the researcher to draw inferences from the data collected that can be justified under critical review?

Taking this in to consideration, along with my own research questions, it was decided that a phenomenological approach was the most appropriate for this study. Before that decision was made however several alternatives were considered and are discussed below.

4.2.1 Ethnography

Ethnographic research aims to gain an insider view of an aspect of an individual's life by participating in this life over a period of time (overtly or covertly) (Willig 2013). So, in the context of exploring the everyday experiences of a group of young people, this may involve observation within a school setting, within their homes and family life, participation in out of school activities and so on. The key benefit of this approach is that it allows the young people to be seen as informers and interpreters of their own lives whilst enabling the accounts provided to be central to the analytic process (James 2001). It is then assumed that by engaging in the lives of participants in this sufficient depth, the researcher is able to see the participant in a 'natural' setting without being affected significantly by being involved in the research process, therefore enabling the researcher to study interaction and cultures in as a natural setting as possible (Howitt 2016) (see Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) and MacLeod (2009) for relevant examples of the benefits of such an approach).

Whilst, justifiably, studies such as this, that are concerned with every day experiences, could have adopted an ethnographic (or quasi-ethnographic) approach, the decision not to produce an ethnographic account was made because of two key reasons. Firstly, from a methodological perspective, because this study is concerned with providing detailed accounts of lived experience it was felt that relying on observation data as one of the key methods of data collection would not be appropriate. Additionally, it was felt that should the study have involved interaction with key stakeholders such as parents and teachers that there was danger that the voice of the young

people themselves may have been lost, with other voices potentially conflicting or contradicting them. This meant the study could potentially move away from its aim to understand experience from the unique perspective of the young people themselves.

Secondly, there was a pragmatic acknowledgment of the practical challenges of undertaking an ethnographic study within the constraints of a PhD thesis. As McLeod (2001) suggests, ethnography is demanding and time-consuming. Personal experience indicated, for example, the difficulties of including parents within WP research (demonstrated by the lack of parental voice within the existing academic WP research).

4.2.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was another option available, which appeared particularly appealing given my previous use of the approach in previous studies and its flexible nature. As an approach it was developed to offer a clear and systematic guide to qualitative fieldwork and analysis (Smith et al. 2009). It does this by generating theoretical accounts through the detailed inspection and analysis of these accounts (Henwood and Pidgeon 2012). The benefit of the approach to examining aspiration and lived experiences is that a grounded theory approach stays *close* to the data by examining participants' and their meanings. In doing so the researcher is able to build levels of abstraction directly from the data that will enable the researcher to gain a dense conceptual analysis of the topic under investigation (Charmaz 2008).

However, within this study it was felt that grounded theory would have led towards a generalised conceptual theoretical understanding of aspiration formation that would use individual accounts to illustrate this overarching theory. This would go against the aims of this research that seeks a more

detailed analysis of the lived experience of a smaller number of participants, with an emphasis of convergence and divergence (Smith et al. 2009).

4.2.3 Narrative Analysis

The use of narrative analysis has become an increasingly popular form of approach within the social sciences. According to Bryman (2015), the approach involves a movement away from questioning 'what actually happened?' to a focus on 'how do people make sense of what happened?' In doing so, participants provide accounts about themselves or events by which they are affected.

In a pilot study, Raven (2015a) investigated the use of one such narrative approach (life history) within WP research. He concluded that the approach was able to generate rich data about students' experiences as well as having the capability to identify wider influences on young people's progression through their educational lives. Therefore, there was a valid case for adopting such an approach within this study.

It was rejected however for two fundamental methodological reasons. Firstly, with a narrative approach looking to elicit stories from participants, as opposed to an exclusive focus on experiences (Chase 2011), it was felt that the approach would move away from the fundamental purpose of the study, to look at lived experience and its impact on aspiration. With its focus on 'understanding and ordering' of experience (Smith and Dunworth 2003) it was considered that, given their age, it may have been difficult at times for participants to meet the demands of the approach in terms of remembering experiences and 'key dates' in the levels of depth required.

4.2.4 The choice of phenomenology

Phenomenology is interested in the world as experienced by human beings in particular contexts, as opposed to abstract statements about the nature of the world (Willig 2013). The founder of the branch of philosophy referred to as phenomenology (Langdrige 2007), Husserl, was interested in finding out a means where an individual could accurately know their own experience of a phenomenon with depth and rigour that might allow them to identify essential qualities of the given experience (Smith et al. 2009). For Van Manen (2007) something that presents itself to consciousness, given that consciousness is the only access a human being has to the world and therefore whatever falls outside of consciousness is outside the bounds of lived experience, is potentially of interest to a phenomenologist. Although various approaches to phenomenology have developed, the focus on subjective experience remains at the heart of a phenomenological approach (Shinebourne 2011).

For the purposes of this study, I outline the work of two phenomenologists - Husserl and Heidegger. The reason for this being that the two can be seen to have taken different approaches to phenomenology, one with a focus on description and one on interpretation.

Husserl proposed that it was possible to experience a state of pre-reflective consciousness by transcending presuppositions and biases. This would allow for a phenomenon to be described as it presents itself to us (Willig 2013). Thus, the early history of phenomenology is often referred to as transcendental. To transcend these presuppositions and to enter the *lebenswelt* (life-world), the world as concretely lived, Husserl describes three phrases of contemplation: epoche (bracketing); phenomenological reduction; and imaginative variation (Willig 2013).

Epoche is the first step in coming to know things (Moustakas 1994) and the process by which we make an attempt to abstain from any presuppositions, in other words, the preconceived ideas we might have as individuals about the things that we are investigating. The purpose of epoche is thus to describe 'the things themselves' and setting aside our natural attitude or assumptions. It should not be seen however that epoche simply involves an acknowledgement of subjective bias. It is more than that, it aims to connect directly with the world as we experience it rather than merely thinking about it to see the world afresh (Finlay 2009). However, within phenomenological circles whether epoche can ever be achieved is open to debate. Whilst transcendental phenomenologists argue that epoche can indeed be reached, an existential approach argues that whilst epoche should be attempted it is never truly possible to bracket off all your presuppositions (Langdrige 2007).

The next stage of contemplation is that of phenomenological reduction where the task is to describe in textural language what one sees, both in terms of the external object (physical features) and experiential features such as thoughts and feelings that appear through the internal act of consciousness (Moustakas 1994; Willig 2013). Description involves an aim to capture and describe a total experience of consciousness in as much detail as possible, through repeated reflection (Langdrige 2007). As Moustakas (1994) puts it, this involves that "I look and describe; look again and describe; look again and describe" (p.74). In doing so this invokes a further process of *horizontalization*, a never ending process as horizons are unlimited and we can never exhaust our experience no matter how many times we reconsider or view them (Moustakas 1994). Through this process we resist a temptation to produce a hierarchal structure to meaning (Langdrige 2007) and treat each phenomenon with equal value whilst we seek to disclose its essence (Moustakas 1994). In doing so we become aware of what makes an experience what it is (Willig 2013).

The final stage of contemplation is described as imaginative variation, an attempt to access the structural components of the phenomenon under investigation (Willig 2013). To do this requires:

“The utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (Moustakas 1994, p.98).

By varying the elements of experience thus may allow the essence of the experience to come in to view. The aim for Husserl was therefore to identify the essence of a phenomena and the structures that underpin the phenomena as it appears to perception (Langdrige 2007).

Originally a student of Husserl, the work of Heidegger signalled a movement away from the transcendental phenomenology described so far, to an approach that focused on hermeneutics and the existential emphasis of phenomenology. Whilst Husserl wished to transcend ‘everydayness’, Heidegger wanted to understand it and to develop an appreciation of the essence of everyday life and understanding (McLeod 2001).

Husserl questioned the possibility of knowledge outside of an interpretative stance (Smith et al. 2009) and argued that people are inseparable from the world that they inhabit and it is not possible to bracket off (epoche) one’s way of seeing and identifying the essence of a phenomenon (Langdrige 2007). Therefore humankind is brought in to existence by engaging in the world in relation to others (Langdrige 2007) and to understand anything we must first interpret it (Finlay 2011).

Whilst Husserl and Heidegger both agreed that description and interpretation were legitimate methods, they disagreed as to which one was primary.

Heidegger saw the phenomenological approach as being a predominantly interpretive approach as opposed to the descriptive approach proposed by Husserl (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008). In his key text 'being and time', Heidegger is interested in establishing the fundamental nature of *Dasein* ('there-being'), in other words the uniquely situated quality of 'human being' (Smith et al. 2009). To Heidegger, *Dasein* is where the very question of being arises with its task being to interpret the meaning of being and that there is no stance that is free of the world (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008).

Heidegger points out that this interpretation of experience is always shaped by language and thus understanding of experience is:

“Woven from the fabric of our many and varied relationships with others, in the context of a world which is shaped by language and culture at least as much as it is by bodies and objects” (Larkin et al. 2011, p.237).

According to Moran (2000), Heidegger ultimately wanted to understand the meaning of being and its relationship to time, as understanding in the present involves the past as well as a projection to the future (Langdridge 2007).

Whilst variations of phenomenology have emerged, all phenomenological research has at its core the description of the things as they appear and a focus on experience as lived. Langdridge (2007) adds that phenomenology illuminates this lived world of the participant so that the findings should enable the researcher to understand the experience in new, subtle and different ways that can make a difference to the lived world of ourselves and others.

In summary, a phenomenological approach, therefore, involves: a description of the things as they appear (Finlay 2009); a focus on experience as a topic

in its own right; a concern with meaning and the ways in which meanings arise out of experience; a focus on description and relationships; and recognising the researcher's role in the construction of the topic (Langdrige 2007). In relation to this study, examining the lived experience of participants and understanding what meanings and perceptions they place on these experiences would help to understand their aspirations and how they are shaped as they progress through their teenage years towards adulthood.

4.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Whilst descriptive phenomenology could be applicable to any experience that can be described and since the number of experiences that could be described is almost limitless (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008), then it can be argued that a descriptive approach would have been practical to this study, as it would to a great deal of others as well. However, whilst descriptive phenomenology may have captured the experiences of participants as it presents itself, it was felt that to be able to answer the research questions, particularly in how aspiration is shaped by the lived experience, and given the complexities of the phenomenon of aspiration, an approach was needed that placed a greater emphasis on interpretation over description. Therefore, it was felt that an interpretative phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study.

Several interpretative approaches were available, with perhaps the two most commonly used being IPA and hermeneutic phenomenology. Whilst both place a key emphasis on interpretation, differences between the two approaches meant it was necessary to decide as to which was the most suitable for this study. Whilst hermeneutic phenomenology is interested in "the shared common understandings of experiences" (Crowther et al. 2017, p.834), it was felt that the way in which IPA focuses on ideographic accounts (see 4.3.2) that seeks to make sense of individuals experiences, meant it

was more appropriate in understanding the lifeworlds of the five young people and how their aspirations are shaped by their day to day experiences.

Another key reason for selecting IPA was its more systematic approach to analysis (see 5.8) that moves from individual meanings to a more interpretative understanding. With a lack of specific method laid out within hermeneutic phenomenology, IPA can be viewed as a more structured version of hermeneutic phenomenology (Finlay 2011).

IPA was introduced by Jonathan A. Smith in his seminal paper 'Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology' (1996) as:

"An approach to psychology which was able to capture the experiential and qualitative, and which could still dialogue with mainstream psychology" (Smith et al. 2009, p.4).

IPA has its origins in areas of enquiry that hold that as humans we come to interpret and understand our world by forming our own stories that make sense to us (Brocki and Wearden 2006). Although IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with the lived experience, the highly interpretative nature of IPA means that it is more suitable for gaining deep insights into participants' experiences (Barr and van Nieuwerburgh 2015).

IPA aims to explore how participants make sense of their own worlds by examining the meanings particular experiences and events hold for these participants (Smith 2011a). In other words:

"IPA aims to understand the lived experience of a conscious, situated, embodied being-in-the-world, where "the world" is understood through a respondent's involvement in it" (Larkin et al. 2011, p.330).

In terms of what constitutes *lived experience*, Larkin et al. (2011) go on to explain that this phrase encompasses the interpreted and meaningful lived aspect of an individual's being in the world. Smith et al. (2009) noted that although it is possible to conduct an IPA study on any type of experience, it is more common when the experience is of importance to the participant. Eatough and Smith (2008) suggest that IPA research can often be appropriate in examining transformative experiences that bring about change to the participants. This appeared especially pertinent to this study, given the age of participants and the multitude of decisions they were beginning to be faced with as they start to think ahead to their adult lives.

As well as having a phenomenological grounding, IPA has its theoretical roots in two other distinct areas: hermeneutics and ideography.

4.3.1 Hermeneutics

IPA recognises that experience is never directly accessible to the researcher (Willig 2013) and the central role that the researcher plays in making sense of the personal experiences of participants. Whilst participants may provide accounts that reflect their attempts to interpret their experiences, the researcher needs to interpret the accounts provided to better understand the experiences provided by participants (Smith et al. 2009). As well as having a phenomenological underpinning, IPA has its theoretical roots, therefore, in hermeneutics. Initially developed as a means of interpreting biblical texts, hermeneutics is concerned with the theory of interpretation. For Heidegger, a hermeneutic understanding does not simply mean re-experiencing another person's experiences but to interpret a text is to come to understand the possibilities being revealed by the text. We therefore cannot separate ourselves from the text as we (the reader) belong to the text we are reading (Van Manen 2007). Interpretation is therefore seen as more of a dialogue, as opposed to a detached observation, where the researcher (the interpreter):

“[...] brings his own ‘horizon’, this cultural baggage, his opinions, subjective norms and prejudices, and confronts them with the cultural spirit of his text” (Bem and Looren de Jong 2013, p.43).

Through this dialogue between the researcher and participant, an IPA study can be thought of as a joint enterprise (Doutre et al. 2013). This is often referred to as the double hermeneutic as the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experiences (Smith et al. 2009). It can be argued that a third hermeneutic is involved, one in that the reader is interpreting the researchers’ interpretation of the participants’ interpretation. The double hermeneutic was particularly pertinent to this study. Aspiration can be thought of as a second order construct in that it is a word applied to an experience; do we as humans directly experience aspiration? Therefore, to be able to relate every day experience to aspiration required an approach that required not only participants to interpret their experiences but that allowed the researcher to create an additional layer of interpretation (that remained grounded in the accounts provided).

A final aspect of hermeneutics that is relevant to IPA is the hermeneutic circle, which is concerned with the dynamic nature between the part and the whole (Smith et al. 2009). So, to understand a sentence, one needs to understand the cumulative meaning of each word. At the same time, to understand the meaning of a single word one needs to see the whole sentence to understand its context. This enables IPA analysis to be seen as an iterative process where the researcher is able to move back and forth between the data, enabling the data to be thought of from different ways. This circular process enables entry into the meaning of a text to be made at a number of different levels, all of which are related to each other (Smith et al. 2009). In the context of this study this would enable short responses by participants to be more fully understood by placing them together in a wider context.

4.3.2 Ideography

The third major theoretical underpinning of IPA is ideography, a focus on the particular. This means that IPA is interested in understanding how particular experiences are understood from the perspective of a particular person in a particular context (Smith et al. 2009). This can be seen to contrast with much WP policy and research that has often portrayed nomothetic accounts of young people's aspirations, that is, generalised and probabilistic claims can be made at a group or population level about the aspirations of certain groups of young people.

Whilst nomothetic studies can only make probabilistic claims about participants, within an idiographic study it is more possible to be able to make more specific claims about participants as analysis is embedded within individuals' accounts (Smith and Eatough 2012). In other words, an IPA study focuses on deeper level reflections of a few as opposed to the general insights of many (Charlick et al. 2015) and does not avoid generalising but locates it in the particular (Smith et al. 2009). The approach sees the individual as an active interpreter of their own subjective world, as opposed to a passive recipient. This means in this viewpoint there is no objective reality or objective truth (Lyons and Coyle 2007).

As an idiographic approach will involve the researchers' commitment to understanding a phenomena from the perspective of certain individuals, Smith et al. (2009) suggest that this enables the researcher to question: what does the experience mean to *this* person and what sense does *this* person make of what is happening to them? In relation to aspiration, this would mean that participants would be able to share their own experiences which would allow their aspirations to be viewed as something very personal to them and their own lives. It would mean that it would not seek to generalise about the lives of *all* young people from WP backgrounds.

4.3.3 A movement into educational research

Whilst the roots of IPA lay in health psychology (Flowers et al. 1997; MacLeod et al. 2002; Senior et al. 2002), because of its primary interest in how people make sense of major experiences in their life (Smith et al. 2009), recent years have seen an expansion into wider areas of psychology including educational research (Bishop and Rhind 2011; Bacon and Bennett 2013; Joseph and Southcott 2013; Thurston 2014; Rizwan and Williams 2015; Lee 2016). Rizwan and Williams (2015) used IPA to examine the experiences of young Pakistani girls in primary schools. They found that the participants' idea of who they were was very much interwoven between experiences at school and their wider lives including their home environment and community culture.

Several postgraduate studies have adopted IPA to examine the aspirations of young people. Fehily (2015) used IPA to look at the aspirations of ten young people from low income families. Three super-ordinate themes were discussed: 'it just happened', 'just being there' and 'expectations of success'. Overall, Fehily found that participants were positive and enthusiastic when describing their aspirations which contrasted with current literature that suggests that young people from low-income families hold more pessimistic views of the future than their more affluent peers.

Banbury (2014) explored the formation of long-term aspirations in looked after children. Banbury found that the wider systems surrounding an individual can play a significant role in facilitating opportunities for aspirations to become a reality in their future lives. Finally, Hayton (2009) explored how the experiences of five young males growing up in a rural community impacted on their identity and future aspirations. Hayton found that the aspirations of these young men were not solely focused on educational progress and success but on wider aspirations involving social and emotional

well-being. Despite these steps into educational studies, IPA is under-utilised within WP research and therefore is a novel approach within the field.

In summary, adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach would allow a level of insight into participants' lives that would enable the research questions of this study to be addressed. Obtaining these insights would enable a deeper account of individual experience to emerge (Willig 2013). This would allow aspiration to be viewed from a new perspective, one that moves away from more traditional studies that reduce aspiration to a measurable variable to an approach that examines aspiration as a construct of lived experience. In other words, in using IPA within the context of WP research could enable new knowledge to emerge by:

“[...] bypassing the closed systems of borrowed hypotheses and theories, it can instead provide meaningful and unexpected analysis of psychosocial issues” (Reid et al. 2005).

Adopting this position acknowledges a shift in the subject matter, with a movement away from a concern as to the nature of aspiration per se to the actual participants and their experiences and understanding (Larkin et al. 2006).

4.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have provided the theoretical underpinnings to this study and justified my decision to use IPA as an approach. The decision process is summarised in Figure 3 below. In the next chapter I discuss the practical implications of the use of IPA.

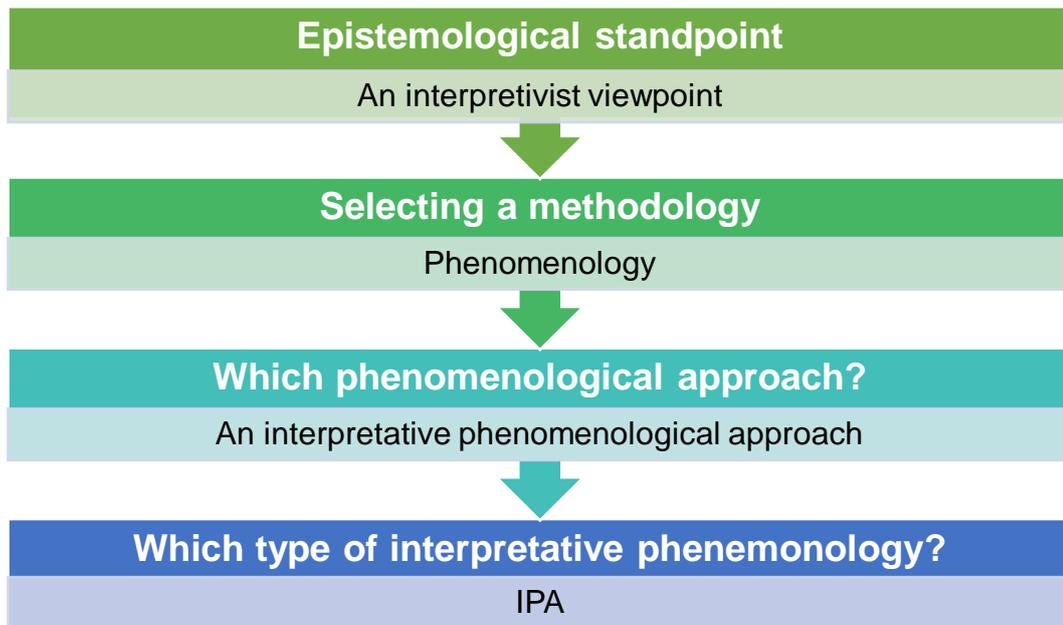


Figure 3: Theoretical underpinnings

Chapter 5: Methodology: IPA in Practice

Having explained the theoretical underpinnings of my decision to use IPA, I now provided a detailed account of the practical use of IPA.

5.1 Ethics⁸

Although ethical considerations need to be at the heart of any research involving human participants, given the age of participants and the phenomenological nature of this study, ethical considerations were of paramount importance in all stages of the process. This was particularly pertinent given that this kind of research may have particular affects (such as discomfort) on participants (Van Manen 2007).

In composing my original ethical checklist, the research design was informed by a range of ethical guidance documents, including BU ethics guidelines, the British Educational Research Association's 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research', the ESRC Framework for research ethics and the UNICEF Office of Research guidance on ethical research involving children. I also completed the BU online ethics training modules and met with a member of the ethics team, prior to submission. Additionally, relevant risk assessments were undertaken (see Appendix 2).

Given the importance of ethics to this study, ethical issues are interwoven into the remainder of this chapter.

⁸ Please refer to Appendix 2 for relevant ethics documentation.

5.2 Finding a perspective

To ensure that the selection of the young people to participate in this study remained theoretically consistent with IPA, it was necessary to select participants purposively rather than through probability. This is done on the basis that participants are able to offer a particular perspective on the topic under investigation and therefore represent a perspective rather than a population (Smith et al. 2009). As Smith et al. (2009) acknowledge, the level of homogeneity of participants will vary from study to study. As the topic under investigation in this study could not be defined as *rare*, a decision was taken to recruit young people with similar demographic/socio-economic status i.e. on the primary basis that they lived in areas of the county defined as a LPN. Given that this study is about pre-HE outreach programmes and the broad range of individuals and families who live within LPNs, to ensure the ideographic requirements of an IPA study, it was decided to focus upon a particular group of young people living in LPNs: namely those who have been identified as having the potential to progress into HE later in life and were therefore part of a targeted outreach cohort. The logic of this is that the researcher is then able to report in detail about a particular group or culture (in this case, young people living in LPNs who are also part of a targeted cohort rather than claiming to say something about all groups or cultures (in the context of this study this can be defined as 'all' WP students) (Smith and Osborn 2008).

To ensure a certain level of homogeneity, it was decided to select participants from the same year group. Year 9 was selected as the starting point for several reasons. As Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) suggest, 13 to 14 is a challenging age as young people start to think about what they want, how they see the world and how will they find their way through opportunities and constraints. It was acknowledged that aspirations are often developed at an early age and in a number of cases the decision to participate in HE can be made by the age of 14 (Department for Education and Skills 2003). With GCSE choices being made, participants were faced

with key decisions that would start to shape their future as they begin to consider their transition from the dependant role of childhood to the independent role of adulthood (Oyserman and Saltz 1993). It therefore appeared to be an appropriate time in the young people's lives to examine their aspirations.

A decision was made to not include other 'voices', such as parents and teachers within the study. Whilst there may be merit for multiple perspectives within certain studies that might enable a multi-faceted account of the topic under investigation (see Larkin and Griffiths (2004) for an example of such a study), it was felt that, with IPA studies not seeking an objective reality or truth, by including other voices, the stories of the young people themselves may have been overridden or lost. This may have been the case if, for example, parents had given a very different story of their home life to the account provided by the young people themselves. There was a danger that this could have led to the analysis and discussion moving away from exploring personal experience that is interested in an individual's personal perception (Smith and Osborn 2008), to an account that sought to compare the accounts of participants and their parents.

5.3 Selecting a sample size

There is not an agreed sample size within IPA studies, although with the need for quality over quantity, IPA studies will often focus on a small number of cases. Smith (2011a) suggests that many studies work with a sample of between five and ten, whilst Finlay (2011) suggests between three and six as being reasonable. This then enables an idiographic analysis to be undertaken (Van Parys et al. 2014). According to Smith and Osborn (2008) deciding on an actual sample size is dependent on a number of factors, including the degree of commitment to a case study level of analysis, the constraints of the study and the richness of each case. In selecting a sample

within a professional doctorate Smith et al. (2009) suggest considering a sample size in terms of numbers of interviews rather than participants.

A sample size of five was decided upon. From a methodological perspective it was felt that a sample size of five (particularly given that each participant took part in four separate individual interviews) would do justice to the accounts of each individual, whilst not being too large so as to be swamped with data that would inevitably end in a more subjective level of analysis (Smith and Eatough 2012).

5.4 Recruitment process

Given my relationship with the AspireBU team, having previously worked for the team under the guise of the Aimhigher in LIFE partnership, it was decided to recruit participants via a school that had a strong existing relationship with the AspireBU team. This was to ensure that a school was selected that received an intensive programme of outreach activities and who would most likely contain a high number of pupils living in LPNs. A few schools were approached and Lakeside Academy was selected, based on their engagement with the research theme, willingness to recruit participants and their general long-term commitment to the study⁹.

According to OFFA (2017a):

“Building strong, long-term relationships with schools and colleges has the potential to greatly contribute to work to raise aspirations and attainment, and to address challenges around prior educational attainment and subject/qualification choice”.

⁹ A donation of £200 was made to the school in recognition of their commitment.

As well as having a strong long-term relationship with local HEIs, under the leadership of a new Principal, the school has experienced something of a transformation over the past few years (something that as I will demonstrate has not gone unnoticed by pupils). Therefore, as well as demonstrating their commitment to the study, Lakeside Academy was an appropriate institution from which to base my research, to see how the culture of aspiration played out at ground level i.e. in the lives of the pupils.

Following initial ethical approval, contact with the Principal was made in May 2015, via an email from a member of the AspireBU team with an introductory letter attached. This was successful in engaging the Principal, who assigned a relevant staff member as a point of contact. A meeting was arranged in June 2015 and the selection process commenced. Once consent/assent forms had been distributed and returned the research process was able to start in October 2015.

The school was provided, via the AspireBU team, with relevant data to identify LPN participants. The relevant school staff member was free to select the five young people (with a three-two gender split either way), providing they met the necessary criteria (living in an LPN and part of the AspireBU cohort). It was acknowledged that as well as living in an LPN, the young people selected may have other WP 'markers' (such as low income or no family history of HE participation). It was also acknowledged that given that the LPN marker is area based as opposed to being based on individuals and families, it was possible that more affluent families who may not have had any other WP 'markers' may be included. No controls were placed on whether participants had other markers. The reason for this was that LPN is seen as a suitable proxy by school and outreach teams to target disadvantaged young people who have the potential to progress to HE. Therefore, irrespective of other indicators of disadvantage, participants would have been identified on the basis that they would benefit from outreach interventions.

The only exception to this was if participants had been or were still in the care system. It was felt that their experiences of being in care may have over-ridden their everyday experiences that this study sought to explore. To this end, all the young people who participated in this study were at the time of the research living with at least one birth parent.

5.5 A 'bolder' design

As Smith et al. (2009) suggest, most traditional IPA studies involve a single point of data collection with each participant. This is not to say there is a lack of IPA research that utilises multiple data collection points. Snelgrove et al. (2013) for example, adopted a longitudinal approach to data collection, so as to compare accounts across time. Smith (1994) provides an example of the benefit of multiple points of collection in his study of the transition to motherhood.

Just as traditional IPA studies often involve a single point of data collection, semi-structured interviews are considered the exemplary form of data collection within an IPA study (Smith and Eatough 2012). A review of 52 IPA journal articles by Brocki and Wearden (2006) for example, found 46 used interviews (with three using a combination of interviews and focus groups). This is in line with the predominant use of semi-structured interviews within wider qualitative and phenomenological research in general (Langdrige 2007). This is because these types of interviews can be suited to in-depth personal discussion where participants are given space to think, speak and be heard. They have the added advantage of flexibility where questions can be modified following responses and new avenues can be explored (Smith et al. 2009). As Mason (2002) suggests, these types of interviews should be seen as a collaboration process between two people rather than just an exercise in data gathering.

A decision was then made to conduct four semi-structured interviews with each participant (as well as a group meeting at the start of the research) (see Figure 4). There were a number of perceived benefits of such an approach that seeks to maximise depth and probing opportunities (Flowers 2008). Firstly, the need to build rapport with participants over a period of time that would allow early, primarily descriptive accounts, to be developed into more interpretative phenomenological accounts. The age of participants meant that the intense nature of a long meeting may have been inappropriate for gaining the most valuable aspects of their experiences. Smith and Dunworth (2003) suggest that this approach can be particularly advantageous when conducting research with young people as it allows a greater level of flexibility as certain topics can be followed up in more depth and any vague or uncertain text can be checked and clarified. By splitting the time over a number of sessions would provide an opportunity to explore in greater depth issues that may arise in previous meetings (Earthy and Cronin 2008).

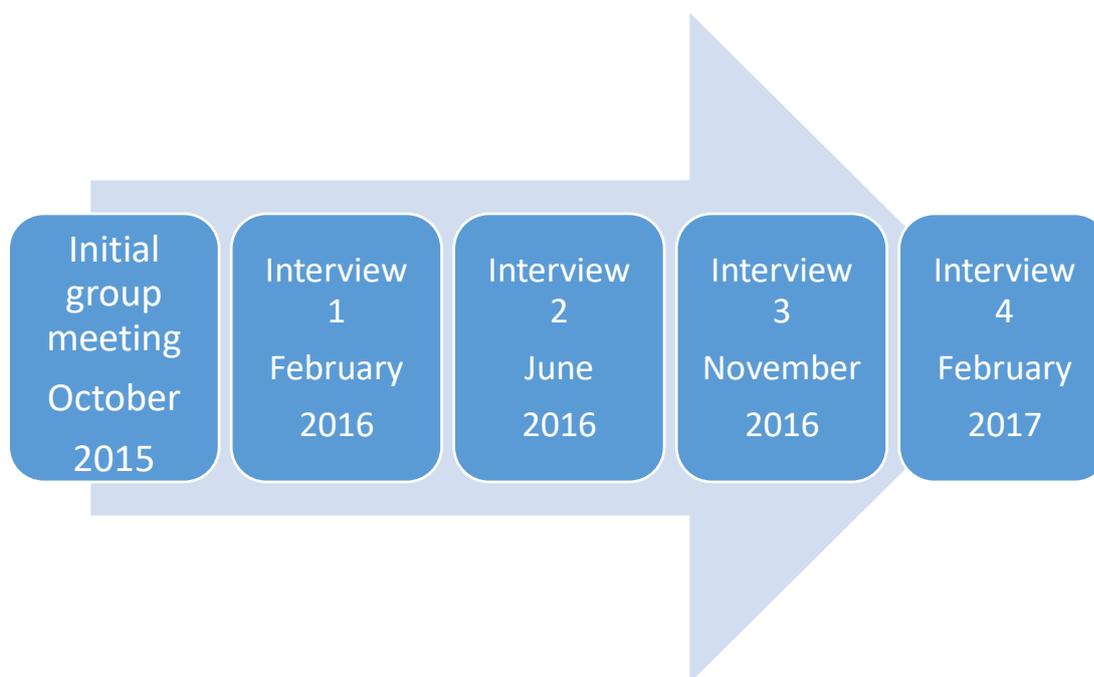


Figure 4: A bolder design

Whilst multiple interviews may have the potential for contradictory narratives from the same participant (Flowers 2008), it was felt that this was not a bad thing in this study. Meeting each participant multiple times over two school

years (years 9 and 10) would allow for the dynamic nature of aspiration to be explored, as opposed to a simple ‘snapshot’ of aspiration to be examined. In this sense, the research design would enable the participants experiences of schooling, home life and so on to be investigated at different time points (Snelgrove et al. 2013). This would allow an element of comparison to be brought into analysis. Did aspirations change over the course of the research? Did new aspirations emerge? Did some aspirations fall by the wayside?

In line with guidance received from the BU Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Panel, the research was split into distinct sections (‘Part A’ and ‘Part B’) with separate ethical approval being needed for each section. In ethics terms, a third part – ‘Part C’ was then required for interview four as this had not been accounted for within either of the previous ethics checklists. A summary is provided in Table 3. The Panel felt I should consider how I expressed my reasons for undertaking the project and how I conveyed these reasons. Originally, information sheets had not referred to participants living in LPNs. Following recommendations from the Panel this was amended to reflect that the study was focusing on areas of the country that traditionally have low HE progression rates.

Stage	Research interventions	Ethics checklist required?	Consent/assent forms completed?
Part A	Introductory group meeting and interview one	Yes	Yes
Part B	Interviews two and three	Yes	Yes
Part C	Interview four	No	Yes

Table 3: Ethics approval process

5.6 Developing an interview schedule

Whilst traditional IPA studies focus on a certain experience, with aspiration being seen more as an external theoretical construct, it was necessary to adapt the interview schedule accordingly. Larkin (2017) suggests that in this case explicitly narrative and reflective strategies should be used to collect data. It was important to develop an interview guide to facilitate interaction with the participant which would enable them to provide a detailed account of their experiences (Smith et al. 2009). The phenomenological aspect of IPA meant that it was important to develop questions that were open-ended and non-directive (Willig 2013). It was necessary however to give due care and consideration to the age of participants. Whilst interviewing within IPA is a largely noninterventionist experience for the researcher, it was likely that more probes would be required and the researcher voice would be perhaps heard more than in traditional IPA studies.

Essentially the purpose of the interviews was to simultaneously collect two types of data: the actual aspirations of the participants; and their lived experiences. The idea across the four interviews was to move from descriptive accounts of aspiration to more interpretive accounts of lived experience. Through the data analysis process lived experiences could then be mapped on to aspirations.

After several draft versions of the interview guide for the first set of interviews were constructed (including supervisory feedback), Appendix 3 displays the finalised version. The overarching aim of the interview schedule was to come at the primary research question 'sideways'. The interview is then set up to facilitate discussion of relevant topics which will allow the primary research questions to be answered via analysis (Smith et al. 2009). The interview should commence, particularly when the purpose of an interview with a young participant is for research, with a period of free narrative to facilitate a settling-in phase of the interview as well as rapport building. Therefore the

first question was designed to allow participants to settle in to the interview by allowing the interview to develop on their own terms and to establish a context from which the participant could start to talk about their experiences (Cameron 2005). However, in some cases, participants were not forthcoming despite the open-ended nature of the opening question and further prompts were required.

The nature of the topic in question meant it was necessary to make constant reference to the literature around aspirations and how they are constructed. Further questions were therefore developed to allow for a discussion around different constructs of aspiration without any reference being made directly to aspiration. As the literature demonstrates, there is complexity in understanding what the word aspiration might mean and therefore direct reference to it may have added a level of confusion in the minds of participants.

The questions “*Can you tell me what you hope your life to be like in 10 years’ time?*” and “*What do you think your life will be like in 10 years’ time?*”, for example, were designed around the discussion in the literature on the difference between hope and expectation (see Lupton and Kintrea (2011) and Reynolds and Pemberton (2001) as examples). By allowing the participants to think forward towards their imagined life allowed for the two-dimensional aspect of aspiration (the now and the future) to be explored. Similarly, questions around success were based on dictionary definitions that demonstrated that although definitions vary, aspiration is focused on the notion of success.

Before each subsequent interview, a review of the previous interviews and my research notes was conducted. The purpose of this was to note any areas of previous interviews which would need following up. This included seeking clarity over use of language or terminology, the selection of specific

quotes (Flowers 2008) and seeking a deeper level of interpretation from the participant that would lead away from initial descriptive accounts.

The following extracts from my research notes provide some examples of this:

Some things to follow up on. Try and probe the smoking and drinking issue a bit more
Check what does 'block a manhunt' mean?
'They think I should be like a highly-qualified mathematician or I should be a micro biologist' - follow up on this, how does she feel about this?

To move to this deeper level of interpretation, I designed questions such as "How did you feel about that?", "Can you give me an example of that?" that would go beyond descriptive accounts of an experience.

As well as seeking clarity over issues from previous interviews, subsequent interviews had two additional key functions. Firstly, some questions were asked to participants across every interview. This was to establish whether their aspirations changed over time, remained constant etc. and to check if there had been any changes to their situation at home or in their family (such as older siblings moving in or out of the family home or their parents changing jobs). Secondly, as I became more immersed in the literature surrounding aspiration, I was able to develop new questions and areas to discuss.

5.7 The interview process

5.7.1 Ethics

Prior to the commencement of each stage of the research, parental/participant consent/assent forms and information sheets were distributed, completed and returned (see Appendix 2). These forms outlined to parents/legal guardians and participants the ethical considerations that had been considered in the research design. This included:

- The right to withdraw;
- The anonymisation of data;
- The ways in which data will be used;
- Risks and benefits;
- Safeguarding procedures;
- Compliance with data protection.

5.7.2 Selecting a location

Whilst it may be true that young people may feel more secure and relaxed if they are interviewed in their home (Smith and Dunworth 2003), participants were all interviewed within school premises. Critically, given the nature of the research and the desire to 'hear the voices' of the young people themselves, by conducting the interviews in the school rather than the home environment would eliminate the possibility of parents and siblings directly influencing the research process. Viewing aspects of their personal lives (such as their homes and their local area) may have influenced (possibly subconsciously) my own perceptions or understanding of their lived worlds that could have influenced the analysis.

It was acknowledged, however, that conducting research within a school environment brings a certain amount of challenges and difficulties. This

includes the interpretation by participants that the research constitutes 'school work' (Kellett and Ding 2004) and the need for the researcher to not be treated as a teacher (Hill 2006). Turock et al. (2009) suggest a potential drawback of interviewing young people within school is that the institutional setting could cause participants to give responses that they believe the researcher wants to hear.

Rather than bracketing out presumptions and assumptions (as advocated by Husserl), IPA works with and uses these to advance understanding (Willig 2013). By reflecting on my previous research experience, I developed strategies to minimise (as far as reasonably possible) some of the issues mentioned in the previous paragraph. All sessions were conducted in a meeting room rather than a classroom to try and create a distance between participant's normal school setting and the research. I took care in what I wore to try and distance myself from giving the appearance of a teacher. Participants were reminded that the sessions were not a lesson or a test and there were no right or wrong responses. Additionally, no school staff were present in any sessions. Previous experience has taught me that the presence of staff can be restrictive and can potentially have an effect on the validity of the research (Greig et al. 2007). This is because of the possible effect on the adult-child power balance as well as the inability of the researcher to ask particular questions (especially around their school lives) for fear of embarrassing participants. Because sessions were conducted on a one-to-one basis an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check was obtained.

5.7.3 Timings

For each period of data collection all five participants were interviewed on the same day. The exception to this was in the final session, when one participant failed to provide a signed parental/guardian consent form. They were then interviewed two weeks later. Each interview was allocated one

hour and participants were taken out of lessons on each occasion. However, in practice, interviews lasted around 45-50 minutes. This was partly to allow a settling in period for participants and to explain the process for that session (such as ethical issues) and partly because participants were often late.

5.7.4 The interviews

As Smith and Dunworth (2003) suggest, young people need to feel safe and comfortable within their relationship with the researcher. Before I met each participant individually, I decided to arrange a group meeting¹⁰. The primary reason for this is the importance of preparing participants in advance (Finlay and Evans 2009). In the context of this research, this meant outlining: the purpose of the research; what was expected of participants; the ethical considerations; giving an opportunity to participants to ask any questions; and to start to build rapport with participants. As well as this, I wanted to gain a basic understanding of their aspirations and their daily lives to act as a base for the interviews.

It is acknowledged that in a study such as this, particularly when personal questions about participants' lives might be asked, the researcher should avoid harming participants (James 2001). All necessary steps were taken to avoid this situation. At the start of every session, participants were reminded of several ethical issues. This included an outline as to the purpose of the study, the right to end the interview, the confidential nature of the conversation and the disclosure process, anonymity and permission to record the interview using an electronic recording device. Participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions before each session commenced. Before the interviews commenced safe-guarding issues were discussed with the school and a process was put in place should any participant reveal any information that could be deemed to put them at risk.

¹⁰ One participant failed to attend. I met with them later that day to introduce myself and the research.

I used my personal experience of many years conducting research with young people to make judgements about the suitability of questioning a participant further. For example, in one interview a participant discussed the recent separation of their parents. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) point out, that whilst remembering painful events may be part of every-day life for some people, for others, the experience may be shocking and unexpected. Being aware of this and the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, having experienced the same thing at a similar age, I stopped the interview to ensure the participant felt comfortable in discussing this issue. Similarly, in another interview the same participant gave a detailed narrative about the battle she had had with the school concerning the use of colourant in her hair. Sensing she was beginning to get emotional when discussing her experiences, I curtailed the conversation and changed subject to an entirely different one. Following this process was in line with guidance from the British Educational Research Association (2011) that recommends that the researcher should desist immediately from any actions that may cause any emotional or other harm.

5.8 Analysis

With the general IPA literature on data analysis primarily focusing on studies with only one research point, the use of multiple research points posed a significant challenge. One of the most obvious was the difficulty in transparently articulating how the different interviews and different stages of analysis relate to a single final narrative (Flowers 2008). Whilst I needed to treat the interviews as one set of data (Eatough and Smith 2006), I needed to take account of any changes across the interviews. There was a need to ensure that analysis retained the key elements of an IPA study, especially around the idiographic nature of IPA and to ensure analysis moved from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretative (Smith et al. 2009).

Smith et al. (2009) do suggest however that despite guidelines, there is no prescribed single method of analysis, with analysis generally being iterative and inductive (Smith 2007). This 'licence' for the IPA researcher meant that I could develop a system of analysis, specifically designed to meet the aims of this study.

One option was to begin analysis after the completion of the four interviews i.e. once all data had been collected. This would have made it easier to treat the interviews as one long interview rather than four separate points of collection. This was rejected on a primarily pragmatic basis. Given the likely length of time it would take to analyse 20 interviews, it was felt that if analysis did not start until 26 months into the study it would not have been possible to complete the study within the time constraints of a PhD. Therefore, an alternative approach was required. With the first two interviews being conducted whilst participants were in year 9 and the final two during year 10, a decision was taken in analytical terms, to split the interviews into two, with interviews one and two forming 'analysis year 9' and interviews three and four forming 'analysis year 10'. This would enable analysis to start in a timely manner to ensure completion of the study.

At this stage, I had the option of using computer software (such as NUDIST or NVivo) to help with data analysis and attended a one-day workshop on NVivo to assess its suitability. Sohn (2017) provides a clear practical reason for the use of such software:

"A click of the mouse and a few taps on the keyboard and a new code can be created. There is a perceived quickness and neatness afforded by such a process as compared to shuffling notecards and writing in pencil" (p.5).

Langdrige (2007) suggests a potential benefit of this approach for phenomenological studies is how software such as NVivo enables the

manipulation of data at a fine level necessary for such studies. After careful consideration however, I opted against such an approach. From a methodological perspective, I felt that there would be a danger of the process becoming too mechanical and prescribed. This would have gone against the very essence of what I was trying to achieve. As Van Manen (2014) suggests, a phenomenological approach is aided by its uniqueness not repetition. As well as feeling 'more at home' with more traditional methods of analysis, from a practical perspective I felt that I would have spent a great deal of time understanding the nuances of the software rather than engaging with the data.

I now discuss the particular approach to analysis that was undertaken, in keeping with the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009).

5.8.1 Stage 1: Reading and re-reading and making initial notes

IPA analysis begins by looking at one case (within this particular study this meant interviews one and two for one participant), with no attempt at any cross-case analysis being undertaken until stages 1-4 had been completed for each individual participant.

As Smith et al. (2009) suggest, the first stage of this process is an immersion in to the original data that helps to begin the process of entering the participant's world. This very much began at the transcription stage. Rather than choosing to have all interviews transcribed by an outside party, I felt, to begin to understand the lived experiences of participants, it was necessary to transcribe all interviews myself¹¹. Whilst this was a hugely time-consuming process (some interviews when written up approached 10,000 words), I felt it was a critical part of the analysis. As Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest, a recording still requires a process of interpretation. By painstakingly

¹¹ All interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents.

transcribing, often having to play back passages of text multiple times, allowed me to 'see' things: the tone of voice; the depth of laughter; the sigh in the voice. Having transcribed and read through the interview I was then able to make initial notes. Smith and Osborn (2008) note there are no rules about what is commented upon and the researcher should keep an open mind as to what is of interest (Smith et al. 2009).

At this stage, I often found myself making notes then re-reading the transcript to fully understand what was being said. This helped me to review my notes to try and look past the actual words so as to move to a more interpretative stance. In this sense, I began to engage in the process of the double hermeneutic. As I began to become more immersed in the data I was able to start to engage in the hermeneutic circle. I started to realise that although very short responses (or even no responses) may on the face of it tell me little, once they were put in the context of the overall narrative of the participant the responses began to be far more revealing. I found myself highlighting passages of text that I felt were important to the overall story being told by each participant.

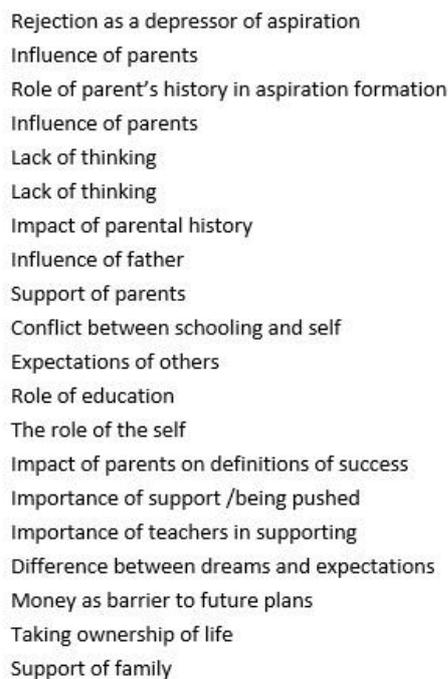
<p>I like having high targets because it makes me feel like I want to do more but then sometimes it makes me kind of feel like I can't achieve that in some things I just want to pass my GCSE's and I don't really care about getting a's and a stars im happy with a C and that's it but when I have that high levels it kind of makes me think it makes me feel better about myself because I know if they think I can achieve that then I'll try my hardest to achieve that grade <i>Say you had a lower targets then what you've got how would that make a difference to you</i> I think if I had lower targets it would make me feel like they don't believe in me if I had like a C grade target id think well I know I can achieve better so why arnt they believing in me it would just make me feel like they don't feel that im capable of doing that <i>So, your glad you've got the targets</i> Yer</p>	<p>Interesting here – she likes the high targets but at the same time it pressures her and she just wants to achieve lower levels. This might be at the very heart of things?? The high targets makes he feel better about herself – lifts her self-esteem. Maybe this is the whole reason why shes subscribes to the ideology because by subscribing it makes her feel good about herself makes her seem maybe even important?? This is her way in life to achieve to be someone to maybe even escape her life??? How critical is this??? Also it can be related to earlier interviews also does this all relate to her brother</p>
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Figure 5: Initial noting in analysis

5.8.2 Stage 2: Developing emergent themes

In this stage, the researcher aims to transform the initial notes into concise phrases which attempt to capture the essential qualities in the text (Smith and Osborn 2008). In doing so, the researcher manages the data by reducing the volume of detail whilst maintaining a level of detail that takes in to account connections, patterns and interrelationships of the exploratory notes (Smith et al. 2009).

At the start, this was a very slow process, as I would often procrastinate about a passage of text, or even a sentence, unsure as to the best theme to use. As I became more confident and more knowledgeable about the interviews, this process became much quicker and I would often relate the theme of one passage of text to another. By the end of this process, I was left with up to 100 themes per interview. These were then copied into Microsoft Excel, in the order that they appeared. An example is provided in Figure 6.



- Rejection as a depressor of aspiration
- Influence of parents
- Role of parent's history in aspiration formation
- Influence of parents
- Lack of thinking
- Lack of thinking
- Impact of parental history
- Influence of father
- Support of parents
- Conflict between schooling and self
- Expectations of others
- Role of education
- The role of the self
- Impact of parents on definitions of success
- Importance of support /being pushed
- Importance of teachers in supporting
- Difference between dreams and expectations
- Money as barrier to future plans
- Taking ownership of life
- Support of family

Figure 6: Example of initial themes

5.8.3 Stage 3: Searching for connections across emergent themes

Once I had copied all the themes into Excel, the next step was to try and establish how the themes fitted together. The first stage of this process was to cluster the themes to create a smaller number of developing themes. At this stage, some initial themes started to become discarded as I sought to draw together a structure that allowed the most important aspects of participant accounts to be heard (Smith et al. 2009). Themes were rejected on the basis that they did not fit within the emerging themes or because there was a weak evidence base (Breakwell et al. 2012).

In Figure 7, I demonstrate how a theme of ‘time’ started to emerge from the original themes in one account.

time
The influence of family pasts
Past as influence
Role of family history
‘always been like that’
The past
The past as an influence
The past as influencer on future
The past creating a norm
Role of the past
Role of the past
The role of the past
The role of the past creating a norm
Present affecting the future

Figure 7: Clustering of themes

Once I had created the new, smaller group of themes, I then sought to, through a process of abstraction, cluster them around a new ‘super-ordinate’ theme that represented a higher level of interpretation. As I became more aware of key parts of each participants’ narrative, these themes were often

changed again, being renamed or put under another theme. In the example of 'time', this was adapted to a theme of 'the past of an influence'. This then formed a theme within the wider super-ordinate theme of 'developing imagined futures' (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Example of participant super-ordinate theme

In creating super-ordinate themes, I considered their relevance to the aims of the research as well as their recurring nature through the accounts of each participant. Whilst frequency of a theme should not be seen as the only indicator of importance, it did enable me to establish their relative importance (Smith et al. 2009). At this stage, I began to compile extracts from each transcript that gave examples of each theme. This would enable an audit trail to allow myself and others to clearly see the links between the themes and the words of participants (see Appendix 5).

5.8.4 Stage 4: Moving on to the next case

In moving to the next case, it was important to, as far as it was feasible, bracket out the themes created by previous participants. This was to ensure

analysis remained 'true' to the ideographic approach within IPA. Stages 1-3 were repeated for interviews one and two for each participant. At this stage, this left a group of super-ordinate themes for each participant, based on their first two interviews (see Appendix 4 for an example). Stages 1-3 were then repeated on interviews three and four for each participant. Rather than create a new set of super-ordinate themes, I integrated the new themes from interviews three and four into the existing themes, thus creating one set of final super-ordinate themes per participant.

5.8.5 Stage 5: Looking for patterns across cases

Having produced a final list of themes from each individual participant, the aim of this stage was to reflect the experiences of the group (Willig 2013), whilst also attempting to represent the idiosyncratic instances of each participant (Smith et al. 2009). For example, in one account, technology was a significant aspect of their day-to-day life. This led to the creation of a super-ordinate theme of 'technology, technology, technology' for that participant. However, the significant role of technology was something pertinent to that participant and therefore a super-ordinate theme of 'technology, technology, technology' would not have reflected the experiences of the group in general. However, when looking across all participants, it became apparent that others had interests that not only seemed to set their career aspirations but became all encompassing. Therefore, the prominence of technology was something that could be integrated in to a more conceptual theme around familiarity. This allowed the experiences of the group to be represented at the same time as the idiosyncratic influence of technology.

The first step of this process was to print off all the final participant themes and visually play around with them, trying to find overarching super-ordinate themes and grouping themes together. A Word document was created linking themes with direct examples from the raw data. This was to ensure that whilst themes included a level of interpretation, they were grounded in

the words of participants. From here, three super-ordinate themes were identified. These reflected the key role that school life played in developing aspirations, the ways in which aspirations seemed to represent self-identity and how aspirations appeared to be formed through participants rejecting parts of their existing lives.

As I developed the themes, as well as revisiting notes, the data and transcripts, I shared and discussed themes with supervisors, fellow students and peers. In doing so I allowed the analysis to move to a more theoretical level. This involved paying closer regard to participants and their emotions, by questioning 'why do they think this way? what is their underlying emotion?' This enabled the final super-ordinate themes to be more closely linked to the participants and their lives. For example, the original super-ordinate theme of 'school: the aspirational playground' - in questioning, 'how does school impact on participants and their aspirations?' I moved the theme to a sub-theme under a broader super-ordinate theme of empowerment; school gives the participants the ability to feel empowered to become aspirational. This final stage of analysis was a challenging, creative, iterative process that involved a great deal of refining. The process continued well into the writing up stage, to ensure that the full integration of themes had been achieved (Willig 2013).

5.9 Reflections on methodology

Whilst IPA has been expanding into educational research, it remains an under-utilised approach to WP research. Therefore, this study was a methodological journey of discovery. Having explained my rationale for using IPA earlier on in this thesis, I was very aware of the words of Langdrige (2007). Langdrige suggests that reflexivity is particularly important when studying vulnerable people or communities, as there is a danger that the research will misrepresent the participants, instead reflecting the researchers

own position as an outsider. However, I needed to balance the principle that IPA relies on the researcher being able to engage with and interpret the participants view of the world. Because of this, an IPA researcher will always be implicated in the analysis (Willig 2013). It therefore appeared to me that reflexivity within IPA was a balancing act. I needed to leave my preconceptions at the door, whilst ensuring I represented the experiences of participants in a manner that was a fair reflection of their interpretations.

To achieve this balancing act, I attempted several things. Firstly, I did no research into the school involved in the research (such as looking at Ofsted reports) until the final themes had been constructed and written up. Similarly, although I had a very basic knowledge of the areas in which participants lived, I did not seek to gain my own self-built knowledge of where they lived. Additionally, although I often met briefly with a staff member at the end of the day's interviewing, I did not discuss interview content, nor did I seek clarity from them over anything that the participants had told me (particularly in relation to the school). This relates back to the thinking of Husserl and his call for phenomenologists to bracket past (or even current) knowledge. In attempting to do so can help the researcher to remain vigilant to the ways in which their own "personal intellectual baggage might distort the description of the phenomenon" (Finlay 2011, p.45).

Using IPA in the context of researching aspiration did throw up some methodological challenges. I discuss the two predominant ones below: the use of language and being swamped in themes.

5.9.1 The use of language

Although I have conducted many interviews with young people, I will admit to feeling nervous when stepping into the school to conduct the first set of interviews. So many things ran through my mind: have I got the right

questions? how will they respond? will they give short answers? how will I deal with silence? will the questions be too leading? will they get upset? The overriding feeling was I felt under pressure, this was my PhD, three years of work was reliant on me getting this part right.

It became apparent early on that one of the challenges of using IPA was the use of language. The formal process of an interview sees the use of 'talk', or language, as the way in which participants communicate their experiences. Willig (2013) however suggests that this presupposes that the use of language provides participants with a suitable tool with which to share their experiences. In early interviews, the young people sometimes found it hard to articulate their experiences or opinions, responding with short answers, leaving long pauses or responding with 'don't know'. Linked to this is the issue of suitability of accounts. Willig (2013) raises questions around how successfully participants can communicate their experience and whether they can do this in a way to produce suitable data for phenomenological analysis.

In reaction to this, in the second set of interviews, I employed some more projective techniques. These can be described as "a category of exercises that provoke imagination and creativity" (Mariampolski 2001, p.206). Of benefit appeared to be the use of completion techniques. Participants were presented with several picture cards which all contained the start of a sentence. Participants selected a card of their choice and completed the sentence. This then formed a basis for further discussion. Whilst this approach was useful in enabling participants to share their thoughts and 'relax' into the interview, it was felt that persisting with this approach in further interviews would have moved the study too far away from the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. It was felt that the interviews would have become too structured with the researcher controlling the flow of information and defining what was important in the lives of participants. I was keen to

hear how these young people could or could not articulate their feelings without the use of prompts.

Similarly, some IPA studies that look at aspiration, such as Elmi-Glennan (2013), have used photo-elicitation as a means of enabling participants to share their experiences. Frith and Harcourt (2007) suggest that one of the benefits of such an approach is that the researcher can access areas of the worlds of participants that they may not have been able to do so in person. Larkin (2017) recommends approaches such as photo-elicitation when participants may be reluctant to engage in the research process. I opted instead to retain the more traditional approach of semi-structured interviews whilst focusing on more narrative and reflective accounts (Larkin 2017). On reflection, given the age of participants, this study may have benefited from an approach such as photo-elicitation. However, it is difficult to ascertain what additional insights I may have gathered using such an approach.

5.9.2 Being swamped in themes

As Smith et al. (2009) suggest, IPA studies should be able to demonstrate their commitment to the 'thing itself', to do justice to the phenomenon (Finlay 2014). One of the challenges in achieving this within an IPA study is the sheer volume of themes produced from the raw interview data. At times this could become overwhelming, leading to a concern that the phenomenon was becoming lost. It is important to refer back to the idea that the frequency of a theme is not the only indicator of importance. It was more than an exercise in counting themes, the phenomenon needed to be explicated holistically (Finlay 2014). Wagstaff et al. (2014) suggest that fundamental individual differences can become obscured by the need to focus on the common experience. In this sense, the volume of themes can create a tension that puts the idiographic nature of IPA under severe strain. Indeed, Wagstaff et al. (2014) suggest this conflict is the greatest weakness of IPA. This was something I battled with throughout: how could I produce super-ordinate

themes that represented all participants, whilst at the same time keeping within the idiographic traditions of IPA?

To combat these issues, Finlay (2014) suggests the researcher needs to keep going back to the data and to keep reminding themselves to focus on lived experience. This was a challenge in itself. When preparing for interview schedules I would often sit there with a thought going round and round in my head: what exactly am I after? what do I need to talk to these young people about to answer my research questions? In the analysis period I would come back to the thought: what exactly am I looking for?

Through the creation of 'contact summary forms' (see Appendix 6 for an example), completed after each interview, and constant reference to the interview transcripts, I began to note what I felt were the key aspects of each participant's narratives that stood out, that needed to be told. I began to construct a biography of each participant, outlining these key themes, along with evidence from the interviews. I then revisited the interview transcripts and highlighted key passages that were critical to the narrative being told. I felt for one participant, for example, their statement that that some of their siblings had required psychiatric help, was vitally important in explaining some of their aspirations. In a similar vein, another participant seemed to be torn between two different worlds and this helped to explain how their aspirations were formed.

5.10 Assessing quality in IPA research

Despite the challenges of developing criteria to assess the quality and validity of qualitative research, it is important to be able to demonstrate studies that are sound and rigorous and are able to yield findings as valuable as quantitative research (Yardley 2011). This is especially true in phenomenological studies, where in the absence of the ability to make grand

'truths' about the nature of reality, the researcher must communicate findings in a manner that will enable others to be able to critically interrogate them (Langdrige 2007).

Several guidelines have emerged to help in this process. Lincoln and Guba (1985), for example, suggest applying four criteria of: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Finlay and Evans (2009) re-conceptualise this, describing their approach as blending scientific rigour and ethical integrity and artistry, labelling their criteria as rigour, relevance, resonance and reflexivity. Smith (2011a) provides specific guidelines for an IPA study. Smith suggests that for an IPA study to be classed as 'good' it should have a clear focus, have strong data, be rigorous, be interpretative rather than purely descriptive and should point to convergence as well as divergence. To assess the quality and validity of this study I used the four stage process produced by Yardley (2000; 2011). This is based on the recommendation of Smith et al. (2009). The four stages are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance.

5.10.1 Sensitivity to context

In order to show that a study has demonstrated its sensitivity to context, Yardley (2011) suggests that the study must clarify what is already known from theory and research and develop a research question that has not been addressed. Therefore, much of my early time was spent reading literature on existing research into outreach programmes, looking at the wider literature on aspirations of young people, particularly from disadvantaged areas and WP policy and practice. I also ensured I kept up-to-date with any relevant news concerned with WP and outreach. By engaging with the literature and WP policy I was able to establish the lack of current research that focuses on not only the lived experiences of WP students but in particular those specifically living in an LPN (given the focus of LPN as a target group for

outreach programmes). This enabled me to formulate my research questions and establish my original contribution to knowledge.

Sensitivity to context involved being sensitive to the perspective and social-cultural context of the young people (Yardley 2011). I demonstrated this in a number of ways, including: taking ethical considerations into account at all stages of the research; the use of interviews over focus groups so as to not put participants in a position where they may feel embarrassed sharing personal experiences with peers; requesting that staff members were not present in interviews; and the construction of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to talk about what was important to them (Wilkinson et al. 2004).

Smith et al. (2009) argue, finally, that the strongest way in which research can demonstrate sensitivity is through the data it produces. To ensure this I have included a large number of verbatim quotes from participants in the findings section. This will then enable readers to make judgements as to the validity of my interpretations of the raw data. In doing so, it gives the participants a voice in the presentation of findings.

5.10.2 Commitment and rigour

As Yardley (2011) suggests, one cannot simply talk to a group of people and discuss some of what they said and claim validity in your research. The researcher needs to demonstrate that they have carried out work of sufficient depth and/or breadth to provide some additional insight into the topic under investigation. From the outset, I demonstrated my commitment to the need to gain a much greater, phenomenological understanding of the lives of a group of young WP pupils. I was committed to move past the more rigid ways of looking at aspiration often prevalent in WP outreach research.

The main way in which this study has demonstrated this is in its desire to remain 'true' to an IPA approach. At the start of the process this meant engaging in a detailed reading of the available IPA literature to understand the theoretical underpinnings and what was required. Other ways it has remained committed to the approach includes the setting of the research questions, the selection of semi-structured interviews as the means of collecting data, preparing suitable interview schedules and in sampling. In sampling, for example, I wanted to ensure that participants all met a particular criterion in that they were all defined as living in an LPN. This would have been opposed to a broader sample of participants who met any WP 'marker'. Recruiting participants from LPNs enabled me to offer insight into that specific group of WP students. Having a sample size of five (as opposed to a higher figure) enabled a more ideographic approach that was attentive to the experiences of the five young people. This is in line with the expectation that an IPA study will demonstrate a commitment to the attentiveness to the participant during the data collection period (Smith et al. 2009).

Demonstrating commitment and rigour was especially important in data analysis and write up. To ensure this I demonstrate how the themes created in analysis can be shown in the accounts of different participants, therefore offering different perspectives. This is rather than relying on the account of one participant.

5.10.3 Coherence and transparency

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that transparency refers to the ways in which the different stages of the research process are described in the final research report. I have ensured this by carefully explaining the choice of IPA over other approaches. I have provided justification for my methodical decisions, including sample size, use of multiple data collection points, use of semi-structured interviews etc. Additionally, I kept a clear audit trail of the coding

system used that enabled all quotes used in the final thesis to be traced back to source (see Appendix 5). From the outset, I also demonstrated my awareness and impact of researcher reflexivity and the ways in which this may have impacted on the research.

In terms of coherence, when reading an IPA study it would be expected that the study will be consistent with the underlying principles of IPA and that the phenomenological and hermeneutic nature of the study should be apparent (Smith et al. 2009). This would enable me to give voice to the personal perspectives of participants by providing a consistent and complete description (Yardley 2000). One of the mechanisms I used to achieve this was by sense checking with supervisors, as experienced researchers. In this sense we formed an “interpretive research group” (Pollio et al. 2006, p.257), where members of the group were able to challenge my interpretations in order to agree that these interpretations were supported by the interview text (Pollio et al. 2006). This enabled the final cross-case themes and the presentation of findings to be clear and logical (Langdridge 2007).

In terms of transparency, one of the options was a process of participant validation where the researcher takes their evolving analysis to the participant as a form of conformation (Finlay 2011). This was rejected however. Langdridge (2007) voices a number of concerns over such a process. Of relevance to this study, given the age of participants, was the issue of power and whether the participant would have the ability to provide honest feedback. This was in two senses. Firstly, whether they would have the confidence to criticise the researcher for fear of offending. On the flip side of this they may have felt the need to ‘represent’ themselves in a particular light so as to, for example, not seem critical of the school or their parents. This led on to a more theoretical concern as to whether the participants would have been able to relate to the analysis (Yardley 2011) by being able to step outside their natural attitude and have the ability to offer a level of critical perspective (Langdridge 2007).

5.10.4 Impact and importance

It is argued that the decisive criteria by which any research should be judged is impact and utility (Yardley 2000) (see Smith (2011a) for specific criteria for judging an IPA paper). This study has a dual role in terms of impact and importance. By opening up new theoretical ways in which the lives of young WP students can be more fully understood, it aims not only to provide an original contribution to knowledge within the field of WP outreach, it aims to offer an original methodological approach to WP research that may encourage further phenomenological research within the field. Because of this, the findings should be of interest to policy makers, WP practitioners and researchers, as well as anyone interested in aspiration formation in young people.

The study has already been presented at three international conferences as well as a co-written journal article published in the *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* (see Appendix 7). It is my intention that the findings be presented at further conferences as well as publication in journals such as *The Qualitative Report*.

5.11 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have outlined the practical aspects of my methodological approach. I outlined the ethical considerations that were considered throughout the process. I justified my decision to focus on young people living in an LPN and my sample size. I have explained the recruitment process and my decision to meet with each participant on five occasions. I explained how I developed my interview schedule, the actual interview process and how I analysed the data generated. I reflected on the challenges of using IPA and outlined how I used the work of Yardley (2011) as a means of ensuring the research is sound and rigorous. I now move on to discuss my research findings.

Chapter 6: The Participants and Their Aspirations

I now present the first part of my research findings. In this chapter, we meet the five participants and briefly understand some of their aspirations. In Chapter 7 I then present a detailed interpretative phenomenological analysis of some of their lived experiences and how these experiences relate to their aspirations. Before I do this, firstly I set some context for their lives.

All five participants attend Lakeside Academy¹², a mixed-sex state secondary school for 11-18 year olds, located in an urban area along the south coast of England. Around 800 pupils attend the school. The vision for the school encompasses the ideas of inclusivity, fairness and the need to develop global citizens. The school believe that pupils should be empowered to aspire and achieve to the highest of their abilities.

The most recent Ofsted report (2014) rated the school as 'Good'. The report noted that the average student has a good attitude towards their learning and this is reflected in low levels of pupil absence. This was an improvement on its previous Ofsted report that had rated the school as 'Requires improvement'.

In 2016, the proportion of pupils who obtained at least 5 A*-C GCSEs (or equivalent) including English and Maths was slightly below the national average. The proportion of pupils staying in education or going into employment after Key Stage 4 is also slightly below the national average. The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium¹³ is well above the national average; with approximately 25% of pupils being eligible for free

¹² All names and places have been anonymised throughout.

¹³ See: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings>.

school meals. Around two thirds of pupils live in the lowest two POLAR3 quintiles for HE progression, with around half living in the lowest.

The school runs a vibrant programme of extra-curricular activities, including participation in HE outreach programmes, run by local HEI providers. Approximately three quarters of current Y13 pupils have applied and had places offered at HE institutions (this includes Russell Group institutions). This is the school's highest recorded figure for HE progression.

Lakeside Academy is located within the ward of Rushington, which has a population of approximately 10,000 people. Rushington sits within the urban area of Grove which has a population of approximately 200,000 people. Grove has thriving financial/insurance and service sectors with elevated levels of employment in these sectors compared to national averages. Conversely, it has smaller manufacturing and construction sectors compared to national averages.

The character of Rushington is that of almost entirely detached housing and suburban estate development. One in four households are classified as 'Elderly people with assets who are enjoying a comfortable retirement' (compared to one in ten in Grove). A very high percentage of Rushington residents are classified as 'White British', far higher than the average for England and Wales. Unemployment claimants are less than that for Grove and the UK in general. Around one in five children in the ward are defined as living in poverty¹⁴. This figure is lower than the national average.

¹⁴ Once housing costs have been added.

6.1 Del

Del lives in a three-bedroomed semi-detached house with his mother and two sisters. Del is the middle child. His grandad and nan live two doors away. His mum works in the healthcare sector and his older sister has recently completed an FE course and is currently preparing to start employment within the animal welfare sector. Del makes no reference to a father throughout all our meetings.

Del was probably the most challenging of the young people to interview. He was personable and humorous but often struggled to articulate his feelings, leaving long pauses, giving no or very short responses. At times, he appeared quite vague and would often tail off when talking about his experiences. I got a sense throughout my time with him that he often got bored, impatient and frustrated with life, describing himself as “*an introvert really*”. Some of his more day-to-day aspirations centred on the desire to ‘do more’, to see more of the world.

His hobbies are “*hanging around*” with his friends, music and playing his Xbox although at times he appeared to get frustrated and bored with both his Xbox and music. I gained a sense that his pets play a very important role in his life. His older sister has two horses which he appeared to visit and ride most weekends (despite the travel involved).

As his career aspiration matrix below suggests, Del has a very clear career aspiration - to work in animal care, preferably as a vet. This aspiration has given him a clear focus in his future plans, articulating his aspirations to go onto 6th form/college and then to university. He would not be the first in family to study in HE as his mother studied at the local university, although he was unsure as to the actual course (and level) that she studied.

Pre-secondary school	Group Meeting	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Vet	I want to do something to do with music	Either a musician or some sort of animal care - like a vet	Animal care/vet	Vet	Vet/animal care

Table 4: Career aspiration matrix: Del

Del's hopes for his future life in 10 years were well matched with his expectations about his future and centred around his career and living fairly locally in a "nice house". He acknowledges the hope that he will be living in a big house with a group of friends as being unrealistic, opting instead for an expectation that "*hopefully I'll have like a girlfriend or something and live with them*".

Del describes his mother as someone who is successful, relating it to her HE experiences. His close relationship with his mother is something that runs throughout his narrative and he clearly values his mother's advice. He also appears to have a good relationship with his sisters, talking about how he was planning to attend a large music festival with his older sister.

The most important things in his life at the moment are school (because he needs it) and his animals. He sees getting the job he wants as the most important aspect of his future. Finally, for Del, the most important thing in life is to be happy.

Super-ordinate themes	Themes
School: The heartbeat of aspiration	Creating and supporting achievement ideology Subscribing to the ethos (of achievement) Supporting and curtailing career aspirations
Support structures	Supportive family and friends Experience of others
A personal tale	Animals The past Boredom and frustration

Table 5: Super-ordinate themes: Del

6.2 Pete

Pete lives in a three-bedroomed house with his father, mother and older sister who recently moved back in. He has an older brother who no longer lives at home. His father works in manufacturing, his mother works for the local council and his sister works in IT advertising. His older brother was in the armed forces but Pete gives no details as to his current profession. When he was younger, his father was a footballer, playing for Arsenal Reserves, before an injury put an end to his career.

Pete was very relaxed throughout our time together, describing himself as a “*now*’ type of guy”. I sensed his relaxed attitude often played out in his daily life, particularly around schooling. At times, he struggled to articulate his feelings and experiences. He was clearly most at ease talking about football which led to some lengthy discussions between us.

His hobbies are playing football and playing his Xbox (the two often overlap). He plays for the school football team as well as a Sunday league team. He

has recently started to go to the gym. Football appears to be a major part of his life.

As his career aspiration matrix below displays, Pete has a clear hierarchy of aspiration, with his number one aspiration to become a professional footballer.

Pre-secondary school	Group Meeting	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Can't really remember	(Absent)	Footballer Police A lawyer if my football career doesn't go to plan	Footballer Police Lawyer	Football, police and then like a lawyer, banker or something	No change

Table 6: Career aspiration matrix: Pete

Pete is doing well at school, has high targets and describes his school as “*brilliant*”. He enjoys lessons that give him some creative freedom as opposed to more formalised learning such as essay writing. He works hard at school because “*I want to do good in life, I want to get a good job*”.

Pete’s hopes for what his life would look like in 10 years varied hugely from his expectations. The future he *hoped* for included playing football for Real Madrid or Barcelona, a mansion, sports cars, a boat and “*a wife, two kids, a boy and a girl*”. This was compared to his *expectations* of: “*probably going to university or like or just sitting at home doing nothing*”, “*just sitting at home doing nothing or playing on the Xbox or something*”.

Pete is planning to attend 6th form and is confident that he will go to university. He would be the first in family and feels his parents would be proud of him. Pete appears to have a love/hate relationship with his parents, particularly his father. On one hand, he sees his father as supportive and looks up to him, wanting to follow in his footsteps of becoming a footballer. On the other however, he outright rejects the choices he has made in life. This is an important part of Pete’s narrative.

To Pete, a successful person is “*someone that, like, achieves what they wanted to achieve*”. Finally, for Pete, the most important thing in life is:

To do what you want to do [...] because it’s your life and it’s your ambitions and if other people are telling you like not to do something and you want to do it then it’s important for you to do your own thing

Super-ordinate themes	Themes
Developed through rejection	Rejection of place Rejection of narrative of others
Strong influencers	Family and friends The self Sport/football/enjoyment School life

Table 7: Super-ordinate themes: Pete

6.3 Sophie

Sophie lives with her father and older brother in a four-bed semi-detached house. Her parents separated shortly before I met her for the first time. At the time of our first meeting she lived with her mother and step-father but by the time we had our final meeting she was living with her father and brother. Her father works in the education sector and her mother did not appear to be employed.

In all our meetings Sophie was very articulate, sure of herself and spoke at length on varying subjects. Our interviews were always curtailed by the school bell and therefore I found I never got close to asking her everything I had intended to. Over the time I have known her, she displayed a real sense of determination, a strong self-identity and high levels of independence.

Her sense of self-identity can be seen in her hobbies and career aspirations, in which she seeks ways to display her self-identity. She has a real love of dance, regularly performing in shows. She has recently become a member of a band and has been taking ukulele lessons. She also enjoys photography.

As her career aspiration matrix demonstrates, her aspirations are split between two differing paths. As well as aspiring to develop her love of the performing arts into something more serious, she is also interested in becoming a forensic scientist. It appears to be quite a dilemma for her; which path should, or will, she take?

Pre-secondary school	Group Meeting	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Fashion design	Performing like on like shows and stuff or something to do with like TV	Dance/performing arts Forensic science	Dance/forensic science	Dance/forensic science	Dance/forensic science

Table 8: Career aspiration matrix: Sophie

In articulating her hopes and expectations for 10 years' time, whilst they followed a similar path, her expectations were that her life, particularly her career aspirations, would be not as far into the journey.

Sophie is doing well at school and often talks about how peers see her as a benchmark, someone to compare themselves to. Sophie appears to struggle to understand the more negative attitudes towards learning of many of her peers.

Sophie has clear aspirations to go to 6th Form and then university. She would not be the first in family as her father has a postgraduate qualification. Her brother is head boy at school and is a high achiever. She describes her brother as “*crazy intelligent*” and her family as “*quite academic*”. Despite her own academic achievements, she feels constantly in the shadows of her brother. This is a key narrative that runs throughout our meetings.

Sophie consistently rejects the idea of aspiring to extrinsic goals (money etc.) and constantly refers to the importance of being happy in life. She equates personal experiences of success to her school life, in particular getting parts in school performances and doing well in tests. Finally, Sophie is very optimistic about her future and: “*As long as I’m still happy in life then that’s the main thing that counts to me*”.

Super-ordinate themes	Themes
A strong sense of self	Fun and happiness Rejecting expectations Being pragmatic Family norms and narratives In control
An academic driver	Subscribing to the school ethos Driven by home life Rejection and contamination Driven by school life

Table 9: Super-ordinate themes: Sophie

6.4 Megan

Megan lives in a semi-detached house with her father, mother and four sisters. She also has three older brothers and one older sister who have all moved out of the family home. Her father works in manufacturing and her mother works part-time as a domestic helper. One of her older brothers is currently studying at university and is the first in family to go to university. She describes the rest of her siblings in the following way:

One has got bad health, she can't really walk so I guess she's on benefits with her carer who's her boyfriend. Another one he's like Martin, he doesn't live with us, he goes round and like I guess finds people and they drop litter do things they shouldn't be doing and there's my other brother, he's got two kids and he's engaged and they live in a flat. I guess he just goes on holidays in local areas and search [inaudible transcript] [...] I've got 2 older sisters who live with me who both go to college and both work like small jobs like chip shops and Burger King and then there's me and the two younger than me

Megan was often very withdrawn in interviews, barely making eye contact and often yawning. This is reflected in my very first notes made in interview one:

Very withdrawn and closed, not giving response to open question. Having to ask additional questions to get any info rather than letting her lead conversation.

Despite this demeanour and the challenges and hardships she might face, I sensed Megan is a young person with a real determination to work hard and do well in life.

Megan's main hobby appears to be reading and she aspires to write a book later in life. She also enjoys watching movies and hanging around with her friends.

As can be seen from her career aspirations matrix, her aspirations were the broadest ranging of the young people. However, many of these aspirations can be linked by the idea they can be defined as professions that provide care or help to people.

Pre-secondary school	Group Meeting	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Hairdresser/vet/ teacher	A councillor or teacher	Something like helping other people like maybe a psychiatrist or a teacher	like elderly care or something Guess it's just like psychology and medical care but not being a doctor, I guess	Psychiatrist working with the police/ Teach/ /law like a lawyer maybe a detective stuff like that or a like a mystery journalist	Maybe investigation work/ Being a doctor or something like that maybe

Table 10: Career aspiration matrix: Megan

Megan appears to be the most 'grounded in reality'. When asked what she hoped her life would be like in 10 years, she was very pragmatic, rejecting many of the extrinsic signs of wealth. Megan makes frequent references to the need for a job and the importance of money.

Megan does well at school, is a member of the Y10 leadership programme and works hard to achieve high grades. She portrays her school and her school life in a positive light and acknowledges that she has matured and got her head down at school.

She has clear aspirations to go onto college/6th Form and then university. She feels quite confident about her future. To Megan, the most important thing in life:

Would be health because without health you're not going to be able to do what you want to do, whether it's like mental health or something

Super-ordinate themes	Themes
A ticket out of town	Rejection of place Rejection of peers Rejection of family narratives Rejection of past self
Pulled and pushed	Family life Hobbies and fun The unknown School life

Table 11: Super-ordinate themes: Megan

6.5 John

John lives in a three-bedroomed semi-detached house with his father, mother and two younger siblings. His father is a maintenance engineer and his mother works within his father's business. His hobbies are playing his Xbox, playing football and playing around with his computer.

Getting to know John was a pleasure. He was humorous and at times very matter of fact, describing things in black and white. He admitted himself he was often forgetful and at times I sensed he got really frustrated with life, frequently using the word *annoying* for example. This was no more evident than in the clear tension at home where he wanted to play his Xbox but was restricted because of its location in his dad's office. This conflict resulted in part of the garage at home being converted into a games/additional bedroom for John, giving him that freedom he desires. By the time of our last meeting, this seemed to have really helped John in feeling a lot less frustrated.

John's life appears to be increasingly consumed by his love of technology. He related many of his experiences to technology, talking about how his desire to play his Xbox often overrode, for example, the need to do his homework. He also aspires to travel, with an island in the Caribbean being his dream destination, due to the location of the airport.

As his career matrix displays, John has a very clear career aspiration, to become a commercial airline pilot. In interview three John brought up the idea of owning a computing company. In interview four he appeared to have gone slightly colder on this idea. This was following his work experience with his father and the realisation of the challenges of setting up a business.

Pre-secondary school	Group Meeting	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Pilot	Pilot	Pilot	Pilot	Pilot Own computer company	Pilot

Table 12: Career aspiration matrix: John

John is doing well at school although he appears to do the minimum to get by. He talks about his school life in a positive manner but has obvious frustrations with his school life. These revolve around the rules, timetabling and especially homework.

John is open to the idea of going to university. It very much depends, however, on whether he needs to go to achieve his aspiration of becoming a pilot. If he did go to university, he would be the first in family.

John was pragmatic when asked the difference between what he hoped and what he thought his life would be like in 10 years. Whilst he maintained his desire to become an airline pilot in both versions of his future, his expectations for his future life were much more centred around the desire to be 'normal' rather than rich.

His goal in life is to “*just to be happy and be a pilot and earn enough money to live*”. Finally, success to John is about being happy and completing the goals that you set for yourself in life. He considers David Beckham to be successful because:

His goals were probably to be a football player and he's completed that goal so he's probably happy

Super-ordinate themes	Themes
Technology, technology, technology	Hobbies and interests Taking over The past School life Defining self-identity
Expressions of freedom?	Frustration at school Frustration and escaping at home Freedom through technology
A supportive environment	School life Family and friends An emerging reality???

Table 13: Super-ordinate themes: John

6.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have introduced each of the five participants and shared some of their aspirations¹⁵. In doing so, I demonstrated that the participants are highly aspirational. They all want to do well in life, they want to progress with their educational careers and all have some form of aspiration to

¹⁵ See Appendix 8 for a summary.

progress to HE. They all aspire towards jobs that can be perceived as 'middle-class'. I also demonstrated that many of these career aspirations are closely related to their hobbies or things that they greatly enjoy doing. Many of their wider life ambitions were related to happiness and doing what they want to do with their lives. Only Pete and to some extent John, expressed desires of material wealth.

Chapter 7: Lived Experience and Aspiration Formation

I now provide a detailed account about how the lived experiences of participants have created the aspirations discussed in the preceding chapter. I do so through the production of three super-ordinate themes: 'Comfort in Familiarity'; 'Empowerment'; and 'Broadening Horizons'.

It is important at this point to stress the complexity of aspiration formation. Whilst I have separated experiences into three super-ordinate themes, it does not mean that aspirations should be viewed in such a systematic manner. Many of the experiences of participants transcended multiple themes and therefore I used my judgement as to which theme they should be placed in. It must be said that this analysis does not, indeed cannot, include every experience relevant to the participants and their aspirations. In using my role (as a researcher) within the double hermeneutic, I have drawn out what I interpret as being the most important part of each participants narrative that helps to explain how their everyday experiences help to shape their aspirations. In doing so, I seek to achieve a:

“Rigorous, rich description, backed by illustrative quotations, which evokes the phenomenon in immediate and potent ways” (Finlay 2014, p.135).

7.1 Super-ordinate theme: Empowerment

This super-ordinate theme discusses the ways in which participants feel empowered to aspire. Within this super-ordinate theme there are three ordinate themes. The first talks about how empowerment comes from within, the participants want to be in control of their own lives. The second one discusses how this empowerment is supported or reaffirmed by the influence of others, predominantly through school and parents. The final ordinate

theme discusses various experiences that cause participants to feel a loss of control.

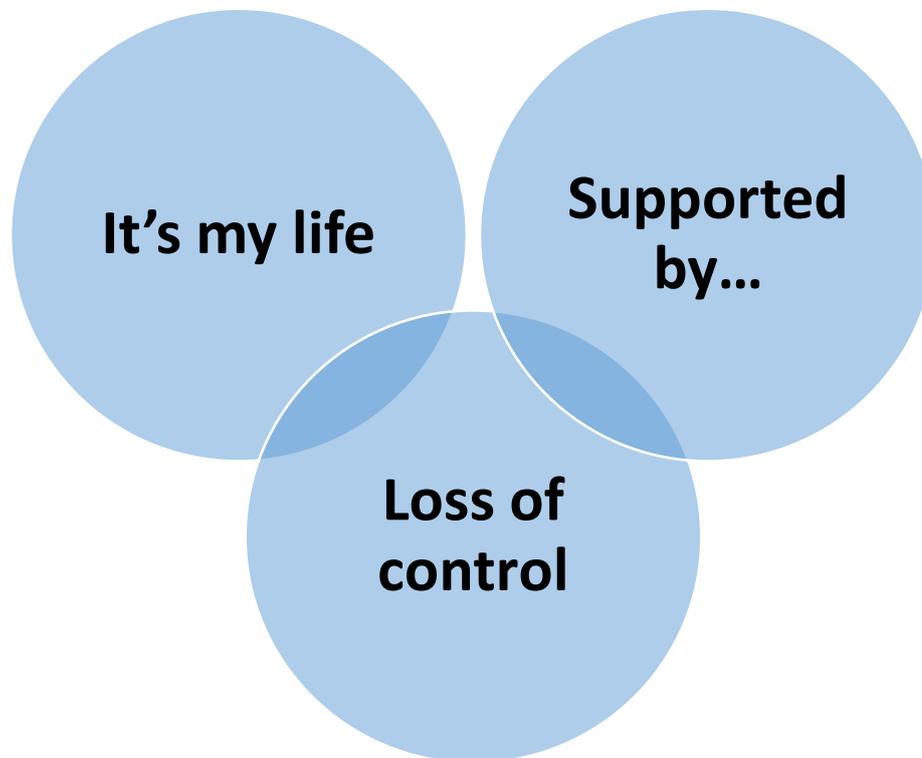


Figure 9: Super-ordinate theme: Empowerment

7.1.1 Theme: It's my life

Something that all participants have in common is their desire to live the life they want, to be in control of their own destiny. This is something that comes across as being important to participants, some more forthrightly than others.

When I met with Megan for the third time, for example, she said something I found quite salient and powerful:

I guess I believe in myself quite a lot because I guess when no one else believes in you, you have to believe in yourself (Megan 4-10)

Although she does not make a specific reference to any individual or group, this short passage of conversation seemed to sum up the struggles Megan faces in her life. She clearly articulates that her solution is to find solace in herself, to feel empowered in the decisions she makes, to be highly aspirational.

However, in our next meeting she talks about how she is defined as 'smart' at school.

A lot of people call me smart, they say like I'm the smartest one in the year and obviously it's like well I don't think that's true. I guess some other people I guess say as smart as I am would be floating my own boat and stuff like that. I guess people are like as smart as me (Megan 4-14)

She is keen to play this down, the use of the word *obviously* suggesting a rejection of this narrative. The use of the phrase *floating my own boat* also indicates a reluctance or shyness to admit that she might be a smart individual. This suggests a possible lack of self-confidence in how others (especially peers) perceive her. It also indicates that the issue of lack of belief may stem from her home life, rather than her school life. Whatever the reason, Megan clearly feels empowered to make her own decisions, to be in control of her own life. Note in the following extract not only the repeated use of *determined* but the reference she makes to wanting to be in control, to do the things she wants.

I'm determined to get a good grade when I leave school, I'm determined to go on to 6th form maybe college instead, I'm determined to go to university, I'm determined to do things I want to do (Megan 4-15)

This determination seems to stem from previous experiences at school and her home life. It is as if she has looked up and thought: 'no, I can do better than that', reflected in how she has transformed herself at school:

I was messing about detentions, phone calls home and stuff like that but I don't really mess around anymore, I've got my head down so [...]
(Megan 3-10)

[...] I guess I realised I was falling behind and stuff. I didn't really want to fall into the crowd of people who like don't care (Megan 4-15)

Notice how she talks about herself in the past and the present, as if they are two different people. For Megan, taking control by not wanting to fall into the wrong crowd is an important part of her narrative and is discussed in greater detail under the super-ordinate theme of 'Broadening Horizons'.

Of all the young people in this study, Sophie displayed very high levels of independence and wanting to be in control of her life. Sophie was the only one out of the participants, for example, who undertook work experience unrelated to her career aspirations. She wanted to do something for herself that she would enjoy. This is a narrative that ran through all our meetings, as summed up in the following quote:

I just kind of think if I want to do it I'm going to do it, so I'm pretty sure that when I decide exactly what I want to do then I'm going to be able to do it somehow (Sophie 4-25)

Not only is she putting herself in control (using 'I' or 'I'm' seven times), the placement of *someway* at the end of the sentence suggests a strong determination to achieve the things she wants to achieve, however difficult that might be. Take her GCSEs. Whilst she is pragmatic enough to acknowledge that in one sense things are out of her control, she still attempts to exert control over the situation, it is up to her.

What's going to happen is going to happen. If I try then that's all I can really do. As long as I get good grades that I'm happy with myself, then I don't really care what other people think about that (Sophie 3-6)

This powerful sense of self appears to come from her parents (particularly her mother) and their attitudes. In this passage, the language Sophie uses is one of defiance and standing up for yourself.

My parents, like when, with the hair colour thing they did support me a lot, they because even they found it quite stupid like how we weren't allowed hair colour [...] They often do fight for like, if there's something that they think is like really ridiculous then they'll kind of stand up for what they believe, in they won't just like take a back seat and be like its ok its fine someone else can deal with it. My parents are quite like head on, they're just like kind of demand what they want (Sophie 1-15)

This self-reliance is evident when Sophie talks about how she became interested in dance:

I really don't know because none of my parents have ever done anything to do with that sort of thing and they've never even thought about putting me in dance classes and stuff because they kind of let me choose what I wanted to do rather than pushing me in certain paths (Sophie 3-17)

The onus is on her; she was left to make her own choices. In some ways, she suggests an almost *laissez-faire* attitude of her parents. However, she does not portray this attitude as something negative, it is just something she's grown up with and is comfortable with. She talks of her mother as like a free spirit, someone who has never been aspirational, who has shunned material desire. However, rather than acting as a deterrent, her mother's experiences seem to reinforce Sophie's own sense of feeling empowered in the decisions she makes.

I mean, well my mum hasn't really done much in her life, she because when she was younger she told me that she never actually wanted to do any sort of job, she always just wanted to have a family (Sophie 1-18)

Another part of Sophie's narrative around feelings of empowerment is the desire to prove people wrong. This seems to really motivate Sophie. By making her feel *really good*, suggests an inner satisfaction, a feeling of contentment.

When people tell me that I can't do things, I just really want to do them cause just to prove them wrong. It feels really good when you just prove somebody wrong, when they told you, you couldn't do something (Sophie 1-7)

These feelings can be attributed to two key narratives playing out in Sophie's life. Firstly, her belief that others view her aspiration to become a dancer as a poorer relative to her academic ambitions to become a forensic scientist, therefore not fulfilling her full potential. Secondly, her perception that she lives under the shadow of her brother, being the inferior sibling. Both these narratives seem to really drive Sophie to want to be in control.

Although I had previously noted that Sophie feels her academic abilities are at times a burden, her academic achievements also seem to help Sophie feel in control. Here Sophie is discussing how she is feeling less stressed about her school work, the better levels seemingly transforming her from stressed to relaxed.

I'm starting to get better levels in my classes so I'm feeling like more relaxed about what I'm doing and I know that if I'm relaxed that's going to help me learn more instead of being stressed and all over the place (Sophie 3-7)

This feeling is re-emphasised in her desire to get the top grades:

Like whenever I tell people this, they think it's really weird, but when I'd kind of be disappointed in myself even if I got like a B because to me that's not as good as I can cause I know that I can do better than that (Sophie 1-15)

The idea of feeling empowered though doing well academically is something that is common across participants. All participants are doing well academically and this seems to breed a belief that they can do well in life, to achieve the things they want. Here Megan links her academic abilities with her future plans, although she seems keen to play down her abilities.

Without sounding like I'm boasting, I'm quite intelligent I guess, high target levels stuff like that [...] I'm probably going to want to go to university and do well with my life (Megan 3-1)

Pete works hard at school so he can do well in life and get a good job, a thought shared by Del. For Pete *"If I'm good at something then I have like more chance of getting it"*. Empowerment for Pete appears to be about choice, by taking control of his own life and destiny, the choices open to him are far greater. In this quote Pete is re-emphasising the need to be in control, it is his life, he must do what is right for himself.

To do what you want to do [...] because it's your life and it's your ambitions and if other people are telling you like not to do something and you want to do it then it's important for you to do your own thing (Pete 2-9)

John also feels the same way, discussing the way in which his parents would accept that it is his life, it is his decisions. Again, this gives him the empowerment to aspire to achieve what he wants.

They [parents] probably wouldn't agree with it but because it's my decision in life they'll probably still help me with it even if they didn't like it (John 2-6)

Choice is something also mentioned by Del. Because he is doing better in science makes him believe that things are opening up; his options are broadening.

I'm getting even better in science now and like maths and I've picked triple science for year 10 to help me like get the right grades so that I'll be able to do everything (Del 2-1)

By doing well in relevant subjects, Del is gaining confidence that he can become a vet, describing the possibility as “*pretty realistic*”. Del feels he has control over the decisions he makes. Although John has a more relaxed attitude towards his school life, appearing to do the minimum to get by, he is still achieving high grades and has a belief that he can achieve anything he wants to, as long as he tries.

John's desire to be in control of his aspirations is symptomatic of a wider power struggle between himself and his family. John is trying to exert a general control over his own life, to make his own decisions, to be independent. This seems to revolve around technology and his frustrations, or inability, to play his Xbox when he wants.

Here John is talking about what his parents think of him spending so much time on his Xbox. He is determined to carry on playing no matter what his parents think, he does not want to give in to them.

They don't mind me playing Xbox, they would like me to go out more but I don't want to go out more (John 4-22)

His parents eventually agreed to a garage conversion, which has given John a real sense of independence. He was keen to tell me that he had designed the layout, picked the wallpaper design etc. His new room has become a symbol of his growing independence.

7.1.2 Theme: Supported by...

To become aspirational, the young people need the support of those around them, encouraging them, reaffirming their aspirations, pushing them etc. For the participants in this study, this is a process that comes from two very distinct parts of their lives: their everyday experiences of school; and their home life, in particular the influence of their parents. By being supported by school and their families, the participants become more confident in their ability to be aspirational.

School life

Their day-to-day school lives enable participants to become aspirational through a two-staged process. Not only does the school need to be driving an aspirational ideology, the young people themselves need to buy into it. The impact of schooling should not be underestimated as a powerful tool in enabling the participants to become aspirational.

All participants agreed that the school are driving an aspirational ideology, emphasising the need to work hard and to achieve the things you want in life. They generally describe their school lives in a positive manner; Pete describes the school as “*brilliant*” and “*fun*”. Note the use of the word *always* in Sophie’s account, suggesting this ideology is a part of everyday life at the school.

The school always goes on about how much if you get really good grades then you can get like really big houses and really good cars and like a really good job (Sophie 3-14)

John links the role of schooling directly to his interest in technology. This is perhaps John’s overriding reason as to why he values education and

engages with the school's aspirational ideology. He is on the same page; he shares the same outlook in terms of the future jobs market. He is making the right choice; technology is the future.

EB: Like why do you think the school are teaching you?

Oh, because this 21st century's getting more technologically advanced so they probably want to teach us about the future because they don't know what jobs are going to be available in the future or anything but it's mostly likely going to involved with technology so they teach us (John 3-6)

For Del the use of *obviously* in the following quote suggests he can't imagine a world in which the role of schooling could be anything else: "*They definitely try to push you but it's for good reasons obviously*". The use of a conjunction such as *but* suggests that initially Del was going to imply that being pushed at school was something of a negative experience, before turning it around into something positive. This conversion from something that appears to be a negative into something positive is felt in an even stronger sense by Pete when talking about how he feels that one of his teachers bullies him.

EB: So why do you think it's bullying, why do you say that?

Well, it's because he usually like points out the things I'm doing so I'm like either speaking or something when the whole class is speaking, just targets me

EB: And why do you think he does that?

Because he wants me to do well (Pete 3-7)

Participants are in general agreement with the above quote from Pete that teachers offer them support and encourage them to become aspirational. Some of them also feel that the teachers expect a lot from them, something that they view in a positive light. Take Del's experiences in Maths as an example:

In maths, quite a lot, I sometimes like don't understand it so then she'll come round to us and she can be quite good and then she'll explain it properly and if you still don't get it then she'll try and give you like an easier question that will help you understand it (Del 3-2)

The feeling of high expectations is something felt by each participant. Here, as Sophie is sharing some of her perceptions, note the highly academic focus.

They think I should be like a highly qualified mathematician or I should be a microbiologist in some like really amazing science lab. They all think I should be doing something like amazing like highly qualified subjects (Sophie 3-20)

Megan shares a similar story, again emphasising the lofty expectations placed on her.

I feel like the teacher's sort of like expect a lot from me like um I got outdoor education as year 9 option. I was told it was recommended that I should change so that I could get do criminology in year [...] so that I could do RS and then the RS grades would give me like the right sort of mind-set to do criminology in year 10 (Megan 1-13)

For Pete, this high expectation is something that seems to be increasing as he progresses through his school life. Whilst Pete talks about the school pushing him, he suggests a carrot and stick approach, where pupils are forced to stay behind if they fail to achieve their targets grades.

EB: So, tell me about what's life like in year 10 compared to year 9
You get a lot more homework. They try and push you to get like your target grades. If you don't get it then you have to stay behind and do intervention and stuff (Pete 3-3)

For Pete, this approach seems to act as a motivator, he suggests there is little alternative: *"It kind of like forces you to do well so well if you don't want to stay behind that is"*.

For Megan, she appears to suggest that the aspirational ideology driven by the school relates to social mobility and the need to get a middle-class job.

She suggests a hierarchy, the need to get a *proper* job, rather than merely working in a shop. The use of *obviously* suggesting there is a limit, she is not going to get what she describes as an *upper-class* job.

To give you the skills and knowledge you need to go on and take you GCSEs and then with your GCSEs you can use that further if you want to get like a proper job. I guess sort of like [pause] there's like lower class, middle class and upper class. Obviously not going to get upper class but like to get rather a middle-class job rather than a lower class one like working in the shop down the road and then there's, like a job like teaching and stuff like that (Megan 3-8)

John shares an experience from a lesson that appears to reaffirm this idea:

In English, our English teacher said that richer kids are more likely to do well than poorer kids (John 3-12)

He takes this statement, agrees with it and applies it to his own life.

I'm not wealthy but I'm not poor and I do pretty well at school, whereas if you look at some of my friends that are not as wealthy as me they are not as high as me. I'm not saying that all poor kids are dumb, like some of them are more clever but that's just the general [...] (John 3-12)

As part of this narrative, the school seem to be encouraging progression to HE as part of building aspirations. Four of the participants, for example, have recently joined a group that meet regularly to, as they see it, encourage university progression and to keep them on track to achieve high grades. This is important given that for some they appear to have no-one in their close environment with HE experience, so their school life appears to be their only way of gaining HE knowledge.

Whilst participants talk about the programme (as well as other outreach activities they have taken part in) in a generally positive way, there was a feeling that the impact was minimal at this stage, or at least only short-term. This is because the participants often seemed to contextualise the programme relative to their circumstances and that university still seemed a long way down the path. John for example, assesses the usefulness of the programme and the need for HE information relative to his own wants and needs: *“I’m not sure because I don’t know whether I need it for the RAF”* (John 4-8).

This is also apparent in his assessment of the outreach activities he has taken part in, where he suggests that he only enjoys activities related to his interest in computers. Pete also questions the usefulness of the programme as he felt he already knew most of the information that was provided, whilst Megan feels *“70 per cent”* sure she will go to university anyway.

Earlier I spoke about how the school has undergone its own transformative journey. This has not gone unnoticed by participants, particularly by Sophie, who talks in detail about the transformation.

They made the school like completely different and they just they kicked out nearly all of the teachers and got brand new ones and the new head teacher really enforced the rules because she knew how bad the school was before. She, for the first couple of years when the old people were already at the school, she really like locked down, she expelled I think it was 14 students within the first couple of months of being at the school (Sophie 3-11)

Pete relates this transformation to the idea that the road to achievement is a bond between school and pupil. As he sees it, it is up to individuals as to whether they want to join the school in the journey or not. Depending on which option each individual takes, according to Pete, determines whether the school will support them or not.

I think they want you to achieve what you want to achieve. So, if you try then they'll try with you, if you don't then (pause) then they don't (Pete-3-8)

Whilst all the participants want to join the school in this journey, i.e. to subscribe to the aspirational ideology, before they do, they appear to stop, reflect and question whether there is the need to. However, once they have reflected, they are all in agreement with the school's overarching aim to make them highly aspirational. This is summarised by John, implying that schooling is a necessary evil.

Nearly everyone you will speak to will say "oh I hate school" and I'll say it as well but they know that it's good to learn because you need it to get a job, like you need it everywhere (John 3-9)

Del applies this to one of the school rules. Although he would like to use his phone at school, he understands the need for the rule. He subscribes to the rules even though he may not agree.

EB: What about things like phone usage and stuff like that?
Obviously, I want to go on it but I understand why we can't have them out
EB: Why do they not let you?
Because, like say we're in class and we need to think properly about say an answer for something then if they see us on our phone then they'll think were just searching it and we don't actually understand what's happening (Del 3-4)

Sophie appears to be the most reluctant of the participants in 'going along' with the aspirational ideology. At times, she is very critical of the school narrative, emphasising the importance of individuality.

Life isn't just about getting as much money as possible and getting like the best car you can get. So, I think it's a bit of a stupid thing to

say, saying if you get good grades and you'll be rich and you'll be happy because that's not true for everybody (Sophie 3-14)

These feelings appear to stem from her love of dance and her perception that the school see it as the poor relative of academic success.

Like "oh you're wasting your intelligence, like doing dance, because anyone can dance" which is a bit of a stupid thing to say, because if someone is passionate about doing something and you know they're good at it then they're not wasting any talent in doing it. Because their talent might be in dance and even if they've also got talent in academic subjects then if they want to dance then that's a good thing for them to do rather than teachers just saying you're wasting yourself on something that you really enjoy doing, because to me it's not wasting myself at all, it's doing something I really enjoy (Sophie 3-20)

Despite these feelings, Sophie works hard, achieves high grades and is highly aspirational. In other words, she, like John, may dislike school but acknowledges the need for a good education. Pete also considers the need to be aspirational because *"I want to do good in life, I want to get a good job"*. This attitude is like Del who understands the need to work hard if he wants to achieve this aspiration to become a vet.

For Megan, it is about commitment. She talks in a way to suggest she has left her old self behind and realised the importance of school. Whilst before she was getting into trouble on a regular basis, she has transformed herself; she now recognises the value of getting a good education. So as the school has embarked on a transformative journey, so has Megan.

I went through a phase where I was quite naughty in year 8 [...] I was messing about, detentions, phone calls home and stuff like that but I don't really mess around anymore, I've got my head down (Megan 3-9)

Home Life

Whilst their school lives clearly encourage them to become aspirational, participants need reaffirmation from their families, particularly their parents. Generally, participants appear to have supportive parents who encourage them to aim high and to be aspirational.

John feels his parents are very influential in creating and developing his aspirations. In these two extracts, this support covers both his hobbies and his career aspirations. The use of words such as *always* and *love* indicate a strong support for their son.

They are always encouraging me, like if I want to do something they are always encouraging me to do it. So, like football, when I want to be a keeper they are always encouraging me to go training and stuff and like play in matches because they want me to do well (John 1-15)

They're very influential. They like the idea of being a pilot. They would love me to be a pilot (John 1-10)

John is linking his parents being supportive with the notion of influence, so by being supportive he sees them as influential. Here he is talking about how their support makes him feel. He suggests that it is because they put his feelings before their own.

It makes me feel good because they're supporting me in what I want and they're not just being selfish and say 'you're doing this' (John 1-18)

For Del, help and support is the key way in which his mum enables him to be aspirational. This fits in with Del's overall narrative around care, whether that is the way he talks about looking after his animals, his career aspiration or indeed his mother's caring attitude towards him. Del not mentioning a father

figure at any point may be pertinent to this narrative. It suggests his mother has had to care of him and his siblings by herself, therefore enabling Del to associate his mother with taking care of him. Del also seems to get on very well with his older sister, again reaffirming to him the caring environment in which he lives.

She wants me to achieve whatever I want to achieve and she'll be there to help and stuff (Del 4-21)

My mum, she'll definitely end up helping me with things like say little things like talking to her she'll help me. If I needed help with like work with anything at school she'll help me (Del 1-6)

Both Megan and Pete talk about how their parents want them to do well at school. This appears to be at odds with their parent's own experiences of schooling, which Megan and Pete talk about in a very negative way. This suggests that Megan and Pete's parents support their children in being aspirational to give them chances and opportunities that they themselves did not have. In this extract Megan is describing the ways in which her parents support her. She indicates something negative, being badly behaved and this reaffirms the notion that her parents see behaviour as being important. Given their own behavioural issues at school, they do not want Megan making the same mistakes.

I guess they ask how my day is when I get home from school, they get quite mad at me if I'm bad behaved at parents evening (Megan 4-11)

For Sophie, the way in which her parents support her in being aspirational is by having a very relaxed attitude towards her learning and achievements. The language Sophie uses in the following extract suggests an almost detached attitude from her mother, as if she does not care.

I remember once I told my mum "oh I think I forgot to tell you I failed like five out of six of my English exams" and she was like "oh I don't care, like it's not bad, I know that you'll still doing well in English, I

don't mind that you failed five, that means nothing to me" (Sophie 4-24)

However, despite her use of language, this does not appear to be anything negative to Sophie. The attitudes of her parents enable Sophie to be fully empowered in becoming highly aspirational.

Another way in which all parents appear to help empower the participants is in their support of their educational aspirations, particularly the desire to progress into HE. Participants all felt that their parents would support them in their desire to go to university later in life. It is worth noting however that participants did not feel as if their parents were pushing them to go to university, it was more about supporting their aspirations as opposed to driving them.

The impact of support from older siblings on aspirations is less clear-cut. Megan, for example, has an older brother who is currently studying away at university. She indicates that he is of little influence and they rarely discuss university life. As Megan sees it, he is more interested in: *"He gets drunk a lot, he has a lot of girlfriends all the time and just really [...] "*

This fits in with the narrative of Pete who feels he is not close to his older sister. Indeed, she has recently moved back home which has frustrated him. He goes as far to say: *"just don't really speak to her, unless I want something"*.

At one point, in interview three, I note that he appears reluctant to want to engage in conversation about her and therefore I change the subject. This leaves an overall impression that, for Pete, his older sister has little positive

impact on his future aspirations. However, he talks about when she was badly behaved at school and “*she got excluded every day [...] yer she was just for smoking and stuff*”. This fits within a wider narrative around Pete wanting to be seen as more aspirational than his family. So, therefore, the experiences of his sister act as a motivator for Pete to become something else. This is discussed in greater depth under the super-ordinate theme ‘Broadening Horizons’.

This narrative compares to Del who appears to have a very close bond with his older sister. He seems to use his sister’s experiences to emulate his own. It also appears that his sister supports and helps develop his aspirations.

I’ve had a conversation with my sister about it as well because she said that one of her friends went to the same college and did the same thing as her and has now gone on to work, he worked in a zoo and now he works in a vet so [...] (Del 3-19)

This close bond with his sister enables Del to conclude that:

She’ll be able to like help me with like the vet thing she’ll be able to help me with just things in my life (Del 1-19)

For Sophie, as with Pete, the experiences of her older brother act as one of the key drivers for her to be highly aspirational. However, whilst Pete uses his sister’s negative experiences to drive his own more positive aspirations, Sophie uses her brother’s positive experiences to drive her own. In the following extracts note her use of language to describe her brother, offering him high praise:

My brother he’s like incredibly smart (Sophie 1-3)

He’s like head boy and he’s done all like these GCSEs early (Sophie 1-3)

My brother he’s crazy intelligent (Sophie 2-2)

This leaves Sophie feeling very pressured, she feels she has to live up to her brother, to become a high achieving, highly aspirational individual (this is discussed in greater detail under super-ordinate theme 'Broadening Horizons').

7.1.3 Theme: Loss of control

Within the lives of each participant there are experiences that create challenges, or indeed threats, which make them experience a loss of control in feeling empowered. The way they experience this loss of control varies between participants and their own individual lived experiences.

John is very clear that his main career aspiration is that of being a pilot. An encounter with the career advisor at school seems to have left him feeling less confident. He is now faced with either enrolling on to a course that costs "40 grand" or entering the RAF. Although he is a little vague as to the specifics of the course, he admits his parents will be unable to support him with the financial costs. This means he is faced with entering the RAF, something that he is reluctant to do. This has left John feeling as if he is losing control over his aspiration whilst acknowledging it is going to be a lot harder to achieve his aspiration. However, he seems to have developed a strategy to take back control and reduce the threat. Here John has decided that he is going to fly the cargo planes for the RAF so he does not have to fight. His language indicates he is trying to take back control; he is not suggesting that he will ask if he can fly the cargo plane, he is saying he will. The word *probably* still leaves an element of doubt in his mind though.

Well the reason why I didn't want to go to the military was I don't really want to fight and like everything, so I'll probably just fly the sort of planes that like drop the cargo then leave so I don't have to stay there for long (John 2-2)

The words of others are also a threat to Megan's feeling of empowerment. In the following extracts, Megan provides several examples of how her parents have tried to influence her in making choices. These influences are very much in a negative context. Note the varying use of negative phrases - boring, poor pay and ruined career.

Um sort of like when I wanted to be a teacher my dad would sort of encourage me out of it and so "oh no that's not a very good job" and stuff like that [...] he just says "it's not a very good job, you don't have a lot of money and it just like say a kid makes false allegations about you then your whole career's ruined" (Megan 1-12)

My dad said that it's sort of like just sitting and listening to people's problems which could be boring (Megan 1-12)

If I was to tell my mum or dad that I wanted to be a psychiatrist they kind of like have an old person view of things so they'd be like "oh why would you want to sit all day and listen to someone's problems?" and stuff like that so (Megan 3-17)

Now let us go back to an earlier comment from Megan:

I guess I believe in myself quite a lot because I guess when no one else believes in you, you have to believe in yourself (Megan 4-10)

This comment appears to be as a direct response to the ones before. She feels her parents are always discouraging her so she takes back control by trying to create her own sense of belief. It gives her the determination to do well and become aspirational.

Megan shares an example of how society in general has suppressed one of her aspirations, to work in the police. To Megan, she feels, as a woman, she would not be taken seriously working in the police force. Whilst Megan has been able to develop a strategy for reacting to her parents discouraging her

from certain professions, it seems this issue is more structural and she is unable to offer a strategy to deal with it.

I guess it's because like some people, like if you're a woman police officer, some guys still take you as a joke sort of to say "oh we're not going to follow what you do, you're just a woman" and stuff so
EB: Why do you think that?
Because I guess it's just what like some people are still not like coming to terms with the fact I guess men and women are equal
(Megan 4-3)

One of the key threats to Del and Pete are themselves, the threat is from within. Del knows he needs to be motivated if he wants to achieve things in his life. Even though he knows the consequences of a lack of motivation, he appears to struggle to react to it.

I wish I could be like more motivated to do my homework and the work and everything
EB: Why is that a wish?
Because if I don't at least help myself a bit then I might not be able to get the right grades to be able to do it (Del 3-20)

This lack of motivation seems to lead to feelings of frustration and boredom and is a frequent narrative of Del.

Because it kind of just bores me after a while, like I sometimes get annoyed with it (Del 2-15)

Like if there's nothing to do then it can be quite boring (Del 2-18)

Because we know it all then we can be quite bored or if we're doing a lesson that's just us writing and its complete silence then it can be quite boring (Del 2-18)

So, for Del, boredom can act as a threat to his feelings of empowerment. Pete is very similar, replacing motivation with the adjective lazy.

EB: Again, can you expand on that? Why do you need pushing do you think?

Because I'm quite lazy!

EB: Why do you think you are lazy?

Because if there's no purpose to it I wouldn't really do it so (Pete 2-11)

In this quote Pete is suggesting it is out of his control, by admitting to being lazy he is losing control of the situation, it is as if he cannot help it.

I don't think I'd get anything done, I think I'll just be just sitting at home doing nothing but yer

EB: So, if you had a choice is that what you would rather?

It's not what I'd rather do it's what I probably would do not like by choice (Pete 1-16)

Pete applies the concept of being lazy to his career aspiration, to become a footballer. Again, he is aware he is lazy but seems unable to react to it. He needs to work hard and train regularly but he finds it too much effort.

EB: So, what do you think you need to do like now to reach these hopes?

Try hard and actually like train every day

EB: So, are you doing that now?

No not really! It's like too much effort (Pete 3-19)

This ultimately leads Pete to conclude that it is unlikely he will become a professional footballer; he is hoping it will be more by good fortune than hard work. In this sense, he becomes one of the people Sophie describes as “*they just think like they cannot really try hard and somehow like get an amazing job somewhere*”. Similarly, John notes that:

Every little kid dreams to be a footballer but I don't think they want to now because obviously the possibility of being like a world class footballer is like zero to like, it's nearly impossible (John 4-6)

The reason as to why Pete might aspire to something that he feels is unreachable is discussed under the super-ordinate theme 'Broadening Horizons'. Although Pete is the only participant who outright states he does not think he will become what he aspires to be, there is a pragmatic acknowledgement from other participants of the possible challenges they face to being in control. Sophie, for example, acknowledges the competitive nature of her aspiration to become a dancer. Despite this, she still aspires to such an aspiration and believes she can achieve it. John is similar, he is pragmatic enough to acknowledge he is faced with a major challenge in becoming a pilot (joining the RAF) but still believes he will become a pilot.

One of the ways in which participants feel a loss of control is through their experiences at school. This is something that is prevalent throughout. Participants often talked about how they struggled to do their homework and how they found it difficult to accept some of the school rules. These issues revolved primarily around their freedoms and how school impinges on them. Here John is discussing the conflict he has with the school about his colour of shoes. It is like a battle for control, who will give in first? He feels victorious.

Like last year I had like black shoes but they had a brown sole and I kept on getting told off for it but my mum didn't want to buy any new shoes so I kept on coming in with them

EB: And what happened? What was the outcome?

They just gave up in the end

EB: Why do you think they gave up then?

I dunno, cause I kept on walking in with them because like [...] Well they're just like "oh you can't be wearing them" so I just walk past, I was like "ok I'll get some new ones tomorrow" even though I never did, I just kept saying I'll get them tomorrow (John 3-8)

This is an important aspect of their narratives because of the potential to suppress aspirations, to cause resentment and the desire of participants to stay in control of their lives. This was no more apparent than in a long, passionate narrative from Sophie in interview three, where she discussed the

battle she had had with the school over their decision to not allow pupils the right to dye their hair. To Sophie, the school were taking something away from her, part of her identity. She feels as if she has lost something, part of herself has gone.

[...] It just became a part of me over time [...] It's just, I feel comfortable with coloured hair rather than just like boring dull like brown and black and stuff so basically coloured hair is big part of who I am [...]. I was like about to cry because I just felt they were taking something from me, it was like a massive part of me and they were just stopping me from allowing to show that side of myself [...] I just feel boring now like I see people with amazingly coloured hair and I just want to like dye my hair all the time [...]. I just want to have like bright red hair again because it makes me feel happy (Sophie 3-10)

In my first meeting with Sophie we talked about her future plans:

We're kind of just expected to always like think about what we're going to do when we're older, like you have to think about it now like rather than just like you're 14 years old you're still a child, you don't have to think about all these crazy things. They just expect us to like act like adults even though we're barely teenagers (Sophie 1-20)

There is resentment in the language Sophie uses. She is young, why should she have to think about her future adult life? The way in which she uses *crazy* suggests the ridiculousness of expectations placed on her.

This lack of thought for the future can be a threat to the empowerment of participants as it feels out of their control; it is an unknown. This seemed to represent the views of participants in general. Not only do they not know what the future holds, they do not overly think about it. Essentially, they are deferring thinking about their future to a later date.

I haven't really thought about it a lot (Pete 3-18)

I don't really think about it to be honest as much (Del 4-18)

I don't really know what I want to do with my life (Megan 1-1)

This can leave confusion and uncertainty in the minds of participants. Megan talks about her future educational plans with little certainty.

I dunno, I like to think I'll probably stay on here and 6th form depending on what topics they're doing at the time or go on to college or something and then yer I don't really know (Megan 2-3)

Del's views are very similar, again showing signs of uncertainty.

Yer I at first, I was originally thinking college and then uni but I'm not sure if I want to do college or 6th form. I think I'll probably do 6th form but I'm not sure (Del 4-8)

Even when John begins to research his future options, it seems to leave him more confused than when he started. Note John's preference for finding the answers online, given the predominance technology plays in his life:

EB: Have you spoken to anyone yet about what you actually need to do?

No, I've looked on the internet a couple of times but all the answers are kind of mixed up, some people say this and some people say that (John 1-9)

Whilst Del has done some research into how to become a vet, he admits he "can't even remember what I looked at". This leads to a broader confusion concerning careers advice. Participants did not appear to be sure whether the school had a careers advisor and if it did, exactly who it was. Megan for example, appeared unsure.

I think we get that in year 11 [...] I think Miss Hope, maybe she's like the careers advisor who like helps us with our work experience and stuff (Megan 4-8)

Whilst Sophie is aware of the presence of a career advisor, she suggests that she and her peers do not care – “*that's for another day*”.

We have a careers advisor but I don't think anybody really cares too much about that sort of thing at the moment. Everyone's just focused on the next test that we will be doing so we've never really talked to the Careers Adviser about anything. If we want to we can but we've never really done it (Sophie 4-17)

Sophie is coming back to this idea of deferring thoughts about her future. She lives in the now, taking each challenge at a time, thinking about the future is for another day. In this quote, she talks about her thought process over her career choices. She breaks it down to very short segments of time, a day.

It's mainly about how like as each day goes. I kind of see which one I'd rather be doing, if I'd rather do one one day then I'll just end up doing it and see where it takes me (Sophie 2-1)

John also suggests a step-by-step process, taking one major challenge at a time.

EB: So, what about post GCSEs, have you thought past GCSEs yet?
No, not really
EB: When do you think you will do?
At GCSE probably! (John 4-13)

This suggests that the young people find it hard to look too far into the future; the future for them is tomorrow or the next major challenge such as GCSEs. Despite this uncertainty, this does not mean the young people face the future with undue fear. One of the primary reasons for this is that they see their

future choices as something they are deferring, therefore it is just simply something they will think about later. They are upbeat about their chances in life and seem determined (in varying levels) to do well. So, although the uncertainty of the future is a challenge, it is not a challenge that appears to scare them. They still ultimately feel in control.

7.2 Super-ordinate theme: Familiarity

This super-ordinate theme discusses the direct link between everyday experiences and aspirations. This close link enables the young people to express aspirations that are familiar to them through their everyday lives. Given their familiarity with experiences that are intrinsically linked with future career choices, it becomes hardly surprising that Del aspires to become a vet, Pete a professional footballer, Sophie a professional dancer and so on.

Within this super-ordinate theme there are three ordinate themes. The first discusses the ways in which aspirations, particularly around careers, are formed within the norms of everyday life. The second theme discusses the ways in which participants find a 'happy place' to feel comfort in familiarity. The third theme demonstrates how these aspirations are then reaffirmed or suppressed through the experiences of others.

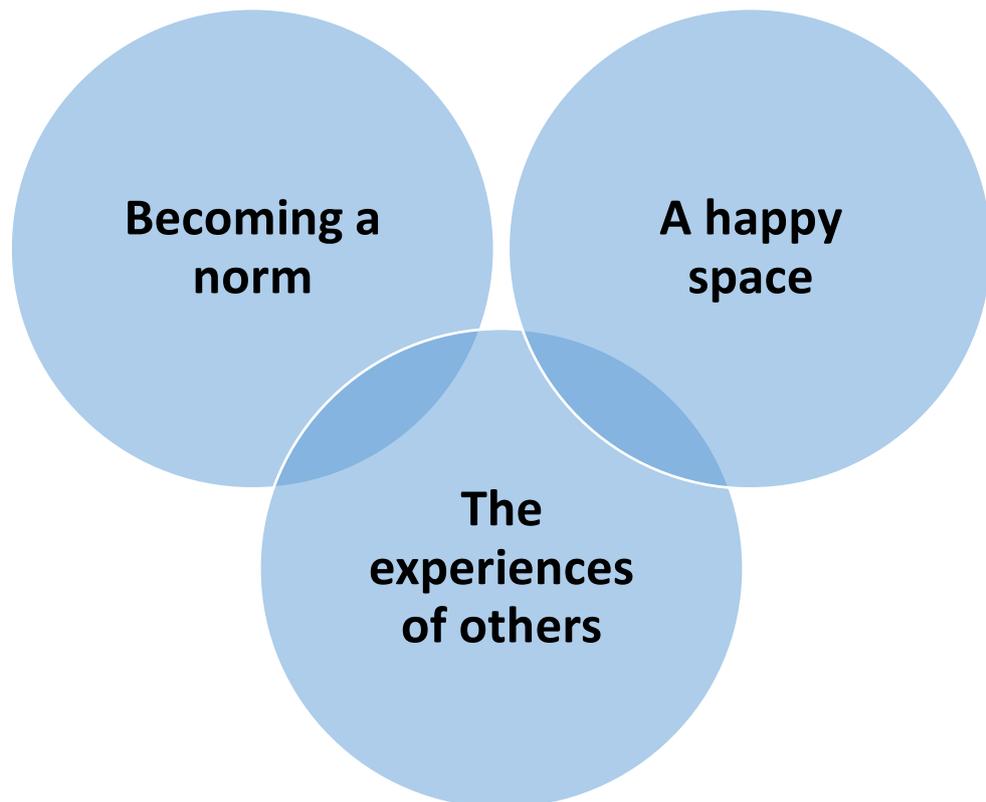


Figure 10: Super-ordinate theme: Familiarity

7.2.1 Theme: Becoming a norm

I've never enjoyed school, I don't think I've ever wanted to go, there's never been a time where I'm really excited to go to school. I've never wanted to go but there's just a part of me that just goes anyway because I've just grown up just thinking got to go to school today. It's just been a part of my life, so I think if I didn't go to school that would be a lot better because I don't enjoy it (Sophie 3-17)

The above quote from Sophie demonstrates the power of norms and familiarity. She admits she does not enjoy school, in fact, life would be better if she did not go to school. However, going to school is part of everyday life, it is just something she does. As I will demonstrate, many of the participants' aspirations, particularly career-wise, can be clearly traced back to this idea of a norm, of being part of everyday experiences in their life (whether in the past or in the present).

Del provides an example, frequently discussing the link between the desire to become a vet and a common family scenario of growing up looking after animals.

I had a cat which I used to spend like all of my time with and used to be like my best friend. I guess had to get her put down because she had cancer. That kind of made me want to be a vet even more because I wanted to help animals I guess (Del 3-17)

Just been around animals or like say looking after the cat palliatively and we, [pause] a couple of months ago as well we had a dog that had to get put to sleep because she has a collapsed larynx or something, yer it blocked his airways yer that made me want to be a vet more as well (Del 4-4)

Notice that Del talks about how his cat was his best friend, creating a very close personal attachment between the past and his aspiration to become a vet. This gives Del the desire to care for animals. Note Del's use of the word *palliatively*, suggesting not only his familiarity with animals but a familiarity with, and a confidence of, more technical phrases of illness.

The aspiration to work in a caring profession also seems to stem from his family life. His mother, whilst not working with animals, works in a caring profession. This notion of caring appears throughout Del's narrative, particularly when he talks about his mother. This may be the core, underlying reason for his aspiration to become a vet. It is his way of applying the caring family environment in which he lives to his own aspirations. He is demonstrating his caring nature through his love of animals. This is given credence because he thinks that his younger sister also aspires to look after animals. In the following extract, Del talks about the selfless nature of his mother:

Yer like she always puts herself, puts us over herself. If we ever need to like, say we need something then she'll kind of get it I guess. Yer she'll always support us even if it means not having to support herself
EB: Can you think of an example when that's happened?

Say when, like my sister was up at college, she had to give her some money to get food because my sister didn't have a job and by doing that we kind of couldn't I guess go to places (Del 2-11)

Whilst growing up with animals might be the building block for his desire to become a vet, these blocks are being built upon all the time, allowing Del to become more and more comfortable in his career aspiration. Within school he talks about the simple act of watching a video providing him with further motivation. He has also decided to undertake work experience within a veterinary surgery. He goes horse riding 'every week' (his sister owns two horses) and given the travel time involved in this pursuit, he is clearly demonstrating a commitment. In the final interview, I asked him what he was doing in the forthcoming half-term. He responded with: "*I'll obviously go and see the horses*". The way in which Del uses the word *obviously* suggests horse riding is very much a norm within his life. This is reemphasised by horse riding being the only thing he mentions when talking about half-term, suggesting whatever else he is doing, it is not as important to him as seeing the horses.

For John, his experiences are similar, although in his case it is familiarity with technology rather than animals that is his driving force behind his career aspirations. Both Del and John relate their earliest childhood memories to these familiarities. Here John can articulate points in his childhood that began his fascination with technology. Note how these experiences appear on the face of it to be chance encounters, something very embryonic. The use of *that is literally it* suggests something unplanned.

I think because my dad brought the PS2 when it came out and I think he like got bored so I think he gave it to me so I started playing PS2 (John 4-4)

EB: Like what was the, you suddenly thought oh my god I want to be a pilot, what, how did you come to that sort of thought?
I think that on a game I flew a plane and I liked it. I think that is literally it (John 3-26)

John appears to suggest that by aspiring to become a pilot enabled him to grow, to see himself not as a little kid anymore who did not care but as an aspiring individual.

When I was little I didn't really care what I wanted to do. I think it was year 5 which I started thinking about being a pilot (John 4-6)

He takes this further when talking about an experience with a flight simulator and how he competed against and beat a 30-year-old. The result of this being:

It means that at a young age I'm already quite good at flying, it's not real but it's the closest I'll ever get at the moment and its success that I can actually fly a plane (John 1-11)

This is important to John because he is starting to associate his fascination for technology with being successful, further reaffirming his enjoyment and belief. He can beat an adult in a flight simulator, to him that is success. On another occasion, he links the notion of success with aspirations by suggesting that if he is successful at computer coding at school it might lead to him owning his own computer company later in life.

This is also a belief held by Pete, who wants to become a professional footballer. His life appears to very much revolve around football, whether that be playing, practicing, playing football games on his Xbox, selecting friendship groups based on their like or dislike of football, as a means of emulating his father and so on. He describes a time when he won a football tournament as being a time when he has been successful. Being the goalkeeper, he was particularly keen to stress the role he played in the team's success, letting in only one goal in ten games. To him, winning at football gives him a sense of pride, that he is good enough; he can achieve something. To Pete, part of his narrative around football is physicality and his

belief that he is strong (in our last interview he talks about how he has just started attending a gym): *“I’m just really quick so I outpace the strikers a lot and just get the ball”*.

This physicality is reflected in another of his career aspirations to become a policeman. For Pete, although a doctor may help people, he rejects that aspiration based on a lack of physicality. It is as if being a doctor would not allow him to display his physical strength and therefore he seeks a career which would value his strength.

It’s kind of like a physical thing whereas like, I don’t know, a doctor, you’re just in a massive building and just walking around helping people (Pete 3-22)

Physicality also seems to play out in the rough and tumble of school life. Pete wants to become a policeman because he wants to help people. Here he is articulating an example of how he helps people. He is acting as the mediator, someone who can break up fights at will. So, Pete is very much linking an everyday experience to a career aspiration. He does this though the identification of something very personal, his physicality.

EB: Can you give any like examples where you can think of where you help people?

Just stopping like stopping them from getting hurt or something [...]. Well like if there’s a fight I just like jump in and break them up (Pete 4-4)

John and Pete both feel empowered by their familiarity with technology and football respectively. It gives them belief that they can realise their ‘dream’ jobs and their experiences only go to reinforce this belief.

John and Pete are also similar in that their day-to-day experiences seem to be all consuming, technology and football take over their lives. What is interesting in both their accounts is that their familiarity with technology and football may in fact, at this stage in their lives, be a barrier to their aspirations. Let us look at these passages taken from John:

EB: And when do you think you need to make [...], you said 'I haven't really thought about like past GCSEs'?

I probably have to think about it, now would be a good time but I probably won't

EB: Why not?

Because technology takes over my life (John 4-13)

EB: And what do you think's the biggest influence on how you're going to be in the future?

I don't know, school and Xbox, like school saying "oh do your homework" and everything but the Xbox just cancelling all that out

EB: What do you mean cancelling it out?

So, do your homework, so it's like I might do the homework, play Xbox, nah, can't be arsed to do the homework (John 4-22)

EB: When do you think you need to then?

Now, but I haven't

EB: Ok, how come you haven't then?

Dunno, just Xbox, I'm too busy playing GTA5¹⁶ (John 3-27)

John knows he needs to be thinking about his future choices but acknowledges that technology is taking over. It is almost like it has become an addiction, taking over his life. He cannot fight it, he knows he needs to do his homework but he just cannot help it, he has to play his Xbox. Being *too busy* to think about his future suggests playing Xbox is almost like his job. He goes on...

No one really ever speaks about business, we just speak about the present, Xbox, computer, Xbox (John 4-16)

¹⁶ Grand Theft Auto is an open world computer game.

There are several things to note in this short passage. Firstly, the reference he makes to thinking about his future as *business*. This seems to create a distinct separation between his lived world and his need to think about the future. This is emphasised by his use of time, *the present*. John and his friends compartmentalise planning for, and thinking about, the future as something separate from their everyday lives and what matters to them in that life. His repetition of *Xbox* indicates living in the now and playing Xbox is what matters.

For Pete, this all-consuming nature of familiarity becomes even more powerful. Here Pete is articulating a potential future where he is *doing nothing*, based on his enjoyment of Xbox. He seems to see this as a real possibility, it is a path his life may go down, he is aware of it but how much is he willing to do something about it?

EB: So now picture what you think life will be like in 10 years
Probably going to university or like or just sitting at home doing nothing!

EB: Ok! Why are you sitting at home doing nothing then?

Er because just sitting at home doing nothing or playing on the Xbox or something

EB: Why do you think your life might be like?

Because I kind of enjoy playing the Xbox (Pete 1-5)

It is important to note that in the passage above, when Pete refers to playing his Xbox he often refers to playing FIFA, a football simulation game. The use of computer games as a way of gaining familiarity is something prevalent in Johns account as well:

On GTA, like my Xbox live name has pilot in it but um like I'm a good pilot on GTA5 and they're like stop landing properly, I'm like I need to practice (John 3-28)

Here John is very much using his online world to live out his real-world desires. He sees the game as something more serious; he needs to practice his skills. The way in which he talks about his friends suggests he feels an element of pride or prestige in his abilities, the way he dismisses their request to *stop landing properly*. In another conversation about a flying experience he had with his dad, John is keen to tell me that he flew in a plane owned by the owner of a renowned restaurant chain, someone who was friends with Richard Branson. This adds an element of prestige to his aspirations, it is something that brings him into contact with people who have elevated levels of material wealth.

One of Sophie's main careers aspirations is to work in the performing arts, preferably in dance. As with the boys, this stems from everyday experiences both in the past and the present. What seems to separate Sophie is her deep sense of passion in talking about her experiences. She spends a great deal of her spare time involved in performing arts, whether that is practising for and performing in dance shows, taking music lessons or playing in the band she has recently joined. For Sophie, the link between familiarity and future aspirations is based around the notions of fun and happiness. She enjoys dance, it is a big part of her life so it is a natural process to want to peruse it as a career. In the following extract, Sophie mentions the word *happy* four times:

I don't know why I started enjoying dance but from kind of primary school I've always liked to dance but I never really realised it until secondary school that dance it just makes me happy when I'm dancing. Like if I've got me friends with me and we're in dance class and we just dance and it just makes me feel happy to just move around to music. It's just something that makes me feel all happy about myself and like if I'm sad I'll just dance and if I'm happy I'll dance anyway, it's just a really nice thing to do (Sophie 3-13)

Notice how she talks about dance making her feel happy about herself. This is an important comment because Sophie displays a very strong sense of

self-identity and dance seems to act as a remedy, it makes her feel good about herself and enables her to display her sense of worth. As with John and technology, it is almost like dancing is an addiction.

For Megan, the norms of day-to-day life have had a much more profound impact on her aspirations. Whilst she appears to have a broad range of career aspirations, they are generally focused on helping people. In the following extract, I ask Megan what experiences have created her aspiration to become a counsellor.

Well a lot of my siblings have been through like some like psychiatrists and stuff like that, maybe but (Megan 4-5)

She goes on...

One has got bad health, she can't really walk so I guess she's on benefits with her carer who's her boyfriend (Megan 4-19)

It is as if her aspirations are a way of rationalising the experiences of her siblings, giving her the chance to help others in similar circumstances. Although Megan's use of the words *maybe but* suggest she is reluctant to accept that thought, the impact of the experiences of her siblings are deep rooted. Mental health is clearly at the forefront of Megan's thoughts; it is part of her everyday lived experience. She talks about mental wellbeing as being a barrier to achieving her aspirations and health (particularly mental health) as being the most important thing in life. In the following quote, Megan is relating health and the impact it can have on being able to fulfil your potential. She has direct experience of this with her own siblings.

Without health, you're not going to be able to do what you want to do, whether it's like mental health or something. I guess it could affect you either way in you won't be able to fulfil your full thing, whatever you call it (Megan 2-17)

Of course, a close familiarity with an experience does not mean that the young person will always aspire to a relevant profession. Del provides the best example of this in his pursuit of a music career. In his experiences, familiarity with music seems to have bred contempt for it. In early interviews, he talks about the time he spends playing music and his aspiration to become a musician.

Every day I probably spend about sometimes it's just like 10-20 minutes but other times if I just want to practice the songs I know or learn new songs I can be for like an hour or two [...] like at lunchtimes I go to practice guitar with some of my mates and I sometimes play piano (Del 1-14)

By the final interview note the change of language, he has lost his motivation, he doesn't care, he longer wants to be a musician:

I kind of I like learning new songs but I just get bored of it and I don't really feel motivated to do it (Del 4-10)

I don't know, just kind of not motivated anymore, don't really care about it I guess (Del 4-21)

For Del, the turning point appears to have been taking GCSE music. To him, this seems to have taken music from something enjoyable that he does in his spare time, to something more formulaic and repetitive. This lack of motivation for playing music is symptomatic of his wider frustrations in life.

7.2.2 Theme: A happy space

Whether it is a physical space or an activity, all participants talk about a 'happy space', somewhere where they feel comfortable. In each case, this happy space is related to their hobbies or activities that they enjoy. So, through their happy space, hobbies seem to start creating the grounding for some of their career aspirations. In all cases, this space links in some way to

their future career aspirations. By seeking comfort in this space, it seems to reaffirm their aspirations

John provides an example of this. His hobbies, indeed passions, are computers and his Xbox. In this extract, he is clearly suggesting that his happy space is his Xbox.

EB: Where would you say you feel the happiest?

On the Xbox [...]

EB: Why is that the happiest place?

Because in GTA5 you get to do what you want, whereas in real life you don't and also in GTA5 you get to fly planes (John 3-28)

As well as giving him the opportunity to fly planes, his Xbox seems to give him a freedom that he does not get in the 'real' world, somewhere where he is free from constraints. He describes this in more vivid detail in interview four.

Well kind of, it's like an 18 game so you can kind of guess what stuff you can do. It's an open world game so you can get in cars, run people over, you can do like anything, you can get in a jet, fire missiles at anything (John 4-4)

This freedom to do what he wants is very much at odds with his lived world and the obvious constraints he feels. Again, he often relates these frustrations to technology. Now observe the different tone of language he uses to describe his real world, sense his frustrations:

EB: What's like a typical family meal you have [...]?

[...] we'll sit at the dining table which is annoying because I have to turn my Xbox down because my Xbox is like right next to the dining table. That's why I'll be glad when I get my room so I won't have to turn it down, I can just leave it on when I go and eat dinner (John 2-16)

Another way John uses technology as a happy space is through music. Note again the way in which it allows him to get away, to escape. It is almost medicinal, the way it makes him feel better, how it cheers him up.

I am happy when I listen to music because whenever like my parents are like shouting at home or whatever, I just listen to music and it like cheers me up

EB: When you say shouting, what at each other?

No just like at my brother or sister or me and then like I just listen to music and like blank it all out and then like music cheers me up (John 2-10)

However, something happens to John over the year that I know him. His frustrations seem to be subsiding; he is more pragmatic. This appears to boil down to a decision taken by his family to convert half the garage into a spare bedroom/gaming room for him. His happy space now seems to be a physical space as well as an online space. This only goes to re-emphasise the growing role that technology plays in his life.

One of the key ways in which the idea of a happy space is created is as a reaction to boredom. This is apparent in Del's account. As with John, his space appears to be built around getting away from day-to-day life. He often talks about boredom, here he is talking about a typical weekend and associating boredom with the inability to socialise with his friends, as if he is stuck at home whilst everyone else is enjoying themselves.

EB: Ok, what's a typical, what would you describe as a typical weekend [...]

Sometimes quite boring

EB: When you say boring, in what way is it boring?

Like if there's nothing to do then it can be quite boring because sometimes other people will be doing something so you won't really be able to go out with your friends or (Del 2-18)

His animals seem to act as a comfort. He talks about being at his happiest when he is with his animals and in the following extract I talk to Del about his frustrations and boredom. His reaction to boredom is to go straight to his animals.

Then I'll probably just, like say because we've got two bunnies now, I'll just get them out in the garden and mess around with them or bring them inside (Del 2-19)

Sophie also uses this notion of boredom to reaffirm her enjoyment of music:

I play ukulele now and it's just a fun thing to do. Like if I'm bored I'll just like pick up my ukulele and I'll just play something (Sophie 4-6)

Another way in which Megan articulates career aspirations related to day-to-day life is through her recent enjoyment of reading. She attributes her aspirations to work in a crime related field (such as a detective or a mystery journalist) directly to her interest in "*those sorts of books*". To Megan, gaining knowledge through fiction gives her the curiosity to want to explore relevant career options. Reading also seems to act as Megan's happy space. Like Del and Sophie, Megan links her growing interest in reading to being bored and seeking a way to escape that boredom. For Megan and the other participants, seeking escape from boredom seems to develop into something more serious, it starts to become a career aspiration.

One of the ways in which boredom seems to manifest itself in the lives of participants is through their school life. Here John is talking about his dislike of learning a foreign language.

In years 7, 8, 9, you had to do languages and, I know you're supposed to learn languages, it's good for you like but I found it so boring and I hated it (John 3-6)

This is like Sophie's description of Maths. As with John, Sophie appears to associate boredom with something she doesn't care about.

We just learn boring things about how to calculate the different volumes of this 3D shape and I'm like "I don't care" [...] it's just always learning how to do this learning, how to do and applying it in this test so it's just always, it always feels like the same sort of thing to me (Sophie 4-15)

This type of narrative is something that is common throughout. Once again, within their school lives, their familiarity and comfort with a subject seems to take them away from this boredom. Sophie, for example, talks about how she prefers practical learning, John describes his best subject as computing and Pete thinks P.E. is his favourite lesson.

For Sophie, her space also appears to be because of its transformative qualities, as if she is a different person after dancing.

Like when I'm like upset or anything I can just like dance and it makes me feel like so much better (Sophie 1-7)

In this longer extract, Sophie takes this further and begins to suggest not only does dance allow her to find happiness in herself but it brings happiness to others. Her use of positive, uplifting language, again emphasises the transformative qualities of her happy space.

EB: Where would you say your favourite place is, have you got somewhere you like to be the most that makes you the happiest?
Probably either in school, like in dance with one or two of my friends, like no teachers in there just putting some music on and just dancing. That's like a really really fun place to be and playing music with my friends, like either performing is probably one of the best places I want to be. I love just sitting down and just performing for people because it just makes me so happy watching them smiling while watching me perform something, so either dancing with my friends or performing to other people that I don't necessarily know (Sophie 3-22)

The reference to *no teachers* in this space is important as it indicates a reference to isolation which is important to Sophie. Throughout our meetings, she makes several references to isolation and in interview three states that “*I don’t specifically like people*”. However, although she refers to isolation, she also discusses:

In my class of dance there’s like a lot of people that I really like and they’re all like passionate about dance (Sophie 3-19)

Because this group of people share her passion, this suggests that her happy space contains people with a like-minded outlook, being surrounded by people who share the same passion as her gives an extra layer of comfort. What dance also does is take Sophie away from the pressures of the academic environment, the expectations. It is somewhere she can be herself. In the dance hall she is just a dancer, just one of the crowd, not this highly academic, high achieving young person.

For Pete, this happy space is a physical space, it is the field. As with the other young people, this is not only because it is a means of engaging with his passion (football), it is because of its qualities as somewhere he can “*just forget about like everything that’s happening and just focus on playing*”. This gives the perception, as with Sophie and dance, the field is somewhere he can transform. For Pete, given that he thinks he is a “*decent*” player, the field is his outlet, it is somewhere he enjoys being and feels good about himself, somewhere he can portray his sense of self in a positive way. Winning on the pitch is what matters.

EB: Why are you happy when you win then?

Because it feels like I’ve achieved something and like I’m good enough to like actually win (Pete 2-8)

7.2.3 Theme: The experiences of others

Well if like, if you was like brought up with a family that was like in jail of something then you might like get influenced by them or something and then they'll make you do like bad decisions, get yourself into trouble and stuff (Pete 2-6)

This quote by Pete emphasises the impact that the experiences of others can have on young people. In this theme, I talk about that although career aspirations may develop through familiarity, these aspirations are re-affirmed through interaction with others and their experiences. The process is also described by John:

Your friends doing different things. So, like they could play football and you're like "oh I'll join in playing football". So, you play football and then you're like, I'm going to try and do what they do because you like what they do so you might try and do their job (John 4-14)

John contextualises this within his own life, talking about the role his friends and family have in his life. John appears to be linking his motivation to their happiness, as if it is contagious, their happiness rubs off on him.

EB: What motivates you then to?

Just the people around, like they're happy so I get motivated

EB: When you meant people, who do you mean by people?

My friends and family (John 4-23)

John then reaffirms this in his perception of his parent's happiness. The use of *but* in the following quote suggesting he views his parents' happiness as something more important than being rich: "*we're not rich, we're just doing good I think but they're happy as they are*".

This concept of the actions of parents being contagious is also apparent in Pete's account. For Pete, it is about belief: "*My parents, like if they believe in*

me then I'll like try harder". He associates his parent's belief in him to the idea that they "come to all my football games". So, Pete is linking parental belief with his career aspiration, to become a professional footballer. Perhaps Pete has figured that football is his way of getting recognition off his parents which then reinforces his aspiration to become a footballer.

Sophie also applies the idea of the experiences of others being contagious to her love of dance:

I don't really take inspiration from watching things or reading things. Mainly it's just I see other people doing things like in person and I really just want to like aspire to doing what they're doing. At the moment, so people will come in with dance workshops with us and they'll tell us how they've been, like big dance companies, and that sort of thing like aspires me to think like could be me in a few years and its mainly just like real people talking about it not on books or DVDs (Sophie 4-7)

By describing the people as *real* she is bringing to life her aspirations, making them seem more realistic, if these people can make it, why can't I? It gives her that belief that it could be her up on stage in years to come.

What is important about that quote from Sophie is that whilst she rejects taking inspiration from watching (in a media sense) or reading things, other participants do take inspiration and ideas from such processes. Pete articulates that his aspiration to become a lawyer primarily comes from watching a drama series on Netflix. Megan also takes her aspiration to write crime novels from her recent enjoyment of reading similar books. In fact, reading has given Megan the aspiration to write a book later in life.

For both John and Sophie, it seems an initial one-off experience snowballed into something more serious. Sophie talks about performing gigs with her

band in the local town and how this had stemmed from an initial casual invite from one of her friends to come along to see what the band were like. John shares something similar:

My friend that likes cars Mark [...] He used to like planes and then I used to go round his house all the time. He used to come round my house, we were like best friends and then he was the one who got me into planes but then he was like cars not planes

EB: So, you say you went round his house and stuff?

We were best friends. So, like we were with each other like all the time. He used to love planes and he used to go to air shows all the time and then like I used to do the air shows with him as well and then I kind of got in to planes but then I got into them even more after he like finished with them (John 4-6)

The experiences of his friend seem to have started a curiosity which grew as time went on. He appears to overtake his friend in being interested in planes, so whilst his friend drifted onto something else, he became more and more fascinated.

One of the ways some participants appear to use the experience of friends or peers is to motivate them to become more aspirational. For Del this comes in the form of a friend who aspires to become a vet. Whilst he agrees that they can support each other, he also talks about the competitive nature of having a similar aspiration, discussing that they had both applied to the same company to undertake work experience and he had been selected over his friend. It gave Del the 'bragging rights', something he could hold over his friend.

Bragging rights is something Pete talks about. Target grades seem to produce a competition amongst friends and having high targets gives him the ability to feel superior, to be able to mock his friends.

EB: And how do you feel about all these targets at school?

Well it makes you like, well I joke around with my friends and if they have like lower targets I call them dumb! So, there's like competition (Pete 4-6)

Sophie, however, describes an experience at school that specifically rejects the idea of target grades creating bragging rights or competition between peers.

They put our grades up every [...], like they'll chose a random student and put all of the levels were getting at the moment up on the board and then they say like it's like a bit of competitiveness to make you want to be smarter than everybody else (Sophie 4-3)

Despite the school trying to encourage an element of competition, Sophie firmly rejects this idea as something unfair, unpleasant, something that shouldn't happen to young people of her age.

I don't really take notice of it because I just think it's a bit, you shouldn't like compare like these 14 and 15 year olds to each other [...]. I just don't really think about it that much and no one else really thinks about it either because it's just a bit, it's not nice to get other people saying, oh look I'm smarter than you, I've got a higher level than you in this because it's not really how it works, just because you get a higher level than someone doesn't mean you're so much smarter than them (Sophie 4-4)

What seems to separate the experience of Sophie from Pete and Del is the context in which the competition takes place. For Pete and Del, bragging rights are something done in a much more informal, fun sort of manner. This compares to the much more structured, forced competition that Sophie describes.

Despite her rejection of this element of competition, competition is a key word used in Sophie's narrative. As Sophie sees it, peers see her as the person to beat in class. She equates the experience to a race; every time

they catch her she wants to run faster, to pull away again. This seems to spur her on to become more aspirational.

Everyone else kind of always wants to be on the same level as me, then once they've got to the level that I am I'm just like pushing myself to be even better than them. So, it's kind of like a race between people to see who can get like the highest mark in a test or something (Sophie 2-5)

What is interesting about Sophie's reference to a race is that it appears to be a race inside her head. Externally, she is reluctant to think of it as a race for fear of upsetting peers. The language Sophie uses suggests others know she is doing better than them and she knows she is doing better than them.

Most of the time I don't really discuss it with them because if I do bring up something, like I got a really good mark in a test or like I got a really good target level then I'm worried about them feeling bad about themselves because they'll think well I only got C target and I got lower level than you. Even though they already know that I'm above them they, I don't want to be like too intrusive about the whole fact I'm doing better at school than them, so I try not to talk about it as much as I can unless I really need to but yer (Sophie 3-4)

The following quote provides a further example of how Sophie appears to internalise challenges, to put the pressure on herself. It is what she thinks that is important, not the perceptions of others.

As long as I get good grades that I'm happy with myself. Then I don't really care what other people think about that which is a bit better because it's a bit less pressure on me but I like also put the pressure on myself (Sophie 3-6)

Despite this notion of competition, in other interviews Sophie seems to suggest her academic achievements are more down to good fortune than hard work and it is something inherited from her father. John seems to share this viewpoint, he sees himself as naturally clever.

The multiple use of the word *envy* in the quote below suggests Sophie feels like her academic ability is at times a burden and she feels the pressure of being the top dog. Sometimes she just wants to be like the others, to be less aspirational, to settle for less. Using the race analogy, she just wants to sit in the pack.

Some points where I just thought, I just don't want to do anything in my future, I want to just like get like a normal like a minimum paying job and just be happy to myself [...] I kind of envy people who don't get, who don't have like amazing grades [...] and they're happy just having like an OK job and like a family. Sometimes I kind of envy people like that who just kind of go along with how, like go along with the flow (Sophie 3-25)

However, something always 'kicks in' and she realises she is more aspirational than that:

Then I realise that that's not who I am, I'm not that sort of person. So, I just kind of get myself to start like believing in myself again knowing that I can do sorts of things that I want to do (Sophie 3-25)

Many participants appear to use emulation to feel comfort in an aspiration. Del for example uses his sister's experiences to reinforce his own aspirations.

EB: When you say your sister's been there in what sense has she been there?

Work experience as well

EB: Oh ok, she went to the same [...]?

Yer and she went to another place as well

EB: Oh, that's funny so how's that helping, how do you think that might help you then?

It helped me decide because I knew that that place was definitely going to be good, well she thought anyway (Del 4-3)

He is taking his sister's experiences almost as his own; he knows it will be good, based on his sister's experience. He takes it almost as a given, his

sister enjoyed it so of course he will. As well as work experience, he is also taking his sisters experience of college as something he wishes to emulate; he aspires to attend the same institution. In many ways, Del is using his sister's choices to feed his own. He is using the familiarity of her experience to reinforce his own plans. In doing so it gives him a belief that he can accomplish his aspirations.

Because I kind of feel like, because she's managed to do it I kind of feel a bit more like I'll be able to do it. I don't know why but yer (Del 1-20)

Sophie uses a similar approach to her father's experiences, almost seeing herself mirror her father at school, particularly around having the right mentality. In this quote, it is like she is talking about herself.

I think my dad was probably the same as me, like he always tried in class even though he had, cause like he went to grammar school and he always got like really good grades and stuff. But I think he was always, kind of had the right mentality to do things and he always tried doing things even if they took him like a long time (Sophie 2-13)

This mirroring of experience is evident in Pete's account. Because his father was a footballer, this gives Pete the encouragement to "*I guess want to be like him*". He also talks about the influence of his parents and following in their footsteps. However, as we will see in the super-ordinate theme 'Broadening Horizons', this mirroring of experience is extremely fragile for Pete and he gives every indication that he strives to become something else, to be better than his parents.

Whilst Del is emulating his sister's experiences, he seems to use his mother's experiences in a separate way. Whilst he may occasionally discuss his mother's experiences of HE, he does not feel it's had the same impact on him as his sister's experiences. Maybe Del finds it harder to associate with

his mother's HE experiences as it is further away from his lived world. His sister's experiences on the other hand are much more relevant to him as they are closer to his lived world, work experience is something in the now, he's been living it.

For Megan, it seems her brother, who is an undergraduate, shares very little of his experiences.

EB: Do you ever want to chat to him about it?

Not necessarily about university, I guess I don't really put much thought into it, it doesn't really cross my mind

EB: What do you think he would do if you wanted to ask questions, what would he do then?

I don't really know. I guess he'd just tell me about it and then just say um yer, just blunt answers I guess, I don't really know (Megan 2-16)

However, his experiences, at least financially, seem to have left an impression.

I guess, maybe I would want to get a temporary job first to get enough pay to go on to study because you get the typical students in university who have like no money, like my brother (Megan 3-19)

Megan frequently refers to the importance of money in her interviews, talking about as she gets older she will need to be more self-sufficient, her parents will not just buy her things. She also discusses her two older siblings who are at college and have part-time jobs. From the experiences of her family, it seems Megan is 'realistic' about life - you need to work hard to get what you want or need.

John seems to use the experiences of family and money to formulate his future. He appears to have a desire to be 'normal' rather than rich; in essence he is seeking to become middle-class. He talks about the role of

schooling being to “*help you survive*”, suggesting stability and security are important. This seems to relate to the experiences of his parents. To John, his parents are not rich but they are happy as they are. See how closely this relates to his perceptions of his future life as a pilot. He rejects the idea that pilots are rich and drive around in flash cars, they are just ‘normal’.

If I'm a pilot I'll probably be just doing well in life, like have enough money to keep up with like bills and stuff and then a little extra to buy stuff I like (John 1-7)

John however, does seem to contradict himself at times, expressing his desire to be richer than his parents, so that he can buy more technology. In this case, his familiarity with technology seems to be the driving force; he is basing the desire for material wealth on his interest in technology. It is not a big house or a sports car he wants, it is technology.

John, Pete and Del share experiences that demonstrate that experiences are very much contextualised by the lives in which they sit. Pete has recently changed friendship groups because his friends had stopped playing football and had become “*boring*”. He rejects them for a new group that are “*very active and play sport*”. He seems to have lost the comfort of familiarity and has actively sought to rectify this. His new friendship group represents what he wants to be, he is back to feeling that comfort.

Del has a similar experience with music, talking about how he and his friend had stopped playing guitar. He talks about how his friend was the first to give up, leading to himself giving up. So, for Del, rather than trying to regain the comfort of familiarity as Pete does, the experiences of others has led to him to “*get bored of it and I don't really feel motivated to do it*”. This reaffirms the idea that familiarity with music has bred contempt for it.

John has a chance encounter at work experience that seems to have alleviated some of his fears of entering the RAF:

When I was at work experience actually [...] the guy who owned the house was a pilot for like I think wasn't the RAF but he used to fly planes and stuff so I spoke to him and he said what to do and that was pretty influencing [...]

EB: When you say told you what to do, told you what like how you get into the RAF or?

Yer, because my dad said that obviously we couldn't do the course and that I didn't really want to go into the RAF, so he just gave me like other options to go to, like still in the RAF but like other routes that I didn't know of (John 4-4)

This encounter is important to John because he had been feeling like the options available to him were beginning to shrink. A bit like Pete and his friendship groups, this encounter appears to have given him his confidence back, he is more comfortable again with his aspiration to become a pilot.

Of course (as with the earlier theme of 'becoming a norm'), because a young person may gain familiarity through the experiences of others, that does not mean they will necessary aspire to be like that person, in a career sense. Indeed, no participant expressed a desire to seek future employment in the same field as their parents' current employment.

In talking to John about what his parents think of his aspiration to become a pilot he starts to talk about his dad...

They say it's good, it's a good job because my dad's he's a maintenance engineer at the moment but I don't really want to do that

EB: Ok, why don't you want to do that?

Dunno, it just seems boring. I don't mind going to work with him every now and then but I couldn't do it every day (John 1-10)

This exchange suggests he feels he can do better than aspiring to be like his dad, the way he describes being a pilot as a good job. The placement of *because* suggesting a superiority to his dad's job, reaffirmed by his use of the word *but*. The rejection of his dad's experiences appears to be based around the perception that it will be boring and repetitive. However, John ends up doing his work experience with his dad. Whilst he admits it was fun, he still rejects the idea of following in his footsteps. What his experiences of working with his dad did do was make him realise the tough reality of the work place. This appears to have suppressed his aspiration to run his own computer company.

Similarly, Del rejects his mother's occupation of working in the health care sector, as well as his sisters' preferred occupation. He talks about how he "*wouldn't be able to handle it*". So, for Del the very thought of getting a job like his mum is something he outright rejects, not because he perceives her profession to be in some way inferior but because of the possible emotional stress of such a profession. Megan's rejection of her father's profession is more straightforward, in her eyes it is a man's job.

Pete is the only participant who uses the career experience of a parent to specifically drive his own aspirations. His father playing for Arsenal reserves is clearly something that spurs Pete on, to be like his dad. However, his outright rejection of the life his father has lived, makes his desire to follow in his father's footsteps complex. It must be said that Pete does not seek to follow in his father's footsteps in terms of his father's current occupation. Perhaps because his dad only reached reserve level encourages Pete to go further, perhaps he wants to do it for his dad or maybe his dad encourages his son into football so he can relive his own missed opportunity?

7.3 Super-ordinate theme: Broadening Horizons

This super-ordinate theme discusses the ways in which the young people are using their aspirations to broaden their horizons. Within this super-ordinate theme there are two ordinate themes. The first discusses the ways in which the young people look at the lives of their families and those in their neighbourhood to encourage them to become more. Essentially, they are rejecting a narrative by saying, 'no, I want more than that'. The second theme discusses the ways in which participants are keen to distance themselves from their perceived lower-aspiring peers and thus see themselves as being more aspirational.

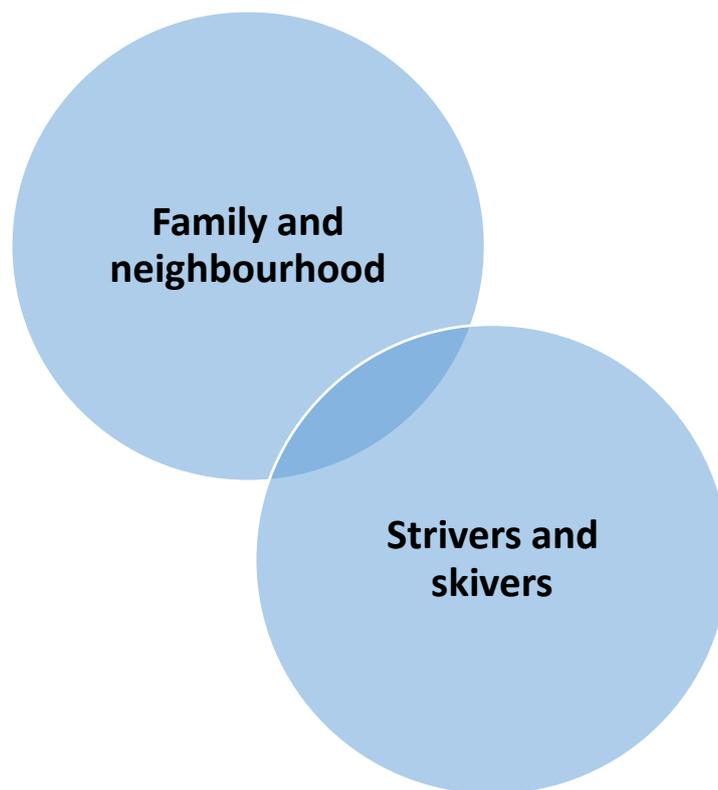


Figure 11: Super-ordinate theme: Broadening Horizons

7.3.1 Theme: Family and neighbourhood

Megan is highly aspirational. She works hard at school and wants to do well in life. This appears to be at odds with her lived world and her perceptions of it. I would like to take you back to the very start of this thesis and repeat the description Megan gave of her local area:

My area has a reputation for being I guess chavvy. Maybe people who are chavs don't really have a great attitude, don't really want to go to university, they just want to leave school, not do any extra study, just get a job, move into an apartment and stuff like that I guess (Megan 3-1)

She went on:

A lot of my area is just stuff like council flats and stuff like that so you're not really going to expect someone from like a council flat to go to university really (Megan 3-1)

You get a lot of teens that are like 14 years old and just walking around smoking and stuff like that and they don't have the right sort of attitude to go to like university simply because of like how they act (Megan 4-6)

So, her perceptions of her local environment are of negativity, of chavs, of bad attitudes, of negative stereotypes. If we now add some of her perceptions of her family, we see increasing levels of negative language. Note how she links her negative perceptions of her local environment to her parent's experiences through smoking.

When both of my parents were young they were quite bad behaved, like my dad used to smoke from a young age, my mum like she was just really badly behaved at school due to like I guess her life at home wasn't great so (Megan 4-18)

He [brother] doesn't live with us, he goes round and like I guess finds people and they drop litter, do things they shouldn't be doing (Megan 4-19)

If we now look at Pete's narrative we see some close similarities with Megan. Both Pete and Megan seem to articulate that it is the people in the local area that they resent. Here Pete, like Megan, is using the phrase "chavvy" in describing his local area.

EB: What is it about the area then?

I just don't really like it

EB: In what sense?

Just the people, like my neighbours

EB: Go on, has anything been happening, any examples of anything?

No, it's just like this areas like quite chavvy so

EB: In what way is it chavvy?

Just the people, that's it like all graffiti on the walls and stuff (Pete 3-23)

Pete shares some family experiences that seem to closely resonate with Megan's narrative. In the next quote for example Pete is talking about his parents. Note his use of language, he *hopes* he won't end up like them. That suggests there is an inner fear that he might: "*Well I hope that I won't start drinking and smoking like they do but yer*".

The reference to smoking is important as Pete seems to use smoking as a metaphor for taking the wrong path in life. Here Pete is using strong language to discuss the effects of smoking, linking it to feelings of disappointment with his father.

Disappointed in him [father], he still smokes now which is bad

EB: How do you feel about smoking then?

I don't like it, it ruins you (Pete 4-26)

This fear then replicates in his mind, if he follows in his parent's footsteps he might end up making the same mistakes.

EB: What might stop you from becoming a professional footballer?
It I start like smoking or drinking (Pete 1-12)

In the next quote Pete seems a bit more certain that he doesn't want to be like his father, using negative examples of his father's past life. What is interesting here is that in other parts of his narrative, Pete talks about how he looks up to his father and how he wants to emulate him career-wise. This seems to suggest a love-hate relationship between Pete and his father. He looks up to him in some senses whilst simultaneously rejecting his past mistakes.

Well, in school they were like troublemakers

EB: They were troublemakers?

Yer

EB: What have they told you then?

Well like my dad got in fights and stuff so

EB: Oh, did he and what difference do you think that makes to you then?

I don't want to be like him (Pete 3-16)

This gives us the idea that both Megan and Pete have looked around their lives and are firmly rejecting the discourse. They do not want to end up like their parents or like the other young people in their area. It seems to encourage them to be seen as highly aspirational. Both use the example of a university education. They both aspire to something that they feel young people in their local area do not aspire to, or are not given the chance to aspire to.

In this quote Megan is responding to a question about how she may be different to her parents. The use of *for a start* suggesting there are number of ways she doesn't want to end up like her parents, whilst fundamental

rejecting something very significant, having many siblings: *“Well I’m not going to have nine kids when I’m older for a start”*.

She is clearly trying to broaden her horizons, by being highly aspirational she can become something else. There is an element of fear in Megan, something that appears part of the narrative of Pete. He describes his local area in a similar way to Megan. He also outright rejects the choices his parents have made in their lives. He seems fearful of ending up like them. One of the ways this seems to manifest is in his HE aspirations. He shares a story about his older sibling and her HE aspirations.

Well I think she wanted to go but she just couldn’t get in because she didn’t really try in this school [...] well she got excluded every day (Pete 4-15)

Given his sibling’s and parent’s experiences, he seems to strive to rise above them, their experiences seem to push him to work harder at school, to have high aspirations. In this quote, Pete is not only expressing his confidence, he is making the point about being first in family, it is important to him. It is like he wants to go to university to become the first in family, to demonstrate his worth: *“I’m very confident. I’ll be like the first one in my family to go to university”*.

Fear is perhaps the reason why Pete aspires to become a professional footballer, even though he acknowledges it is highly unlikely it will happen. It is his way of dreaming of another life, an escape from his surroundings. This is why Pete’s hopes for his future varied so greatly from his expectations. His hopes were full of material signs of wealth, a big house, a sports car, a yacht. His expectations, almost a fear that he would have given up on his dreams, included the possibility that he would be just sitting at home playing his Xbox.

Megan and Pete both use the example of homework and their parent's lack of help to suggest a superiority to their parents that are played out in their rejections of their parents' past. They don't really need or want help from their parents - they are smarter than them.

EB: Do they ever like help with homework or anything like that?
No not really, they're not that smart (Megan 4-11)

EB: Like do they ever help with homework or?

No!

[...]

EB: So, does it frustrate you?

Not really because I'm probably smarter than them anyway (Pete 4-17)

Pete expresses a desire to move out of his local area, something that Del aspires to. Del expresses this desire due to negative experiences as well, articulating situations where the police are called to fights in his street. He describes the events as an onlooker, almost as if he is peering behind the curtains.

People normally come out and try and like split them up because if there's a fight they will try and stop them and like sometimes it's them that call the police because they might think somebody's say in danger (Del 2-9)

Again, this suggests that Del is keen to be different, to not be like the others in his close vicinity. This may explain why some participants express aspirations to travel, to see places "*not like here*". Only Sophie shows an interest in moving out of her immediate area. Whilst others talked about spreading their wings, they still aspire to live in areas relatively close to where they currently do, albeit in 'better' areas. This demonstrates an interesting clash between this super-ordinate theme and the one of familiarity. This is also evident in Megan's assessment of potential barriers to HE. Whilst she is clearly apathetic to where she lives and aspires to be better

than her parents, familiarity appears to try and drag her back down. In this quote, she clearly feels nervous about the prospect of moving away:

I guess if it's too far away. I also wouldn't want to because I guess it's just like, I guess if I'd had experience being away from my parents for a long amount of time before then it would have been okay but just going straight to like being away for a good few months would be like [...] (Megan 4-10)

For John, whilst he occasionally talks about his local area in a negative tone, it is much more about his personal frustrations of life in general as opposed to issues of fear. He talks about how the next-door neighbour's children are noisy playing in the garden for example. John's real issue in where he lives is his actual house. This frustration, as already mentioned, is more symptomatic of his wider frustrations of daily life and may be partly where his frustrations stem from.

The house is a bit too small because I have a brother and a sister so it's a family of five and it's only a three-bedroomed house and I have to share with my brother. I don't like that (John 1-2)

Again, these frustrations seem to impact on his relationship with his parents. He does not talk of his parents using the negative tone in which Megan and Pete do. His frustrations with his parents are not about the past and what they have achieved in life, the decisions they have made, but are more about the present and how they impact on his ability to get on with daily life.

For Sophie, the relationship between aspirations and being fearful is much more complex. As well as aspiring to develop her love of the performing arts into something more serious, she is interested in becoming a forensic scientist. It appears to be quite a dilemma for her. She is completely unsure which road to take. Part of the reason why she aspires to an academic field, such as forensic science, is the experiences of her brother. Sophie makes

constant reference to her brother's academic achievements, she feels she lives in his shadows. In this following quote, she feels inferior to him.

My brother he's like incredibly smart, he did his GCSEs like a year early and still got like A stars, so it's like I trying to live up to those expectations, like sometimes it's hard for me because I think that like I'm not as good as him (Sophie 1-3)

Part of this narrative revolves around how others talk about her brother. She clearly finds this difficult to cope with.

It kind of makes me annoyed. Like it just feels like they're not like telling other people how well I'm doing, they're just like Josh is doing amazingly but Sophie she's doing just as good as him. It's like always being compared and it kind of feels hard sometimes but I kind of just get on with it and try and do [...] (Sophie 1-4)

She also feels that academic achievement is something that runs throughout the family. There is an expectation. What is interesting however is that Sophie seems to suggest the expectation comes from within, it is not something that is imposed on her.

So, I think just growing up with my like parents being smart and my brother being smart, I've always been like well I should kind of live up to that expectation even though no one's actually expecting me to do that (Sophie 2-2)

So, for Sophie, she is fearful of not being perceived as academic within her family, even though there does not seem to be any tangible expectation from her family. This appears to drive her to aspire to become a forensic scientist. It is as if her aspiration to become a dancer is for herself and her aspiration to become a forensic scientist is to appease the academic side of the family. In her heart of hearts, she would rather be a dancer. However, her fear of being seen as less academic, forces her to broaden her horizons, to aspire to something that would demonstrate her academic ability. Given that her

parents have recently divorced, her career aspirations can almost be a metaphor for her family life. Her time is split between her parents just like her aspirations. She wants to find ways of demonstrating her strong self-identity, of being free, of being like her mum. This gets challenged by her academic side, the need to work hard, the need to be like her brother and dad. This creates a complex internal battle for Sophie, she has no idea which path to take.

Yer I think it's still pretty split between dance and science. I'm not sure because I'm still really interested in the forensic science and that sort of thing and at the moment I'm doing like my triple science and I'm just finding it really interesting but then at the moment I still can't like, I would never be able to give up dance because it's still like a really big thing in my life which is quite annoying [laughter] because they are very different things (Sophie 4-6)

7.3.2 Theme: Strivers and skivers

All participants talked about how they felt that some of their peers had lower aspirations than themselves. They did not want to be seen to be part of this group, reaffirming their desire to expand their horizons. In this sense, they use their opinions of others as a means of reaffirming their own high aspirations and to place themselves amongst the aspiring group.

Participants used different words to describe their less aspirational peers. For Sophie and Del, it seems to be about a lack of care. Sophie just cannot understand it, why would a young person simply not care? In this extract, Sophie repeatedly uses the word *they*, making sure it is clear they are different to her.

Some people they, they just don't care for some reason, they really think I don't care about my what I get in life, I'm just going to go like see what happens because maybe they're upset that they've tried their hardest and they can't get the levels that they want to get but some just don't put the effort in at all because they don't see the point in doing it. They just like mess around in classes and don't do tests

and get like really bad scores in everything but somehow they still don't care about it. I just, I don't really understand (Sophie 3-8)

It seems to frustrate Sophie, this lack of care. In this example, she suggests that even in the top sets some peers don't seem to care. Again, she constantly refers to *they*.

Yer a lot of people, even in like, because I'm in top set for all my classes but even people in my sets a lot of them don't care, they just mess around and they get sent out of class basically every lesson and they don't really see the point (Sophie 3-8)

This lack of care is something John picks up on as well.

Some people don't get their education, like they're naughty and they get sent out of class all of the time which suggests to me they probably don't care about learning (John 4-5)

John shares an experience of his younger brother being bullied at school. Again, a lack of care is prominent in his response as to why his brother is bullied.

His dad doesn't really do anything, his dad doesn't really care what he does, he just walks around like bullying everyone [...] I don't know, I think he's just one of those people that doesn't really care (John 2-7)

John has first-hand experience of his brother being bullied, attributing it to the lack of care of the father. He is then able to transfer this to his own experiences at school and begins to link the more badly-behaved peers to this idea of a lack of care. This is what sets them back; they simply don't care.

John articulates his perceived reasons, through his friend's experience, that helps him to rationalise the reasons as to why some young people might be skivers not strivers. He feels he has a better chance of getting higher grades at school than one of his friends because:

They have to do more stuff at home like when their parents are out, so look after their brothers and sisters or like cook their own food or whatever. And, that's good life skills but that's not very good grades, so like maths, science or English or anything like that and they can't really learn much because one of my friends, like he's always asked, or most of the time, asked to look after his brother and sister but he just like shouts at them all the time because they are annoying (John 3-13)

He is implying that his friend has his learning restricted by his circumstance and it is this that holds him back. He goes on to suggest that if his friend tries harder, then he will probably do better than John himself.

The idea of strivers and skivers is perhaps most pertinent to Megan. Megan often refers to her past self as someone who was one of the skivers, in with the wrong crowd. With the realisation of the impact of being in with the wrong crowd might have on her, she has transformed herself into one of the high aspirers. Del shares a similar experience, talking about how he has changed.

I used to, like two years ago a lot but I've cracked down on it now [...] I was just constantly getting sent out or told off for doing stupid things
EB: You were saying oh, you realised that you need to work why did you suddenly think that?
Because I want to be able to be a vet and have a good job and education and things (Del 4-6)

So, for Del, having a clear career aspiration has given him that drive to change things around, to transform. This compares to his viewpoint that his lower aspiring peers haven't "*really realised yet*", the need to work hard.

For Megan, it is about attitude. Note the use of language again, the use of *they* to distinguish herself from this group. Note the way in which she rejects their view of the world.

They just, they're the type of people with the bad attitude, oh why do we need uniform, why do we need to learn this, it's not relevant to our life but it's like everything you do is relevant to your life so (Megan 3-7)

This compares to her own viewpoint that: "*I'm here to learn and I'm not here to look good in the uniform*".

Participants talk about the impact the behaviour of others has on them. It is as if they begin to resent the skivers. Through this resentment they then begin to develop their own aspirations. In this extract, Megan seems annoyed. This may be exacerbated for Megan, given that she appears to also be talking about her past self.

I guess it annoys me really because it's, what's the point in just messing around, getting in with the wrong crowd when you can just like I guess do good with your life (Megan 4-14)

Pete and John also refer to feelings of annoyance, discussing how the behaviour of others affects them.

Well annoyed because I want to learn, not look at people and like shouting out stuff (Pete 4-18)

Not like misbehave like really naughty but like just keep talking across the class and stuff, well they'll be in one corner and their friend will be in the other corner and they'll talk and you can't hear what the teachers saying and it's just like be quiet please (John 4-10)

In the following quote Pete is describing his close friends. His use of language, using phrases such as *immature*, *not very clever* and *can't be bothered*, implies that his friends are more skivers than strivers.

EB: What are they like, if you had to describe like your main friends?
Um normal, quite immature [...] well they like, they're not very clever [...] they just can't be bothered [...] because they don't really like enjoy school so (Pete 2-17)

The rhetoric that he uses adds to his general narrative around a rejection, or fear of his surroundings. He discusses his local neighbourhood in a negative way, some of his family's experiences in an equivalent manner and now his friends. This all seems to add to Pete's 'dreamy' aspirations, which appear to be at odds with his lived world. Take his aspiration to live with some of his friends later in life. He describes it as "*more of a dream than a possibility*". Like his aspiration to become a professional footballer, he seems to acknowledge it is unlikely to happen but he likes to dream of what he could become, it gives him something to hold on to.

Some of the participants use the aspiration of future educational paths as a way of distinguishing themselves as being highly aspirational. All the participants expressed a desire to go to university, although very tentatively in some cases. They all felt it was almost a natural progression for them. This was not the case they felt with their lower aspiring peers.

Megan thinks that around 15% of her year group might progress into HE and in this quote, she is implying that this is because many do not aspire to the types of jobs that might require a degree:

Not many people want to go on to study at university to be like a doctor or a teacher or something like that (Megan 2-13)

In this example, Megan categorises her peers and identifies the ‘type’ of people who don’t aspire to university. Note again her use of language, the distinguishing of ‘them’.

Well a lot of our year is kind of careless and bad behaved and stuff like that so you can't really imagine them going on for further education at university. A lot of the type of people are like I can't wait till we leave school and stuff like that so therefore why would they go on to further education after school (Megan 2-14)

Sophie articulates that, as she sees it, peers who do not see the need for further education do not care about their future. This is completely different to Sophie’s own view, suggesting that for her, university seems somewhere she *needs* to go to be seen as aspirational.

I think I'd worry too much about what I would be doing with my life if I didn't go because I wouldn't feel like I have enough experience with school even though I would be doing like 13 years, to me that just seems like I need to get that extra level of learning in and I really need to learn how things work more and I think university would help me a lot with that (Sophie 4-18)

7.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed analysis of the lived experience of each participant and how this relates to their aspirations. Overall, I found that aspirations are a complex web of emotions, influences, experiences, familiarities and dilemmas.

The first super-ordinate theme, ‘Empowerment’, discussed the mechanisms that enabled each participant to feel empowered to become highly aspirational. I found that empowerment starts from within, each participant was clear that it was their life, they wanted to be in control of their own aspirations. This was then supported by their school and family lives. I

discussed how their school were driving a highly aspirational ideology. I found that the participants appeared to question the ideology but ultimately bought into it. This was then reaffirmed by their parents generally supporting them in being aspirational and doing well in life. I then discussed some of the experiences of participants that became a threat to their feelings of empowerment. In some cases, the experiences that helped the participants to feel empowered also acted as a counter-balance and became a threat to their feelings of empowerment. This included the self, school life and family life. I also found that their unknown futures were one of the key ways in which participants felt a loss of control.

The second super-ordinate theme, 'Familiarity', demonstrated the close link between their daily lives and their career aspirations. I found that familiarity of experience brought comfort to participants. This enabled them to feel confident in aspiring to certain professions. Much of this was wrapped around hobbies and activities that they find enjoyable and fun. As part of this process I discussed the impact that a 'happy space' has in reaffirming their aspirations. For each participant, this happy space was extrinsically linked to their career aspirations and was centred on the transformative qualities that the space brings to them, the way it gets them away from their day to day life and, in some cases, as a strategy to deal with boredom. I then discussed the ways in which participants use the experience of others to develop their own aspirations. I found that each participant did so in their own unique way. For some it appeared that the experiences of others became contagious, sometimes through a snowballing effect. For others, they used an element of competition to drive them to become more aspirational. For some, they wanted to emulate the experience of others. I found that in many cases, the participants rejected the experiences of others. Only Pete, for example, has a career aspiration that follows in his parent's footsteps.

The third and final super-ordinate theme, 'Broadening Horizons' discussed how participants used the experiences of others to drive them to broaden their horizons. Essentially, the participants were rejecting a perceived narrative by saying 'no, I can do more than that, I can become something'. I found that this was created through two areas of their lives. The first was concerned with their family and local neighbourhood. For some, they were critical of their local neighbourhood and mistakes or choices that their family had made. They wanted to 'do better'. Some of this revolved around fear - fear that they might end up making similar mistakes in their life. For Sophie, the experiences of her family, particularly her brother, made her feel pressured to broaden her horizons to satisfy the academic nature of her brother and father. I then discussed how participants seemed to split their peers into two distinct groups; strivers and skivers. The participants were all keen to stress that they were strivers and highly aspirational, using particular language to separate themselves from the skivers. I found that much of this division was caused by the participant's perceptions that some peers lacked the right attitude to learn and progress or simply didn't care about their futures.

Chapter 8: Discussion

In the previous chapter I focused on the participants themselves as well as my interpretations of their lived experiences and how this relates to their aspirations. In this chapter, I put the findings into context by examining them within wider theory and literature.

The most obvious starting point is that the participants in this study do not suffer from a 'poverty' of aspiration. Indeed, using the Archer et al. (2010) definition of aspiration, they can be said to have 'lofty ambitions'. They all want to do well in life, want to get good jobs, aspire to HE and so on. This seems to go against the dominant discourse of deficit within policy around the aspirations of young people from WP backgrounds. This finding also concurs with a growing evidence base that suggests that young people from disadvantaged and/or WP backgrounds do not lack aspiration (Social Exclusion Task Force 2008; St Clair and Benjamin 2011; Cummings et al. 2012; Kintrea et al. 2015; Frostick et al. 2016; Campbell and McKendrick 2017).

The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to discuss that the young people are highly aspirational. It is to discuss why the young people have the aspirations that they do; how have their everyday experiences created, shaped and constrained these aspirations? I do so by discussing each of the three super-ordinate themes in turn. It must be noted that although I approach each theme individually, it should not be seen that aspirations are so formulaic. As noted in the findings chapter, many aspirations cover multiple themes and thus much of the discussion will cover such multiple themes.

8.1 Empowerment

The super-ordinate theme 'Empowerment', raised the issue that all participants felt empowered to be aspirational, it gives them the confidence to want to aim high and do well in life. Why is this the case? What makes them feel empowered?

To begin to answer these questions, I must take a step back and revisit policy. Much of the way in which aspirations have been portrayed in policy can be understood within a neoliberal discourse, which has been presented over the past 20 years as:

“A form of market-driven egalitarianism, producing a rhetoric of individualism, mobility and choice” (Best 2017, p.42).

Indeed, Brown (2013) suggests that aspiration itself is based around a neoliberal discourse of hope and promotion of individualised social mobility. Within this discourse, according to Pimlott-Wilson (2017), young people are required to take responsibility, look towards the future and raise their aspirations. Of particular relevance is the work of Raco (2009) and Best (2017). As explained in section 2.2, according to Raco (2009), the focus on aspiration is part of a wider movement from a policy of expectation, where the onus is on the state to ensure citizens received equal outcomes (Sellar et al. 2011), to a policy of aspiration that has led to the development of the aspirational citizen. This approach has therefore placed a greater emphasis on the individual and individual responsibility. Young people are then trained to internalise uncertainty about the future as insecurities that need to be managed on an emotional level (Cairns 2013).

The high aspirations of the young people in this study can be interpreted as a reaction to this discourse. They are actively seeking to become the

aspirational citizens that Raco (2009) talks about. They all feel empowered to aspire. They are taking responsibility to be aspirational. They want to do well in life. This fits with Best's assertion that:

“The neo-liberal self is encouraged to conceive itself as formally responsible for the processes of becoming” (Best 2017, p.41).

We see for example that, as Sellar (2013) suggests, all participants believe in education, they see education as something they can shine in. An example of this is the aspiration to go to university. Despite appearing to lack relevant knowledge of the world of HE (some of them more so than others), including having a lack of people in their immediate world with HE experiences, all participants have HE aspirations. They can also be seen to support the credentialist logic where the more educational credentials an individual has, the higher the chances of gaining 'good' employment (Spohrer 2016). As Sophie feels:

I need to get that extra level of learning in and I really need to learn how things work more and I think university would help me a lot with that (Sophie 4-18)

They were confident in their capabilities that were required for HE. This may be because, as Wiseman et al. (2017) suggest, HE is now perceived to be a norm and that some young people view HE as just something that most people do these days. It may also be, as Spohrer (2011) suggests, that having a degree can be seen as desirable by young people because it is associated with reward, especially income and social recognition. The importance of social recognition seemed important for the young people in this study. Pete, for example, described people who go to university as being clever and who enjoyed education. Megan had similar thoughts, describing university students as “*well behaved, intelligent*”. From a local point of view, all having an aspiration to enter HE could be seen to have something to do

with the ethos of their school and the increasing number of pupils progressing into HE from the school.

Although all participants aspire to HE, this should not be seen as something wholly unexpected. Chowdry et al. (2011), Anders and Micklewright (2013) and Kintrea et al. (2015) all note that HE aspirations are higher than the actual national HE participation rate. It could also be explained by the idea that when young people have a more positive view of their academic abilities (as was the case in this study) they will have higher HE expectations (Chevalier et al. 2009).

Another way in which the participants expressed aspirations that fit within a neoliberal discourse is the idea that:

“All individuals have responsibility to engage and succeed as lifelong learners in which they flexibly accumulate human capital. If they fail in this, then they have only themselves to blame” (Zipin et al. 2015, p.232).

Participants were very much in agreement that it was up to them to fulfil their aspirations, particularly their educational and career aspirations. If they did not, it would be because it was their fault, it was something they were lacking, they had not got the necessary grades, they had not been motivated enough. As MacLeod (2009) suggests:

“If they fail to get ahead they will probably attribute their social and economic fate to their own incapacibilities, to their own lack of merit” (p.127).

In the ordinate theme ‘Loss of Control’, participants offered solutions or ways round most of the issues when faced with a loss of control. John provided us with an example through his aspiration to become a commercial airline pilot.

Clearly, he was coming to a realisation that it was not going to be easy. The financial costs of study were blocking him from enrolling on to the necessary course. This left him with the possibility of entering the RAF. Despite being apprehensive about this route, he still believes he can become a pilot, it is up to him to weave around the barriers.

Archer et al. (2014c) suggest that this type of mind-set fits in with a wider body of research that, in modern Britain, people are less likely to spontaneously suggest social-class inequalities even though these inequalities may shape their future chances. Megan, for example, felt that:

Without sounding like I'm boasting I'm quite intelligent, I guess high target levels stuff like that [...] I'm probably going to want to go to university and do well with my life so I've still got as equal chance as anyone who has a lot of money to go on and do well with my life (Megan 3-1)

John swapped this the other way around suggesting that he had an advantage compared to his less fortunate friend, who was required to spend a lot of his time looking after his younger siblings. John felt ultimately though that if his friend tried then he could probably do better than John. This suggests that although participants were aware of inequalities, they felt that these inequalities could be overridden by natural ability and hard work, set within a rhetoric of individual strength and resilience (Mendick et al. 2015). Participants also defined people who were successful in terms of them achieving their own personal goals, working hard and being happy. So, John for example, used a celebrity, David Beckham, to define success. To him, David Beckham was successful not because he was rich but because he had completed his goal of becoming a footballer. In a similar vein, Megan felt that people who “*write their own music they write lyrics that mean something they've worked at it from a young age*” were successful. Participants using role models to define success and happiness is in line with Ahmed's (2010) assertion that:

“Ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy ‘in the right way’” (p.13).

In many ways, by developing high aspirations, often situated within a neo-liberal discourse, it can be argued that the participants in this study feel empowered to become aspirational because the world in which they live dictates that they should be so. Or put another way, the participants, because of their everyday experiences, buy into the notion of being aspirational. This is perhaps why all the participants used familiarity as a cornerstone to develop their aspirations. It gives them an entry point in to becoming the aspirational citizens that they and their environment desires.

It must be stressed that participants did not ‘buy in’ or become fully ‘captured by the discourse’ (Trowler 2001). Most significantly, they generally rejected the idea of “neoliberal ideals of fulfilment through material consumption” (Pimlott-Wilson 2017, p.289). As the findings chapter demonstrated, Sophie was particularly passionate in her rejection of this narrative. Life is not about money and material wealth, it is about being happy. The search for happiness in life seemed key to all participants. In this sense, Sophie, and the other young people offered an alternative to the dominant notion of what success means (Spohrer 2016).

At this point it would be useful to introduce the work of Kasser and Ryan (1996). They identify the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations. Extrinsic aspirations (financial success, social recognition and image) depend on the contingent reactions of others and are related to the receipt of reward or praise (Baird et al. 2012). These types of aspirations are typically associated with a means to some other end. Intrinsic aspirations (affiliation, community feeling, health and self-acceptance) are seen as inherently valuable or satisfying to the individuals involved, as opposed to the need of evaluation from others. Using their Aspiration Index, Kasser and

Ryan (1993; 1996) found intrinsic aspirations were associated with higher well-being and less distress, whilst extrinsic aspirations were associated with lower vitality and self-actualisation.

Whilst participants have high career aspirations, this desire was not because of material wealth but because it would mean they have achieved their personal goals, therefore participants expressed aspirations that were focused on intrinsic gain. For example, Pete - although he expressed a strong aspiration for material desires in his hopes for his future life, it seemed that this was because of his aspiration to become a footballer. This was opposed to him seeking material wealth through whatever means necessary. Being a footballer was what really matters. This supports research such as Park et al. (2004), Brown (2011), Archer et al. (2013), Hoskins and Barker (2017) and Wiseman et al. (2017), who all suggest that young people put personal happiness as a priority for their future aspirations. However, whilst Brown (2011) suggests that this was at the expense of more academic and professional aspirations, in this study, these aspirations sat side by side. Whilst they aspired to dominant discourse of educational and career success, they also aspired to be happy, to achieve their own personal definitions of success. However, within their career aspirations, they sought careers that they enjoyed doing, or in Sophie's case, that she was passionate about. Therefore, this suggests that participants do not develop career aspirations dispassionately (Brown 2011).

I argue that the most powerful way in which this neo-liberal discourse is transmitted into the aspirations of participants is through their every-day school lives. The school itself has undergone a transformation, coinciding with its conversion to an academy. Its Ofsted reports are improving and an increasing number of pupils from the school are applying to and entering HE. If it is true that the education system favours those who are able to 'crack the code' and willingly enter the game (Bourdieu and Passeron 1994), then the

five young people in this study are willingly entering the game. In doing so, according to Byrom (2009), they become HE 'fodder':

"Waiting to be provided with the requisite credentials to move onto the next stage of education" (p.220).

They viewed their school as an institution driving a clear, strong aspirational message, work hard and do well in life. In this sense, the school can be seen to be reproducing what they define as higher aspirations (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011), or as Riddell (2010) puts it:

"The young people hear similar narratives in all the contexts of their lives about what is important for people like them, the normality of university and professional career aspirations, what they should spend their time on and how they should behave because of who and what they are" (p.51).

As Sophie suggested: "*They're probably just preparing you for you getting into higher level jobs*". Megan also suggested that the role of education and school was to *get "a middle-class job rather than a lower class one like working in the shop down the road"*. Thus it can be seen that the school has a strong institutional habitus (Bowes et al. 2015) in driving pupils to work hard and aim high.

These two quotes from Sophie and Megan suggest that the school place a high value on social mobility, which can be defined as:

"The extent to which where you end up, in terms of income or social class, is not determined by where you started" (All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility 2012, p.4).

Whilst Hoskins and Barnard (2017) offer counter evidence that does not fit within the neoliberal assumption that most people want to get ahead and

improve their relative status and prosperity, this study found the opposite, that the five participants in this study very much bought into this idea. They wanted to, for example, enter the labour market through what can be described as 'middle-class' jobs. This is despite many of their parents working in what can be termed more traditional working-class jobs. This in line with findings such as Atherton et al. (2009), Kintrea et al. (2011) and Archer et al. (2014c), who found high levels of aspiration for high status jobs. Kintrea et al. (2011) also note that young people from disadvantaged areas expressed high status jobs in far greater numbers than the actual number of available jobs in the labour market. In aspiring to these job roles, like the 'brothers' in MacLeod's (2009) study, they are attempting to embody middle-class values. They also acknowledged that working hard was crucial to them being successful (Mendick et al. 2015).

This of course, only tells part of the story. Clearly, as the participants all state themselves, not every pupil in the school bought into this aspirational ethos, this drive for improvement. What separated these five young people from the 'skivers'? One of the most critical factors is that all participants are doing well academically. By doing well in school, they gain the confidence that enables their aspirations to remain high (Furlong and Biggart 1999). They therefore feel empowered to aspire and despite possible constraints on their aspirations, they feel in control of the decision making process (Hart 2013). Their academic success also enables them to be an 'insider' in the aspirational life of the school environment. As Pete suggested:

I think they want you to achieve what you want to achieve. So, if you try then they'll try with you, if you don't then (pause) then they don't
(Pete 3-8)

In working hard academically, Pete and the other participants therefore join the school in the journey, to get ahead and to improve their relative status

(Hoskins and Barker 2017). They subscribe to the dominant discourse of the school, thereby avoiding the threat that:

“To be without aspiration is to lead a life without value or meaning and with an underpinning feeling of helplessness” (Best 2017, p.39).

The link between attainment and high career aspirations, as demonstrated in this study, is very much in line with research such as Brown (2011) and Gore et al. (2015), who both noted the strong link between academic achievement and aspirations for prestigious occupations. McCulloch (2017) also note that young people with higher aspirations have generally higher levels of educational achievement in general. The importance of this is underlined by research conducted Chowdry et al. (2011) in their analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England. They found that factors such as young people having a belief in their academic ability, finding school worthwhile and having good relationships with their teachers were all contributing factors in young people achieving higher GCSE results.

Participants all shared generally (although not entirely) positive experiences of their teachers. This support seemed to re-affirm their belief in doing well at school, such as Pete’s recent experience:

Um like two weeks ago one of the English teachers told me that I did like the best in my class for like a test so that was good (Pete 3-6)

Sophie also shares a positive story of her music teacher:

He just kind of, he never tells me that I can’t, I’m bad at doing it, he’s always there to say ok this is how you do it. He doesn’t make anybody feel stupid for not knowing how to do things (Sophie 4-10)

This is re-affirmed by research such as Anderman (2002), Stewart et al. (2007) and Crespo et al. (2013) who note that forming close relationships with teachers and other school staff can often lead to higher aspirations and academic performance. This is not always the case, with Frostick et al. (2016) finding that the perception of school and peer relationships were significant in their negative association with aspirations, a finding the authors describe as 'unexpected'. Research conducted by la Velle et al. (2013) emphasised the important role that teachers can play in supporting young people's aspirations by suggesting the problem with low aspirations towards HE can lie with teachers as opposed to the young people themselves.

One of the other significant ways in which the five participants feel empowered to be aspirational is through the support of their families. It is important to note that the ways in which families and family life impacted upon their aspirations varied from participant to participant. However, what brought participants together was a consensus that their parents wanted them to do well and generally supported them in being aspirational. As a word of caution, Cuthbert and Hatch (2009) suggest that most parents project positive aspirations for their children, irrespective of their background. Therefore, it should not be assumed that the young people held high aspirations purely on the basis that their parents held high aspirations for them.

Much has been written about the impact of family on the aspirations of young people. Frostick et al. (2016) for example, note the positive association between parental support and reported aspirations. In a similar vein, Kintrea et al. (2011) identify the link between what a parent wants for their child and what the child aspires to themselves. Madarasova Geckova et al. (2010) suggest that parents with higher education are more likely to create an environment that stimulates similar aspirations. Finally, Hoskins and Barker (2017) suggest that the aspirations of their young participants were overwhelmingly developed through individual family histories.

By examining the lives of the five participants it appears that family, particularly parents, play a predominantly supportive rather than leading role in the participants having high aspirations. This is summarised by Del: “*She [mother] wants me to achieve whatever I want to achieve and she’ll be there to help and stuff*”. This aligns with research from Archer et al. (2014c) who note that ‘working class’ families tended to support rather than engage in fostering aspirations and Atherton et al. (2009) who found young people wanted to be supported by their parents rather than pursuing ambitions that their parents hold for them. Archer et al. (2014c) suggest that this is represented by the frequent use of the phrase ‘as long as I’m happy’. Here we see Sophie applying the very phrase:

She [mother] says well as long as you’re happy and you know that you’re going to enjoy doing something then just go for it (Sophie 2-7)

That is not to say that family narratives do not have a vital role to play in the aspirations that the young people hold. However, there was no real sense that parents were pressurising the young people into certain directions. The possible exception to this was Megan. As discussed in the findings chapter, her parents appeared to often attempt to suppress some of her career aspirations. Despite this, Megan suggested her parents were generally supportive. She maintained high career and educational aspirations, suggesting that her parents’ sometimes negative language did not ultimately affect her personal beliefs. For John, whilst he acknowledged that his father would like him to follow in his footsteps career wise, there was no pressure to do so. Similarly, whilst Sophie clearly felt pressured to live up to her father’s and brother’s academic abilities, she acknowledged that the pressure was more from within.

8.2 Familiarity

The super-ordinate theme 'Empowerment' was concerned with the mechanisms that enabled the participants to become aspirational. The super-ordinate theme of 'Familiarity' was more concerned with the principle that aspirations are something hard to have without giving them some form (Ahmed 2010). Participants used their environment and their experiences to find something that they could use as a vehicle that would enable them to become aspirational citizens. In doing so, their experiences become a norm and through these norms they became comfortable in articulating their future career choices. Thus, it can be said that the aspirations expressed by the participants are very much set by the direct context of their individual lives as opposed to something fictional (St Clair and Benjamin 2011). In setting their own aspirations through familiarity, aspirations can be valued and developed within personal contexts that profoundly influence the importance attached to them (Watts and Bridges 2006). This is why John aspires to become a commercial airline pilot, Sophie a dancer and so on. In their lives, this is what matters to them, they attach a worth to these aspirations. In doing so, they develop their aspirational identity in which they begin to normalise the aspirations for people 'like them' (Riddell 2010).

This study, rather than take the deficit view that participants lacked certain forms of capital, found that participants used the capital available to them to formulate aspirations that, in the context of what was available to them, seemed realistic. Therefore, with the possible exception of Pete, their hopes for their future were fairly well matched with their expectations in that they were firmly embedded within their existing lives. This is very much in line with St Clair and Benjamin's (2011) performative model of aspiration where young people use the limited social resources that they have to express aspirations that are constrained by context. St Clair and Benjamin (2011) go on to suggest that a benefit of such a viewpoint being that it takes the opinion that the young people are doing the best with what they have, rather than a deficit viewpoint that they lack something.

From a theoretical perspective, participants were taking an approach to their aspirations that can be defined as pragmatic rationality. Such an approach helps to avoid:

“The twin pitfalls of implicit social determinism or of seeing (young) people as completely free agents” (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, p.29).

The model centres on the idea that whilst some form of rational choice is involved in decision making, these choices tend to be constrained by structure, opportunity and qualifications as well as the young person’s attitudes (Payne 2003; Baird et al. 2012; Rose and Baird 2013). This was evident within the narratives of all participants. Megan, for example, used financial resources to rein in her aspirations. Her hopes for the future were very much related to her lived world, the way her brother struggled financially at university, how her two sisters were forced to get part-time jobs whilst studying at college, hence why she suggested:

I'll probably just rent with my parents until I can afford to leave home and then just get like a cheap flat or something (Megan 1-3)

Maybe something like sort of a scooter thing at first and then like a little rubbish car (Megan 1-4)

One of the predominant ways in which all participants used familiarity was through their hobbies and activities they enjoy and feel they are good at, as identified in many other studies (Archer and Hiromi 2003; Turok et al. 2009; Kintrea et al. 2011). Often, these were deep-rooted in childhood and family narratives, and therefore woven into the fabric of family life and personal identities (Archer et al. 2014c). Participants using hobbies, things that they enjoyed and felt they were ‘good at’, fits in with Archer and Hiromi’s (2003) notion that young people are aware of their own limits and opt for the ‘safe route’ in constructing their aspirations. It also supports Bowes et al. (2015)

finding that by Year 9 young people are developing aspirations related to expressing forms of enjoyment.

St Clair and Benjamin (2011) use the example that attendance at a school drama club could be crucial to the development of an aspiration to work in the performing arts for one individual person but completely irrelevant to another. Why is this the case? To try and explain this and to theorise the way in which participants develop interests that can lead them to aspire to a particular field, I draw upon the work of Hidi and Renninger (2006) and their four-phase model of interest development. An outline of the model is presented in Figure 12.

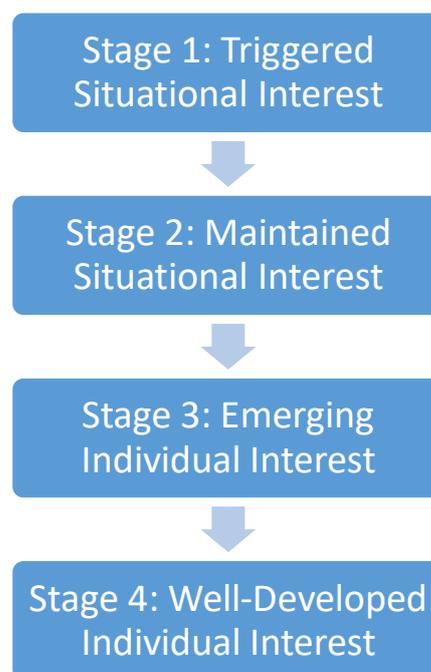


Figure 12: The Four-Phase Model of Interest Development (Adapted from: Hidi and Renninger (2006))

Hidi and Renninger (2006) define the process as sequential and the length each stage lasts will be dependent on an individual's circumstances. The first stage is referred to a triggered situational interest and relates to a psychological state of interest resulting from "short-term changes in affective

and cognitive processing” (p.114), in essence, something new. Importantly this initial interest is typically supported by others. So, for John, his interest starts in early childhood, when his father hands him a computer console. For Sophie, it is her father bringing musical instruments home and for Pete it is watching football on the television. Megan picks up a murder mystery book to read. It can be said that some aspirations have currently only reached this first stage of development. Pete mentions his aspiration to become a lawyer based on watching a series on Netflix. This appears to be as far he has got with his aspiration. He has not reached a deep level of engagement, so it can be argued that this aspiration to become a lawyer is less secure than his aspiration to become a professional footballer as it is not embedded into his life to the extent football is.

This initial stage then leads into stage two, maintained situational interest. In this stage, people begin to focus attention with the interest over an extended period of time. Interest is sustained through the meaningfulness of tasks and/or personal involvement. So, for Del, he begins to take more interest in his pets, starting to care for them. His pets become something meaningful to him. With John, he starts to enjoy playing his computer, playing games that involve aircraft. He begins hanging around with a friend who is also interested in aircraft, they start going to air shows.

The third stage is defined as emerging individual interest and involves the beginning phases of a relatively enduring need to seek re-engagement. Hidi and Renninger (2006) point out that only certain situational interests will develop into individual interests. This third stage can involve a growth of feelings of positive values and stored value. So, Sophie begins to associate dancing with it making her feel happy, it can transform her. She begins to start spending more time involved in dance and performing arts, getting parts in school performances. For John and Pete, their interests in technology and football respectively begin to take over, their hobbies start to become all consuming. John finds himself wanting to play his Xbox more and more. It is

at this stage that perhaps the participants start beginning to develop their idea of a 'happy space' as they start to create a bond between their personal lives and experiences and their future career aspirations.

Whilst this third stage is typically self-generated, the emerging interest can require some external support that can increase understanding whilst also creating an environment that challenges and provides opportunities (Hidi and Renninger 2006). John, for example, gets taken to a flight simulator, he does well, beating a 30-year old, he is associating flying with being successful at something. It is at this stage that perhaps John loses his interest in owning a computer company. By gaining a greater understanding of business (through work experience with his father) he begins to see the harsh reality of business, how difficult it might be for him. So, in this essence, he has taken his interest to this stage but by gaining more knowledge it has in fact curtailed his career aspiration. The same can be said about Del and his aspiration to become a musician. He takes music as an option at GCSE, this seems to lead to him losing interest in the subject, it is not as enjoyable as he thought it would be. This leads to him practising less, spending less time with his friends playing instruments.

In this stage, participants also appear to begin to develop self-efficacy in certain fields of work. John starts to believe he can become a pilot, Del a vet, Sophie a dancer. This process is described by Bandura et al. (2001) as:

“The patterning of children’s perceived efficacy influences the types of occupations for which they believe they have the capabilities, which, in turn, is linked to the kinds of career pursuits they would choose for their life’s work” (p.198).

The final stage of the process, well-developed interest, involves a more enduring predisposition to re-engage with particular classes of content (Hidi and Renninger 2006). Mitchell (1993) suggests for example, that whilst

factors such as the use of computers may trigger an interest in maths, it is only through personal involvement and meaningful tasks that individuals will maintain an interest over a period of time. So, Del builds on his interest in animals, he begins to use his pets as a comfort. He starts to take an interest in pursuing a career in animal care, he takes work experience at a local vet. Eccles (2009) suggests that over time, an individual will begin to develop a competence and skill for a particular activity and that the activity becomes part of an individual's 'Me' self. This is also apparent in research by Smith (2011b) who found some young people were strongly influenced by their sense of self. We certainly see this within this study. Technology is very much part of John's life for example, it is who he is. The same can be said about Sophie with dance. The freedom of expression that dance brings to Sophie represents who she sees herself as. Similarly, with Del, becoming a vet and looking after animals is something natural to him, given the caring environment that his home life brings. Participants deeming themselves competent in these fields also fits with Eccles's (2009) idea that individuals come to value tasks in which they do well in more than they do with tasks they do not do so well in.

A critical aspect of this final stage is identified by Fink (1998) who suggests that when an individual has a well-developed individual interest it enables them to persist despite challenges or difficulties. John is faced with a big challenge in his pursuit of becoming an airline pilot, the prospect of entering the RAF. Despite the obvious challenges, he persists with his aspiration, he has that personal involvement. Sophie also recognises the competitive nature of the performing arts but, like John, her passion leads her to believe she can still achieve her aspiration.

The model presented may also help to explain why participants appear to have a stable 'core' career aspiration and other aspirations that appear to be more temporal, more uncertain. Their 'core' aspiration has developed through the four stages, it has reached a point where they have personalised

an initial triggered interest, it has become embedded into their daily lives. This compares to more temporal career aspirations that may not have yet switched from a situational interest into something that is much more of an individual interest. The model can also explain why Megan's career aspirations are more widespread. Whilst many of her aspirations can be related to her family experiences around mental health and care, having a wide range of aspirations suggests there is not one dominant interest that has sufficiently developed along the four stages. Perhaps she has many interests that are simultaneously developing along the four stages and one dominant interest has yet to emerge.

Whilst the young people develop aspirations as individuals, they do not do so in a vacuum. In many cases, they are guided or persuaded towards particular aspirations by the experiences of others (Hart 2013). This is put into stark reality by Geoffrey Canada, cited by Tough (2009), using a phrase he calls 'contamination'.

"Imagine growing up in a community where your cousins, your uncle, everybody has gone to jail. That's just been the normal experience. Now you're nine years old, and you're trying to figure out what it means to be a nine-year-old in Harlem. Well, pretty quickly you're going to come to believe that going to jail is no bad thing" (Tough 2009, p.264).

Interestingly, Pete describes the possible impact of others on young people's experiences, using a very similar analogy:

Well if like, if you was like brought up with a family that was like in jail of something then you might like get influenced by them or something and then they'll make you do like bad decisions, get yourself into trouble and stuff (Pete 2-6)

This suggests that the participants were more than aware of the impact that others could have on their future chances. It is why Megan talks about her

past self and being in with the wrong crowd. She realised what the impact of peers was having on her own life chances and aspirations and transformed herself into a highly aspirational individual.

Ray (2006) conceptualises these experiences into what he defines as the 'aspirations window'. Ray suggests that aspirations will be shaped by the lives, achievements and ideals of those in an individual's aspiration window. Thus, aspirations can be said to be 'habituated' in that they are derived from familial and sociocultural groups (Gale and Parker 2015a). Ray (2006) offers the view that the level of social mobility (or the perceived level) within a society will influence an individual's aspiration window, the greater the level of social mobility, the broader the aspirations window.

The idea of similarity can be narrowed down in several ways. Firstly, there is a possible natural inclination for people to use peers to form their own aspirations. There is also the issue that what people can physically observe may be limited. Ray provides an example of the work of Wilson (1987) who found that successful individuals who migrate out of an inner city are no longer able to influence the aspirations of others as they are no longer able to be observed. We see this in the life of John. John has a distant family member who was a pilot. However, this family member lives in New Zealand and John has never met him. Therefore, he falls outside John's aspiration window, he is unable to influence him (at least consciously). Lastly, Ray suggests a statistical reason that by looking at the experiences of similar people enables an individual to be better informed in making their own decisions. We see this in Sophie's assessment of watching dance workshops at school. By seeing dancers who have 'made it', it gives Sophie greater belief that it could be her one day. She calculates that the odds are falling; "if they can become dancers, so can I".

Participants within this study discussed a myriad of ways in which the aspirations window can be applied. This included the use of emulation, using others as self-motivation, a snowballing of experience and as a way of gaining recognition. To explain the mechanisms that explain how the experiences of others can transmit into the participants' aspirations I refer to Ray's (2006) theory of collective action as a means of influencing aspirations.

Firstly, Ray suggests that groups are repositories of pooled information, in other words members of the group can share their experiences with others in the group. As Ray puts it:

“There is no experience quite as compelling as the experience of your immediate family, and more broadly, those in your socio-economic and spatial neighbourhood” (p.416).

This idea of pooled information has been conceptualised in several ways. In her exploration of the aspirations of a group of young people (aged 11-12) in Australia, Bok (2010) suggests that the capacity of some young people to navigate their aspirations can be seen as performing a play with no rehearsal and access to a minimal script. The ability to improvise the script Bok suggests is dependent on the access a young person has to 'hot' knowledge. Referred to as 'grapevine' knowledge by Ball and Vincent (1998), this knowledge is embedded in the experiences and impressions of socially embedded networks such as friends and family and is not only used differently by differing social groups but is also distributed unevenly.

Del, for example, is using grapevine knowledge in his articulation of his college aspirations. He aspires to attend the same college as his sister, based on her experiences. Del figures that because she enjoyed studying at that college then he will, because she can 'tell it how it is' (Green and White

2008). He is also using one of his close friends having a similar aspiration to him to motivate him, to be competition.

Megan has perhaps been influenced by her family history the most. As already discussed, many of her aspirations can be linked to the experiences of her siblings, particularly around mental health. So, whilst she does not articulate one clear aspiration, her aspirations are firmly rooted in the experiences of those around her. Sophie often refers to having grown up with certain norms and values, again suggesting the experiences of those around her have impacted on her choices. Her brother having always been academic, clearly impacts her for example, as well as her assumption that “*I think my dad was probably the same as me like he always tried in class*”. She also makes use of grapevine knowledge experiences in re-affirming her HE aspirations:

I have loads of um friends like brothers and sisters and my dad's, loads of my dad's students have actually like been to university and everyone asks them how they found it and like all of them have said it's a really good place to go and stuff, so that's made me feel a lot better about [...] (Sophie 1-10)

When this ‘hot’ knowledge was absent, one of the ways participants appeared to try and ‘fill in the blanks’ was through the experiences and knowledge of their teachers. As Atherton et al. (2009) point out:

“The ability of a teacher to shape the young people’s horizons [...] should not be under-estimated - they exist as examples of success and their support is crucial also” (p.4).

Megan, for example, relied primarily on the input of her teachers in picking her GCSE options and when asked whose advice she valued the most responded with: “*Um [pause] I'd say maybe like teachers I guess because they like know what they're doing, they know what's best for you*”. In a similar

vein, John had also taken a teacher's advice in picking his GCSEs, particularly their view that *"do what you like doing and don't just join it because your friends join it"*.

It is important to note that this reliance on the experiences of teachers appeared to come through more informal, ad-hoc conversations, as Del notes:

I kind of I had a conversation with a teacher, I can't even remember what happened but because they asked me what we were going to be doing after we had left and then she kind of said that what I want to do, it would probably be better to go to college (Del 3-18)

What appeared to be lacking was the use of more formalised, structured careers advice, or 'cold' knowledge (Ball and Vincent 1998). At times, participants, particularly Sophie, appeared to view 'cold' knowledge with an element of suspicion, often questioning the rhetoric of teachers:

The school always goes on about how much, if you get really good grades then you can get like really houses and really good cars and like a really good job, which when I hear that sort of thing, it just makes me kind of feel a bit annoyed because that's not the case at all (Sophie 3-14)

Ray (2006) also suggests that groups can act as external conveyors of information. The key to outsiders being able to have an impact is, according to Ray, credibility. We see this in John's chance encounter whilst undertaking work experience. He chats to a retired pilot who seems to reassure him that there were options open to him. He leaves feeling more confident that he can become a pilot. In John's eyes, the retired pilot is credible. Del is also able to draw upon the experiences of his sister's friend who attended college and now works in a zoo. Here we see examples of how participants can widen their aspirations window by drawing upon the experiences of others. Sophie offers an example of how a much wider group, society, has impacted on her

aspirations. She rejects the idea of working in the police because of society's perceptions of women being inferior within that field of work.

Crucially, this current study demonstrates that there is a limit to the extent to which the five participants go along with Ray's (2006) assertion of the power of immediate family and neighbourhood. As the discussion of the super-ordinate theme 'Broadening Horizons' will demonstrate, participants often used the experiences of those in their aspirations window to spur them on to raise their aspirations for something different. So, rather than replicating the experiences of those close to them, the participants seek the opposite or an alternative, to ensure they don't replicate those very experiences and therefore avoiding the idea that certain aspirations are for 'people like me' (Archer 2014). In this sense, their desire to be socially mobile overrides the locally embedded experiences of those close to them.

For example, whilst participants often sought to emulate others in the development of their aspirations, only Pete expressed a career aspiration that was directly related to the occupation of a family member (father) and even then, that was a previous occupation rather than his current one. This differs from research such as Kintrea et al. (2011) and Hoskins and Barker (2017), who suggest future occupations are often related to the employment of family. The reasons for this dis-engagement may be related to the other two super-ordinate themes and, as already discussed, their high aspirations can be situated within a neo-liberal discourse that assumes they are:

"Rejecting their parents' values, attitudes and beliefs, no longer wanting to be working class and wanting instead to be upwardly mobile" (Best 2017, p.44).

In the context of Hidi and Renninger's 2006 four-phase model of interest development, it may also be that they have not developed a personal interest

in their parents' sphere of work, despite being exposed to experiences that may have triggered a situational interest.

Up to this point, the discussion has implied that the participants were relatively well set in their articulation of their future aspirations, educationally, career-wise and in general. However, this was not always the case. What appeared to hinder all participants at times was their inability, bordering on unwillingness, to think ahead to their future. Participants very much lived in the now, taking one challenge at a time, reflected in Del's assertion that he's a "*now type of guy*", Megan's admission that "*anything could happen sort of like something could happen to provoke me that I have to move school then yer I don't know*" and Sophie's feeling that "*everyone's just focused on the next test*".

The 'living in the now' attitude is very much in line with Archer et al. (2010) and their notion of 'wait and see' and Reay's (1998) 'never being sure'. In adopting this attitude, participants often deferred planning to a later date. Sophie's point of deferment, for example, appears to be her GCSEs:

I just think that I'll probably go to 6th form or college somewhere and just see what happens really. Just see what I do on my GCSEs because that will kind of tell me how I cope in that sort of situation (Sophie 4-14)

This deferring or 'wait and see' attitude could be problematic in some cases as the participants themselves admitted that now was the time to be thinking about their future but for one reason or another they failed to act on this. Archer et al. (2010) suggest that this kind of deferment can be down to the individual's lack of confidence in their educational abilities. Whilst this may be partly true in this current study, what also seemed to create part of this discourse was a lack of formalised, structured career planning. This was reflected in the apparent confusion across accounts as to whether the school

had an official careers advisor and if so who it was. Sophie also perceived that it was up to each individual as to whether they wished to meet the careers adviser and she was not aware of anyone who had taken the invitation up.

When John did do some planning, looking on the internet, the differing messages appeared to leave him more confused. Del had also done some research into being a vet but admitted: *"I can't even remember what I looked at"*. At times, this was then exacerbated by the lack of more informal means of finding out further information. Although Megan had an older brother who was a current undergraduate, she spoke of how little she discussed university with him. Similarly, Sophie admitted she *'hasn't had much experience of people telling me like what university is like or like what happens at university, so I don't really have much knowledge about that'*. It must be pointed out that this comment from Sophie appears to be contradicted in a later interview when she discusses the variety of people she is able to draw upon to share their university experiences.

8.3 Broadening horizons

The final super-ordinate theme can be referred to as a clash between the other two super-ordinate themes. In seeking to become socially mobile, aspirational citizens and thus subscribe to the lure of doxic aspirations, they seek an alternative to their habituated aspirations, i.e. their existing situation and environment. In this sense, the aspirations of participants become 'dream-like' in that they begin to offer the participants an alternative to their expected adult lives (Brown 2013).

This clash is apparent in the participant's predominant career aspirations, ones that differ from the careers of their immediate families. As Zipin et al.

(2015) suggest, young people no longer hold the lives of their parents up as role models. This may be down to the 'anti-local' strategy of their school, in that the school are clearly trying to encourage pupils to aspire to something beyond the world of their families and neighbourhood (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011). This is certainly true of Megan and Pete, who, whilst they feel supported by their parents, firmly reject the choices their parents have made and seek to construct an alternative. Similarly, their desire to 'do well' in life, despite their often negative portrayal of their local neighbourhoods, supports Kintrea et al. (2011) in their rejection of the idea that disadvantaged neighbourhoods encourage inhabitants to be inward-looking and fatalistic. Indeed, the opposite would appear to be true, especially for Megan and Pete. They use their negative perceptions of their neighbourhood as a yardstick to 'transcend space' (Green and White 2008) and project their own higher aspirations. Living in an LPN, for example, does not appear to impact their desire to progress into HE. This tends to support Baxter et al. (2007) and their suggestion that young WP students do not see themselves to be in deficit and Watts and Bridges (2006) who found many young people resenting the idea that they had low aspirations. Research by Wicht and Ludwig-Mayerhofer (2014) in Germany also noted a weak effect of neighbourhoods on occupational aspirations and I would also agree with Wicht and Ludwig-Mayerhofer's assertion that the school context has considerably more direct influence on the lives of these five participants than their local neighbourhood.

Megan and Pete both referring to their local area as being 'chavvy' should not be overlooked. Whilst the phrase 'chav' may have come to represent a stigma of working-class culture (Jones 2012), both Megan and Pete use the word 'chav' to describe their immediate neighbourhoods, as opposed to generalised descriptions of other more distant neighbourhoods. This suggests that both may be fearful of having the identity of 'chav' imposed upon themselves, based on where they live. Therefore, their own values and way of life, based on hard work, being aspirational and doing well at school,

differs from their perceived way of life of the 'chavs'. Their prejudices of the 'chavs' may:

“Serve to distance them from demonised groups who might be a threat to their own identities and provide a sense of security that they will not end up in the same position” (Valentine and Harris 2014, p.88).

As Megan and Pete's description of the 'chavs' suggests, one of the reasons that participants seek to broaden their horizons is the emotion of fear. Brown (2011) suggests that aspirations are strong emotional impulses and it is these impulses that motivate individuals towards an anticipated better future. Brown goes on to suggest that because of the emotional nature of aspirations, they are always entangled with other emotions such as excitement and fear. Archer et al. (2014c) also suggest that aspirations are formed within “powerful emotional landscapes” (p.92). It should not necessarily be thought that fear should be interpreted as something negative, indeed fear can be motivationally useful (Oyserman and Markus 1990). The importance of fear as a driver of future aspirations is emphasised by Pierce et al. (2015):

“Hopes and expectations are believed to be accompanied by action plans to achieve these goals. Similarly, feared possible selves are believed to represent failures to achieve important goals; thus, individuals are motivated to avoid these possibilities” (p.18).

Within this super-ordinate theme, we certainly see an element of fear involved in the articulated aspirations of participants. This is particularly the case with Megan and Pete, whose narratives give a strong indication that they fear they will 'end up' like those in their immediate space (whether that be in their neighbourhood or close family). The notion of fear manifests itself in subtly different ways for Megan and Pete. For Megan, fear seems to motivate her to work hard and strive to do well in life. For Pete, fear seems to create aspirations that represent a 'ticket out of town', or as Alloway et al.

(2004) put it, aspirations become driven by a pragmatic consideration of how one could escape from a perceived restricted future within ones community. As Pete does not realistically think he will become a professional footballer this suggests that his aspirations are “untampered by reality” (MacLeod 2009, p.257).

Oyserman and Markus (1990) suggest that when individuals have a balance between their expected and feared self then the individual has more motivational control over their behaviour. This is a critical point and particularly relevant to Pete. Whilst he acknowledges the possibility that his future could involve: “*Just sitting at home doing nothing or playing on the Xbox or something*”, he has constructed another more positive future that counter-balances this fearful narrative. Pete being able to offer this counter-balance is important because, as Oyserman and Markus (1990) suggest, when individuals are unable to counter their worries about their futures then the individual may become less motivated to take the action needed to prevent this feared future from becoming a reality. As Megan demonstrates, when faced with the fear of falling into the wrong crowd and the impact it might have on her future, she has constructed an alternative, one that sees her as a high achieving, highly motivated individual. Similarly, whilst John is clearly fearful of the need to join the RAF to realise his aspiration of becoming a pilot, he uses this fear to construct a way in which he can counter his challenges.

Fear is also something that emerges from Sophie’s narrative. However, fear means something entirely different for Sophie. Sophie is fearful of not living up to family expectations, of not being as smart or as academic as her brother and father. So, whilst Megan and Pete seek to be something different from their parents, Sophie seeks the opposite, she wants to be like her father and this motivates her to work hard and do well. In articulating this narrative, Sophie counters the idea that at times she strays into a future where she is far less aspirational, suggesting her feared self may involve:

Some points where I just thought I just don't want to do anything in my future, I want to just like get like a normal, like a minimum paying job and just be happy to myself and just do that rather than like having to work hard (Sophie 3-25)

The benefit of this thought process can be that Sophie is able to identify a self-identifying goal, something she can strive for i.e. doing well academically and following in her father and brother's footsteps, whilst also being aware of the potential consequences of not meeting her personal goal(s) (Oyserman and Saltz 1993), the thought of getting a minimum paying job and doing nothing. In having a balanced possible self, she is able to pragmatically acknowledge that: "*To be where I want to be in life I do need to go to school and get a better education*".

The example of the emotion of fear demonstrates the complexities of aspirations in that Megan, Pete and Sophie, for example, all have a strong element of fear running through their narratives but the personalised nature of aspirations means that fear takes different forms for different individuals and the lives that they live.

One of the ways all participants constructed a positive narrative is through their identification of the skivers at school. The key reason for this divide appears to be because all the participants very much buy into the school ideology. As Cairns (2013) puts it:

"These 'failed individuals' serve as symbolic motivation for the self-governance of others, and thus perform an integral role within dominant stories of success" (p.342).

All participants appeared to use their perceptions of the skivers to project their own high aspirations and were keen to point out that they were the strivers and thus distance themselves from the skivers. By creating a divide

between peer groups, they consciously make a choice to identify themselves within a particular group (Woodward 2000). Much like 'Sophie' in Byrom's (2009) study, they are all able to identify with peers like them, those who place a high value on working hard and academic attainment. They often failed to understand why the skivers had not realised the need to embrace their education and strive to do the best they can and put the failure of the skivers down to a lack of will and motivation or as constructing success as something that is a result of an individual's ability and effort (Spohrer 2016). In doing so, participants create a divide very much like the divide between the 'Brothers' and the 'Hallway Hangers' in MacLeod's (2009) study, who despite living in the same housing project had very different views and experiences of schooling and the achievement ideology.

In describing their peers in such a manner, the five participants begin to categorise themselves and their peers as either supporting the notion of an achievement ideology or not. In doing so they can be seen to establish moral boundaries of deservedness (Pimlott-Wilson 2017). Hence, we see Megan articulating:

Like there's this one girl who's like really really smart but she spends so much time messing around in lessons to the point she doesn't fulfil her potential in a sense but like she rarely comes to lessons, when she does she's just like top of the class (Megan 4-14)

and Del:

They haven't really realised yet or don't really care
EB: Why do you think they don't care?
They might feel like they don't really need school or something yer
(Del 4-6)

Despite their desire to be socially mobile there was very much a sense that participants wanted to 'stay local' and 'keep close' (Archer et al. 2010). This

provides further confusion in the minds of participants in the conflict between the desire to broaden their horizons and their attachment to place. Although all participants saw a future for themselves that involved moving out their immediate neighbourhood, reaffirming research by Kintrea et al. (2011), they all expressed a desire (with the exception of Sophie who was open to the idea of living further afield) to 'keep close' by living in neighbourhoods in close geographical proximity to their existing lives, albeit in 'better' areas. So, whilst Megan and Pete may be critical of their local area they also appeared reluctant to move too far from home. This may be because although they seek to move away from their locality they also want to retain the comfort of 'home' (Hinton 2011), or as Archer and Hiromi (2003) put it, "knowing people and being known" (p.63).

This apparent tension between 'escape' and 'stay local' fits with Hinton's (2011) suggestion that young people can simultaneously articulate a desire to retain and escape the familiarity of home and as young people aspire to develop independence, they do so whilst moving within spaces they recognise as 'home'. So, whilst Megan has a powerful desire to go to university, she feels:

I guess if it's too far away [...] I also wouldn't want to because I guess it's just like, I guess if I'd had experience being away from my parents for a long amount of time before then it would have been okay but just going straight to like being away for a good few months would be like (Megan 4-10)

Similarly, although Sophie was open to moving further afield she still felt that, in terms of where to live:

[...] probably around this sort of area or somewhere in England. I wouldn't really like to move away anywhere because I don't know, I'd just find it hard to leave everyone and just like start a whole new life but I'd like to live around England somewhere (Sophie 1-4)

Archer (2014c) note that although the idea of 'staying close' may have certain benefits (such as emotional security), it can also restrict young people in terms of career options. Only time will tell whether this becomes the case for the five young people in this study.

8.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have put my findings into context by discussing them in relation to the relevant literature.

I found that all five participants in this study are highly aspirational. They are all doing well educationally and want to do well in life. They all have aspirations to further their education through 6th form/college and a university degree. They all aspire to what can be deemed as 'middle-class' jobs and have varying degrees of self-belief that they can achieve these aspirations. In doing so they can be seen to all be:

“Mapping their futures along a series of culturally-approved benchmarks, students project themselves into adult lives that confirm their moral worth, distancing their own imagined futures from one less desirable” (Cairns 2013, p.341).

I discussed the idea that participants feeling empowered to become aspirational could be interpreted as a reaction to a neoliberal discourse, in that they are actively seeking to become the aspirational citizens that Raco (2009) refers to. I argued that the predominant way in which this neoliberal discourse is transmitted into the aspirations of participants is through their daily school lives. The school are clearly driving a strong aspirational message which participants generally buy into. One of the key reasons for this 'buy in' appears to be because all participants are doing well academically at school, thereby gaining the confidence that enables their

aspirations to remain high (Furlong and Biggart 1999). I found that their feelings of empowerment were supported, rather than led by, their home and family life.

In the super-ordinate theme 'Familiarity', I discussed how participants use their environment and their experiences to find something that they can use as a vehicle that would enable them to become aspirational citizens. In doing so, their experiences become a norm and through these norms they became comfortable in articulating their future career choices. Rather than suggesting the young people lack certain forms of capital I found that they use the capital available to them. I suggest they take a 'pragmatic rationality' approach in expressing their aspirations. In taking such an approach, their aspirations become set by the direct context of their individual lives, thus they become seen as realistic and achievable.

I found that many of the career aspirations of participants were linked to hobbies and activities that they enjoy. I applied Hidi and Renninger's (2006) four-phase model of interest to explain the process that leads the young people to have core stable aspirations (based around their hobbies) as well as ones that can be viewed as more temporal.

I also suggest that aspirations do not exist in a personal vacuum and they will be influenced by the experiences of others. I used the work of Ray (2006) and the concept of the 'aspirations window' to discuss the diverse ways in which others influence the young people's aspirations. I found participants used those in their aspirations window in several ways including emulation, motivation and a snowballing of experience.

I then applied Ray's (2006) theory of collective action as a means of influencing aspirations. I discussed how participants often used those close

to them as repositories of pooled information, Del, for example, using grapevine knowledge gained from his older sister and her friends in his articulation of his college aspirations. I also found that when locally embedded knowledge may be missing, participants often appeared to use the experiences of their teachers to 'fill in the blanks'.

I also found that participants often used the experiences of those in their aspirations window to spur them on to raise their aspirations for something different. I then went on to discuss that participants very much lived in the now and how this may at times hinder their aspirations.

In the final super-ordinate theme of 'Broadening Horizons' I discussed that in seeking to become socially mobile, aspirational citizens, participants sought an alternative to their existing situation and environment. I found that much of this was formed around the notion of fear but, because participants were able to balance their feared self with a more positive expected self, they were able to articulate aspirations that rejected their feared possible selves.

I also found that one of the key ways in which participants constructed a positive narrative was by splitting their peer groups at school into the 'strivers' and the 'skivers', ensuring it was clear they considered themselves to be in the 'strivers' group.

Finally, whilst participants wanted to broaden their horizons, there was a sense that this was often conflicted by their attachment to place and what they know. This led to an apparent tension between their desire to 'escape' and their desire to 'stay local' thus causing their broadening horizons to become blurred horizons.

Chapter 9: Implications

Yardley (2000) argues that ultimately the decisive way in which to judge any piece of research is its impact and utility. An ideographic study such as this does not seek to offer generalised conclusions about the lives of all young people from WP backgrounds or indeed about the lives of all young people living in LPNs. Using IPA, it committed itself to explore the phenomenon of aspiration from the perspective of five young people, in a particular context (Smith et al. 2009). It offered a personalised story, based around the lives of these five young people and focused purely on their voices, with no interference from others (such as parents, teachers and siblings).

The study did not start from an assumption that the aspirations of the participants were 'low' as is often portrayed in policy. In doing so it has given the five young participants ownership of their aspirations and given the reader an insight into their lives. Take Pete as an example. At face value Pete has a stereotypical fantasy-like aspiration in that he wants to become a professional footballer. What this study has done is open the door, to find out the reasons behind this aspiration. When we consider Pete's life, we find many things that demonstrate that his aspiration to become a footballer is born out of his everyday experiences. For a start, his father was a football player for Arsenal Reserves, before injury curtailed his career. Perhaps Pete wants to finish the job his father never completed, to 'make it' in football. Perhaps his father supports his son as a projection of his own thwarted ambitions (MacLeod 2009). Pete also enjoys playing football, whether in the 'real' world or through his Xbox, it is a major part of his life. He thinks he is "*half decent*" but acknowledges that he's probably not good enough to become a professional footballer. Why does he still harbour such an aspiration then? When we delve a little further we see the possible reasons. Pete is quite critical of where he lives, calling it "*chavvy*". There is also a real sense in his narrative of a rejection of his family and the mistakes they have made in their lives. He refers to his parents smoking habits and how smoking

“ruins you”. Both his parents were badly behaved at school and his older sister was excluded from school. Perhaps then his lofty ambition is an expression of his desire to reject how his life might turn out, replacing it with an alternate reality in which he flourishes. Because football is a major part of his life, he enjoys it and he thinks he is a decent player, football becomes the vehicle which he uses to formulate this expression.

The implications of this are that HEIs and schools should recognise that aspirations in young people are based on what happens to them in their own everyday world, not on policy-driven notions that aspiring to HE can in some way be created or raised solely through outreach and other similar activities. This does not mean aspirations should be disregarded but it should be acknowledged that focusing on aspirations alone will not widen HE participation (Campbell and McKendrick 2017), the issues around HE participation are far more complex than that. The results of this study should be of interest to policymakers, WP practitioners and researchers as well as anyone with a general interest in the aspirations of young people.

However, in simply noting that the findings of this current study are compatible with existing research does not provide evidence that this study demonstrates features of validity (Yardley 2011). For example, this current study supports existing research that suggests hobbies and interests, as well as things that young people deem themselves to be good at, play a significant role in career aspiration formation (Archer and Hiromi 2003; Turok et al. 2009; Kintrea et al. 2011). It also supports research such as Kintrea et al. (2011) that rejects the idea that disadvantaged neighbourhoods encourage inhabitants to be inward-looking and fatalistic.

For the research findings to demonstrate relevance it must go further than this, it must be able to answer questions such as: Does the research add something to the existing body of knowledge relating to a particular issue or

aspect of life? Does it enrich our understanding? (Finlay and Evans 2009). Below I discuss the implications of this study, particularly in relation to outreach programmes. As Yardley (2011) observes, there is little point in carrying out research unless it has the potential to make a difference. The implications are split into two sections: implications for policy and practice; and for research.

9.1 Implications for policy and practice

Raco (2009) argues that young people's voices and aspirations have long been ignored in policy. The consequence of this is a growing distance between the lived experiences of young people and the futures they are encouraged to follow (Brown 2011). This current study contributes to a growing body of research evidence that questions the very notion that the aspirations of young people from WP or disadvantaged backgrounds are as low as often implied in policy. Thus, this fundamentally questions the need to 'raise' aspirations through outreach.

Rather than the problem being about low aspirations, this current study supports the argument that it is the *capacity* to aspire rather than aspiration itself that needs to be strengthened in young people from WP backgrounds. As Appadurai (2004) suggests, it is the capacity to aspire, rather than aspiration per se, that needs to be strengthened within certain communities. Prodonovich et al. (2014) add, aspirations do not deliver an individual from a start to an end point, instead an understanding in how to navigate the "dense combination of nodes and pathways" (Appadurai 2004, p.69) is required. Central to the capacity to aspire therefore is the idea of a navigational capacity, with more privileged members of society being more supple in navigating the complex steps between norms and specific wants and needs. Thus, Appadurai suggests:

“The more privileged in society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically [...] The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity, have a more brittle horizon of aspirations” (2004, p.69).

With the participants in this study already having ‘high’ aspirations, it is this capacity to aspire that needs attention if their aspirations are ever to be realised. As Atkins and Ebdon (2014) suggest, even if aspirations are higher than thought, they still require some seeding. At this stage in his life, John knows he wants to become a commercial airline pilot, Del knows he wants to become a vet. For John and Del knowing the end goal is not the issue, the real issue for both of them is how will they become? What experiences will they be able to draw upon? How will they be able to navigate the ‘nodes and pathways’ that Appadurai (2004) refers to? This leads to an argument for a focus on programmes that seek to increase social capital (Nicholson and Cleland 2017) and cultural capital and habitus (Hayton and Bengry-Howell 2016).

This has led several authors to recommend the need to reconceptualise the concept of low aspiration. Watts and Bridges (2006) suggest rather than a focus on raising aspiration towards HE, it may be more pertinent to ensure young people are given sufficient knowledge to have the opportunity to make a considered choice whether to reject (or not) HE. This idea is also agreed by Cummings (2012) who suggests a focus on improvements to opportunities and information rather than attitudinal changes per se. This is backed up by research undertaken by Atherton et al. (2009) who found that students (Y7) from lower socio-economic backgrounds actually had higher HE aspirations than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. The report suggested that addressing the gap between aspirations and knowledge was key rather than raising aspirations. Menzies (2013) also argues that the real problem for young people is not ‘where am I going?’ but ‘how do I get there?’ and the focus should be on keeping aspirations on

track. Finally, Campbell and McKendrick (2017) suggest focusing on capability formation rather than aspirations. The commonality amongst this body of research being the need to help young people along the journey rather than focusing solely on the end goal.

In many ways, the policy drive for young people to become aspirational citizens, based within a neo-liberal discourse, is having a positive effect if we look in isolation at the lives of the participants within this study. They are all aspirational, they aspire to 'middle-class' jobs, they want to do well in life. This appears to be largely driven by their school lives in which the aspirational message is trickling down to 'ground level' in the context of the lives of the five participants. We see this in the life of Megan, someone who has left her past self behind and opted to become this hard-working, aspiring individual. However, Zipin et al. (2015) offer some words of caution. They suggest that the promotion of the ethic: 'If you work hard enough you can attain your dream' (something we see in the narratives of participants), in which young people are incited and reinforced to pursue out of reach dreams of upward social mobility is:

“The hope-goading gloss on the other side of sterner neoliberal injunctions [...] that all individuals have responsibility to engage and succeed as lifelong learners” (p.232).

Only time will tell whether the words of Zipin et al. (2015) become reality for the five young people within this study. It must also be remembered that, as all participants acknowledge themselves through their descriptions of the skivers, the premise of aspiration does not work for all. In the scramble along the aspiration rat race, some are left behind. Those young people being left behind should not be forgotten by policymakers.

If the primary policy implication of this study is that it is the *capacity* to aspire rather than low aspiration that is the issue for the five participants, how does

this trickle down to outreach programmes themselves? For a start, the young people I interviewed highlighted very clearly that the decision, or indeed ability, to enter HE is formed within a myriad of intertwined experiences formed within everyday life. It is about who is in your aspirations window, it is about family norms and values, it is about school life, it is about a pragmatic acknowledgement as to whether HE is right for you. However, for some, attendance at an outreach event might be that turning point, that light bulb moment that sets them along the HE path. So, whilst Byrom (2009) points out that it remains problematic to suggest that outreach is the sole contributing factor influencing young people in considering HE as a future option, the importance of outreach programmes should not be underplayed. As Webster and Atherton (2016) also suggest, the issues around low levels of HE progression from certain groups of young people are deep rooted and cultural, and HEIs on their own cannot fix the problem. Whilst they are clearly not the only influence on whether a young person from a WP background progresses into HE, they can be one such influence in that they can create 'wow' moments that can affect one's perception of what is possible (Brown 2011), particularly when there may be a lack of parental knowledge or understanding of the education system (Koshy et al. 2017).

For the five participants of this study, their experiences of outreach programmes have generally been positive so far, as Sophie discusses:

We've had tours like around the arts section and the media sections and like the fashion designing places which was like really cool to look at

EB: How did it feel when you arrived, what were you feeling?

It was it was kind of, I was like excited to be there because obviously it's like somewhere I'd never been before so it was kind of like looking around and I was really intrigued by everything that was going on and all the people were walking around

EB: How did you feel at the end; did you feel any different to when you got there?

I still felt pretty positive about everything, there was nothing that put me off going to university and it looked like, because all the people that were there, they were all like walking around, they looked like

happy rather than just being forced to go to like a place like that they've kind of chose to go there and they looked happy (Sophie 2-20)

This is similar to John's experiences:

EB: Can you remember what feelings you had when you arrived?
Yer I quite liked it, wasn't scared, it was quite cool (John 2-17)

For Pete, university clearly felt alien to him, but a tour had begun to take some of his worries away:

EB: Like how did you feel when you went to that, when you arrived at Grove University the other week?

I felt small

EB: What made you feel like that?

Because I'm not used to going to like university and this schools quite small so I'm used to

EB: Did that change throughout the day?

Yer I got like more confident like by the end but

EB: What other things were you thinking when you got there?

Nervous

EB: [...] What did you learn then from that?

Um that [pause] it's like it's scary at first but it won't be like when [...]
(Pete 2-15)

One of the key implications of this study for practice is therefore: how can outreach programmes engage more intimately with what matters in the lives of young people? As John suggests:

University trips are fun depending on what you are doing

EB: Like what do you mean?

If they're to do with technology then yer, anything else probably not
(John 4-15)

With scarce resources (financial, time and staffing), tailoring programmes to become more responsive to the needs of participants is of course not easy but in John's case it seems vitally important. As Whitty et al. (2015) imply,

universities need to move beyond generic campus visits, with Thornton et al. (2014) suggesting targeted approaches, sitting alongside more universal approaches, can ensure both inclusivity and support/advice which is most appropriate for students' needs. To achieve this, there needs to be a greater understanding of the complexities of individual's lives, in order to design programmes that are relevant and responsive to these lives. Perhaps, for example, Hidi and Renninger's (2006) four-phase model of interest development (see section 8.2) might be a useful tool to use as a basis for understanding and nurturing aspirations, by enabling and supporting *situational* interests to become *individual* interests. For example, supporting Pete in developing his interest in becoming a lawyer.

Based on the findings of this study, I now raise three issues that appear especially important if outreach programmes are to engage with young people's lives and what matters to them in their life: are young people being targeted by outreach programmes for the right reasons?; the need to nurture and support aspirations; and the need to widen the aspirations window.

9.1.1 Are young people being targeted by outreach programmes for the right reasons?

All the young people who took part in this study are doing well academically at school. Not only do they work hard, they achieve good grades. This gives them the confidence and self-belief that they can achieve the things that they aspire to (it can also lead to anxiety and self-doubt). Thus, it can be argued that their high aspirations are because of their high grades (although Doyle and Griffin (2012) suggest that raising aspirations can also improve confidence) and thereby focusing on raising attainment will increase the pool of young people from WP backgrounds with the potential to progress into HE. After undertaking research into 'what works', Harrison and Waller (2017) recommend a shift towards WP activities that focus on raising attainment.

The evidence from this current study indicates that this may well be the case and the importance of attainment should not be underestimated.

Despite this implication, it must not be assumed that attainment is the only barrier to HE for young people from WP backgrounds. The issue is far more complex than that. Although CFE Research (2015) suggest that prior attainment is a key predictor of HE participation, one cannot simply assume that raising attainment levels will increase progression rates. This is picked up in the 2016 White Paper (Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice), which suggests that disparities in HE participation between groups cannot be explained by educational attainment alone. However, the emphasis on attainment raising activities is likely to grow in the coming years, with OFFA guidance to HEIs concerning their 2018-19 access agreements outlining the first strategic priority as:

“Increase your work to raise attainment in schools and colleges for those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups, including through outreach and/or strategic relationships” (OFFA 2017e, p.1).

The question must be asked therefore, given that they all aspire to HE and are doing well academically, should Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie be targeted by WP outreach programmes based on the fact they live in a LPN? Would it not be more effective to target the ‘skivers’ at their school? As Harrison and Waller (2017) suggest, there is a risk that efforts to widen participation will merely reorganise the allocation of those already en route to HE without influencing the overall pool of potential young people entering HE. The authors provide evidence that over 50% of the people who took part in their research felt that recruiting an advantaged student from a disadvantaged area was equally or more important to their own HEI than recruiting a disadvantaged student from an advantaged area. This argument reignites Gorard’s (2013) viewpoint that WP activities target the ‘usual suspects’, with their being a limited pool of young people who could

potentially be affected by WP interventions, as well as Doyle and Griffin's (2012) view that to widen participation, the correct targeting must be undertaken to ensure the right young people are involved.

I would argue that yes, Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie should be part of an outreach cohort, on the basis that there is no automatic assumption that any of them have a 'rite of passage' into HE. This is particularly the case for Pete. None of his family have ever achieved HE level qualifications, indeed he does not appear to have anyone in his aspirations window with HE experiences to draw upon. Thus, his experiences at school (and I include outreach within that) appear to be his only means that allow his access into the world of HE. Similarly, John is in the same boat, with no family experiences to draw upon. Whilst the others may have indicated there is a family background of HE, there was no real sense in any accounts that it was automatically assumed that they would be going to university. Whilst Megan has an older brother, for example, who is currently an undergraduate, she also has older siblings who have not gone down the HE route. Sophie, whilst possibly demonstrating the highest likelihood of progressing into HE could change her mind depending on her career choices.

I suggest that the key reason why it is right to target young people such as Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie is not primarily because they live in an LPN (none of them gave a strong implication that where they were from was going to hold them back in life). It is because they need guidance in not only deciding whether HE is the right option for them, but also the information to make that informed choice. Hence, this implies that the role of outreach should be to nurture and support young peoples' aspirations rather than primarily seeking to raise them.

9.1.2 Nurturing and supporting aspirations

As we have firmly established, the aspirations of the five young people within this study are high and the possibility of HE is in the minds of all of them. However, what appeared to be lacking at this stage of their lives was the ability to make an informed choice, based upon the relevant information. The knock-on effect of this was that they often put off or deferred their decision-making process to a later date. This suggests that there is a greater need for outreach to nurture and support, rather than 'raise', aspirations.

As Moore et al. (2013) suggest, young people from WP backgrounds often have less access to formal information advice and guidance and make greater use of 'hot' knowledge. This is very much the case for the five young people in this current study and has been discussed at an earlier stage. Therefore, there is a need for each young person to have access to good careers and subject advice (Sammons et al. 2015). However, as Moore et al. (2013) go on to suggest, simply providing more information is not enough, the young people need support that is personalised to them and the decisions that they make. Take John. In the following extract he is confused as to whether he needs to go to university or not to become a pilot: "*On the internet some people say you don't need to, some people say you do need to, it's different people*". How can he make an informed choice as to whether he needs an HE qualification to become a pilot when his primary data source gives him such conflicting information? Del also suggests that: "*Like if there was something that I wanted to do and didn't have to do university then I probably wouldn't do it*".

For John and Del the issue is therefore not whether they aspire to HE but whether their career aspirations dictate that they need an HE level qualification. John and Del don't need their HE aspirations to be raised, they need access to appropriate careers advice and guidance to allow them to make an informed choice as to whether HE is the right option for them. This

is a fundamentally critical distinction that goes to the very heart of outreach. Indeed, the role of outreach programmes as providers of impartial information advice and guidance poses a potential tension for HEIs (Moore et al. 2013). With the increasing marketisation of the HE sector, outreach staff often find themselves located within the marketing departments of institutions, leading to a “blurring of the lines between access activity and recruitment activity” (Harrison and Waller 2017, p.157) and suggests the primary role of outreach as being a recruiting tool for a particular institution. Research by Gartland (2012), for example, found that student ambassadors’ primary contribution was to promote their own institutions rather than to widen participation. According to Moore et al. (2013) this opens institutions up to two potential criticisms: outreach is promoting HE above other options; and that advice by institutions is provided when they may be under pressure to meet recruitment targets. If an outreach programme successfully enables participants to make an informed choice that HE is not for them, is that programme a success or is it a failure for the institution(s) involved?

This suggests that there is a vital role for active collaboration between HEIs (Harrison and Waller 2017), with OFFA (2017b) acknowledging the important element collaboration plays in being able to offer impartial advice and guidance. The opportunity for the sector to work in closer collaboration is there with the onset of NCOP (see 1.1.4). However, currently funding is only scheduled to last until the academic year 2019-20. Collaborative working will need to be something of a long-term plan if it is to have the desired effect. Much of this might depend on how well the sector is able to evidence the success of NCOP (something it was perceived to have not been able to do under Aimhigher).

Clearly schools have a vital role to play in offering the relevant support to young people as they are in the front line. Therefore, the relationship

between HEIs and local schools is vitally important. As Passy et al. (2009) suggest, this is necessary to:

“Effect a culture change’ [...] so that they can discover a common purpose...of encouraging non-traditional groups of young people to participate in higher education” (p.8).

This is in line with Gale et al. (2010) who suggest that learning what schools and communities understand as the ‘problem’ can be a preliminary step in designing interventions and that interventions may be improved in ways such as working with the school leadership and engaging in the development of the curriculum. Whilst Lakeside Academy has experienced a culture change, with increasing numbers of pupils progressing into HE, clearly not every school will be going through a similar experience. Therefore, outreach teams have a vital role to play in working with local schools to effect such a culture change. Research by Atherton et al. (2015), for example, found that pupils who attended schools that offered HE support activities had a much better understanding of the HE student support system than pupils at schools which did not.

9.1.3 Widening the aspirations window

In section 8.2 I introduced the concept of the aspirations window (Ray 2006) and discussed the different ways in which participants used the experiences of those in their own aspirations window. The implication of these experiences for outreach is potentially two-fold: the ability to bring people into the aspirations window i.e. mentoring and contact with HE students; and closer engagement with those already in the window.

I have already spoken about the need to nurture and support young peoples’ aspirations by providing them with the information to be able to make an informed choice. Whilst this ‘cold’ knowledge is clearly valuable, outreach

programmes can also play a part in providing 'hot' knowledge, particularly if the young people have trouble decoding 'cold' knowledge. For Sophie, seeing 'real people' gives her great belief that she could be in their shoes one day:

I see other people doing things, like in person and I really just want to like aspire to doing what they're doing...so people will come in with dance workshops with us and they'll tell us how they've been, like big dance companies and that sort of thing like aspires me to think like could be me in a few years and its mainly just like real people talking about it not on books or DVDs (Sophie 4-7)

This very much indicates the importance of providing young people with access to HE students who can share 'hot' knowledge'. The use of HE students in outreach programmes is already a well-established part of most outreach programmes, with mentoring being cited as one of the most prevalent outreach activities within access agreements (Bowes et al. 2013a), given the assumption that existing HE students can be seen as "credible information-givers" (Hatt et al. 2009, p.341). However, the assumption that they can automatically be seen as role models is questioned in research conducted by Gartland (2015) who studied the role of student ambassadors. According to Gartland (2015) much depends on the positioning of these ambassadors. If, as Gartland suggests, ambassadors are placed in the context with 'formal attributes' then this may entrench young peoples' subjectivities in opposition to ambassadors, which could potentially be damaging in developing their identities as HE students. Both Gartland (2015) and Smith (2011b) suggest the need for more informal interactions where young people find it easier to relate to ambassadors/HE students. According to Smith (2011b), this would equip the young people with 'hot' knowledge, something that I suggest the participants within this current study may lack. Such an approach can be seen as 'people-rich' (Gale et al. 2010) and would ensure that ongoing guidance relates to an individual's own situation and therefore be more relevant to their experiences.

In 'Whatever it Takes', Tough (2009) discusses the work of Geoffrey Canada in Harlem, New York. Canada's idea was that for poorer children to compete with middle-class peers everything needed to be changed in their lives, from their schools to their neighbourhoods to the practices of their parents. Whilst not advocating such a radical programme, the findings of this current study do suggest that outreach needs to engage more with the people already in the aspirations window of young people. Take Pete. Whilst Pete may have someone at home to talk to about his future and his parents appear supportive of the possibility of Pete going to university, he does not give any indication that they were able to impart much knowledge or information about university. Maybe then, his parents, as much as Pete, would benefit from outreach programmes? As Kintrea et al. (2011) suggest, supporting young people's aspirations means working with their parents as well as the young people themselves. Perhaps, as well as arranging a campus visit for Pete, it might be desirable to also arrange one for his parents? Maybe that would help to make HE and HE aspirations "more known and familiar within families' everyday lives" (Archer et al. 2013, p.189). According to Menzies (2013) the most effective way of achieving this is to create an environment which taps into their (parents) needs and interests on their own terms, with Harris and Goodall (2007) for example, suggesting initiatives that relate to family dynamics being especially effective in engaging parents in achievement raising.

9.2 Implications for research

In July 2017, I presented my research findings at an international WP conference in Glasgow. I asked the audience (of around 25-30 people) if anyone had heard of IPA. The response was a resounding no! This to me seems like a huge opportunity to encourage the use of IPA and other phenomenological approaches into the WP research spectrum. By demonstrating the complexity of lived experience, this study has shown the potential strengths of IPA and the increased understanding it can bring of the

lives of young people from WP backgrounds. By using IPA, the study was able to not only identify the participant's aspirations but by setting them in the context of their everyday lives, it has added an extra layer of research knowledge that helps to explain 'why' young people hold the aspirations that they do. The ideographic approach, which involved a close engagement between the researcher and the small sample of participants (Wagstaff et al. 2014), provided rich data that put the lives of the young people right at the heart of the research process. It asked, 'how does it feel?' to be a young person from a WP background facing a multitude of choices as they progress through their childhood towards their adult lives and the challenges that it brings. In gaining a deeper understanding of the lives of young people from WP backgrounds, outreach activities and programmes can be developed around their lives and what matter to them in their life. This would put the young people themselves at the very heart of outreach. This seems key if outreach programmes are to remain a valuable tool in encouraging young people from WP backgrounds to consider HE as a future option.

This is not to say that there are not challenges in incorporating IPA into the existing knowledge base. For a start, approaches such as IPA are resource intensive and they require time to 'get right'. With the pressure on institutions to deliver 'outputs' there is a danger that approaches like IPA will be left behind as institutions seek to deliver on their Access Agreement requirements. With very little use of IPA within WP research there is also little existing knowledge of the approach within the field. In this sense, researchers are starting afresh with little experience or previous studies to draw upon. As noted by Crawford et al. (2017a), there are also issues around a lack of training and guidance in qualitative approaches, as well as lack of access to necessary software. This does not mean that researchers should be put off from adopting phenomenological approaches such as IPA, which Finlay (2009) summarises as having the:

"Potential to offer rich narratives or descriptions of embodiments, emotion, cognition, language and the culture or context" (p.146).

With a growing concern that the sector is unable to provide robust evidence to suggest the positive effects of outreach programmes on participants and HE progression rates, there has been a recent push for the introduction of Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) in WP research. A 2015 HEFCE report, for example, suggested:

“RCTs and studies with comparison groups provide the strongest evidence of impact and what works and should be encouraged for new interventions or innovations to existing approaches” (CFE Research 2015, p.96).

This recommendation follows in the footsteps of the reviews conducted by Gorard et al. (2006) which had noted the lack of experimental/comparator designs and Stanley and Goodlad (2010) who had raised a concern that it is difficult to evaluate the effects of interventions designed to support progression without the use of comparison groups of some kind. Although Crawford et al. (2017b) suggest there are a number of challenges of implementing RCTs, according to Haynes et al. (2012) one of the key benefits of such an approach being the elimination of much bias that can be associated with evaluation.

Whilst there are merits in more ‘scientific’ modes of enquiry and approaches such as RCTs that can potentially improve the knowledge base in research which focuses on programme effectiveness, or ‘what works’, more interpretative forms of research that put young people’s lives at the very heart of the process must not be pushed aside or forgotten. Indeed, encouraging the use of interpretative approaches can address concerns that qualitative methods can get overlooked or not supported within WP and outreach research (Crawford et al. 2017a).

This study demonstrated the value of a small, phenomenological snap-shot of the lives of five young people from WP backgrounds. I would encourage

researchers to adopt more interpretative modes of data collection to build a greater picture of the lifeworld's of WP students. Whilst there is merit in positivist approaches to data collection that may be concerned with the size of an association (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014) i.e. reducing aspiration to something measurable to establish the effectiveness of different programmes or activities, interpretative approaches can complement this by providing a deeper level of insight that more positivist approaches may not be able to offer. This would therefore offer richer accounts of the phenomenon under question (in this case aspiration) (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014). As Larkin (2017) states, the benefits of such an approach being:

‘Sometimes we may wish to use peoples experience as a means of understanding the broader meaning [...] of an event or process, in order to understand its wider constitution and development’

Finally, by offering different epistemological perspectives, the sector can improve its approach to WP research and evaluation, in order to more fully understand the complexities that are involved in young people's decision making processes around HE participation (Whitty et al. 2015).

9.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the implications of my research findings for policy, practice and research.

In terms of policy, the findings of this research support a growing number of studies which suggest that rather than a policy focus on ‘raising’ aspirations, the focus should be on nurturing and supporting aspirations. This means focusing on the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004) as opposed to aspirations per se.

To achieve this, outreach programmes need to focus more on the lives and experiences of participants and what matters to them in that life. To do this, it needs to be ensured that the most appropriate young people are targeted, and collaborative working is needed to ensure aspirations are nurtured and supported. Greater use should be made of a young person's aspiration window, whether that means bringing 'new' people in to that window or supporting those already there.

With an apparent leaning towards more 'scientific' research approaches such as RCTs in the field of WP research, this study serves as a timely reminder that approaches at the other end of the epistemological spectrum should not be forgotten. They can provide rich sources of data that puts the young person and their lives at the very heart of the process. In gaining this more in-depth knowledge of their lives, outreach programmes can be adapted and tailored to take account of the wider experiences of WP students. With the benefits this can bring, I would hope other researchers will consider more interpretative approaches as the sector comes under increasing pressure to demonstrate 'what works'.

Chapter 10: Wrapping Things Up

In this closing chapter, I revisit my primary research questions. I pay one last visit to reflexivity, lay out the next steps for this study, and provide my own definition of aspiration before some concluding thoughts.

10.1 Research questions revisited

In section 1.2 I posed my primary research questions that this study set out to explore. As a conclusion, I now provide a summary of my response to those two questions.

10.1.1 What are the aspirations of young people living in LPNs?

Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie do not lack aspiration, nor do they suffer from a 'poverty' of aspiration. This in itself is an important and perhaps unsurprising finding as it supports a growing band of research that questions the idea that young people from WP backgrounds suffer from low levels of aspiration and thus need their aspirations raised, particularly in aspiring to HE. All the participants have some form of aspiration to progress into HE later in life. Some are also pragmatic enough to acknowledge that HE might not be for them. Because they all want to do well in life and aspire to 'middle-class' jobs, this also suggests that they buy into the idea of becoming aspirational citizens (Raco 2009).

I found that alongside these doxic aspirations, the young people also aspired to be happy, stressing the importance of doing what they want to do with their lives, for it was *their* life. To them, success is about achieving the personal things that you set out to achieve, not how much money you have or other signs of material wealth. Some want to travel and see more, some

want to be happy and earn enough money to live, one wants to write a book. These more intrinsic aspirations appeared to happily co-exist with their ambitions of success within the worlds of education and employment (See Appendix 8).

10.1.2 How are these aspirations shaped by their lived experience?

To provide an original contribution to knowledge, this study went further than merely outlining the aspirations of young people from WP backgrounds. It explored the everyday lives of five young people to understand how these experiences shape their aspirations. It also explored why these experiences shape aspirations, so, for example, why are the career aspirations of young people predominantly related to their hobbies and interests?

In exploring these experiences, the study became a journey. Not only has it been a journey for myself as a researcher but it has also been a journey for the participants. Over the year I have known them, they have made their GCSE choices and moved up a year at school. Some of them have had to deal with changes in their personal lives - parents splitting up and siblings moving back into the family home. They are also increasingly faced with confusing choices as they become almost stuck in a no man's land between being a child and having to make choices about their adult lives. As Sophie eloquently puts it:

Most people kind of expect that we're be like perfect children who like always put their head down and work as hard as they can. Obviously that's not true, loads of people don't do that but we're kind of just expected to always like think about what we're going to do when were older, like you have to think about it now like rather than just like you're 14 years old, you're still a child, you don't have to think about all these crazy things. They just expect us to like act like adults even though we're barely teenagers (Sophie 1-20)

In order to attempt to contextualise their journey into a model that demonstrates Appadurai's (2004) notion that aspirations involve some form of navigational capacity, in Figure 13 I present the 'Aspirational Journey' for Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie. The model represents the close bond between their lived experiences and the aspirations that they articulated.

As displayed within the model, in analysing participant accounts I identified three super-ordinate themes: 'Empowerment'; 'Familiarity'; and 'Broadening Horizons' that helped to explain how every day experiences shape the aspirations of the participants. The figure demonstrates the complex web of experiences and feelings that help to create their aspirations. Aspirations are very much formed, as Appadurai (2004) suggests, in "the thick of social life" (p.67). It must also be stressed that the journey is not meant as a generic journey of aspiration formation amongst young people, or indeed amongst young people from WP backgrounds. Everyone navigates their own unique journey through their own lived experiences, that help to create and develop their personalised aspirations. It thereby represents the lived experiences of the five young people who took part in this research, outlining the journey that these specific young people undertake in formulating their aspirations. It does however provide a framework that could be developed in the future to understand the journeys of other young people from WP backgrounds. Would there be points of similarity with the experiences of the participants within this study? Would the super-ordinate themes be different? This would enable a broader picture of the lived experiences of young people from WP backgrounds to emerge.

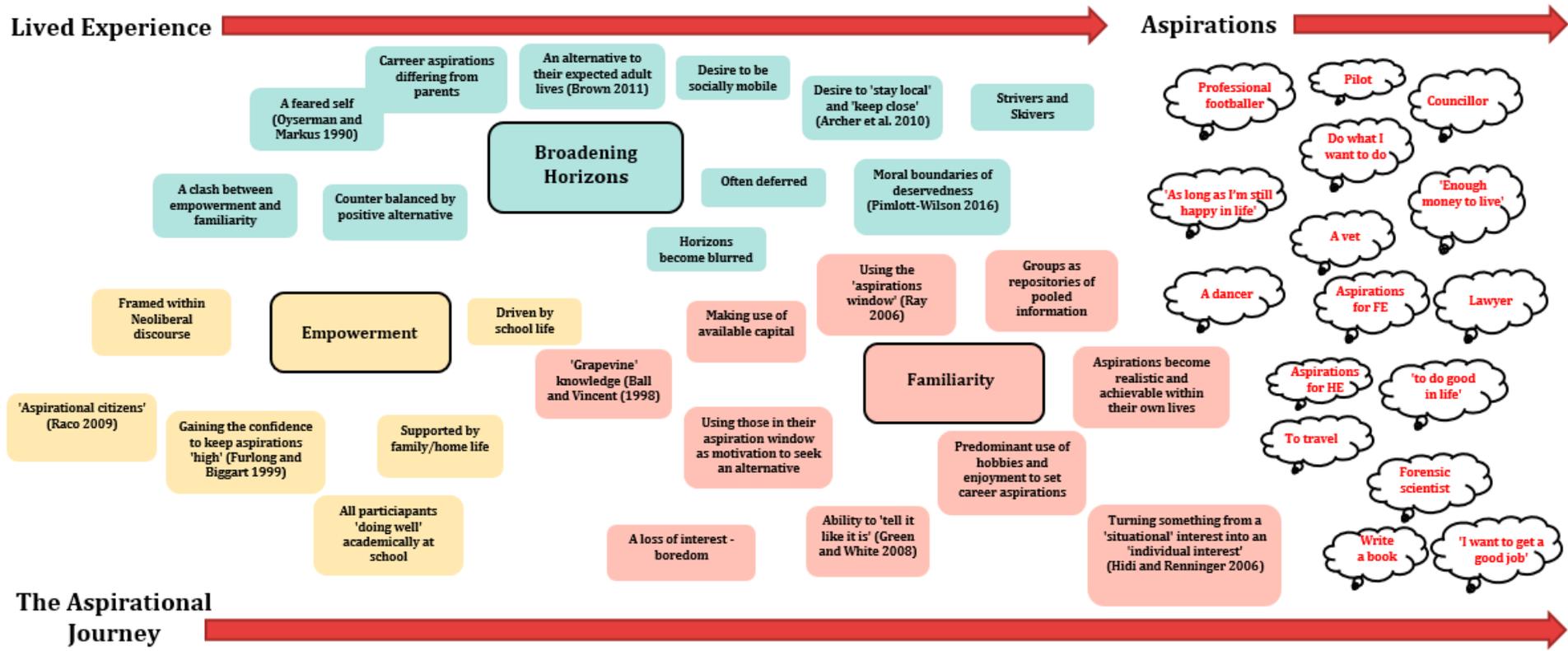


Figure 13: The Aspirational Journey

The model also suggests that it is too simplistic to imply that aspirations can simply be raised through programmes such as outreach without considering the wider lives of the young people who participate in such programmes. These wider lives may be complex and challenging with outreach playing a very small part in their decision-making process.

'Empowerment' explored how through their everyday lives, the young people feel empowered to become aspirational. I found that this was primarily driven by their school lives, in which the school drives a very clear message of hope, of working hard and achieving your goals in life. Participants, although reluctantly at times, generally bought into this ethos and felt empowered to aspire, to want to do well in life. This must also be linked to all participants doing well academically at school. I also found that whilst their school lives created feelings of empowerment, this was supported within their home and family lives.

In the super-ordinate theme 'Familiarity' I found that to become aspirational, participants needed something to attach their aspirations to. Participants made use of the capital available to them to articulate aspirations that in the context of their own lives made their aspirations seem realistic and desirable. Many of their career aspirations were closely linked to their hobbies and interests which they attached a worth to. They did this by turning something from a 'situational' interest into an 'individual' interest (Hidi and Renninger 2006). In doing so not only did it give them the confidence to aspire to a certain profession, it enabled them to create the determination to overcome barriers that they may face in trying to achieve their aspirations.

I also found that the young people do not create aspirations in a vacuum, they do so by interacting with those in their aspirations window (Ray 2006). Participants used the experiences of others in a multitude of ways, including motivation, emulation and reinforcement. Crucially, participants also used the

more negative experiences of others as a way of motivating themselves to seek an alternative to those experiences.

The final super-ordinate theme 'Broadening Horizons' found that participants were constructing futures that used their current situation as a yardstick to seek an alternative to their expected adult lives (Brown 2011). This was reflected in their career aspirations that differed from the occupations of their parents. For some, fear appeared to be a strong factor in their desire to seek an alternative. However, the participants within this study were able to counter-balance their feared self with a positive alternative and therefore were able to articulate 'lofty' ambitions rather than 'accepting their lot'.

This super-ordinate theme also demonstrated the dilemmas or crossroads that young people face in developing their aspirations. How do they rationalise the dilemma between 'keeping close' and being socially mobile? I also found that participants were often unsure, or indeed unwilling, to consider their future, preferring to live in the now. This meant that their broadening horizons often started to become blurred horizons as they were faced with making decisions about their future.

10.2 Reflexivity revisited

In accordance with the suggestion of Langdrige (2007), having discussed reflexivity in the introduction chapter as well as at the end of the methods chapter, I revisit reflexivity one last time, here at the end of the study.

The hermeneutic nature of IPA means that the researcher can be seen to have a dual role. Like the participant, the researcher draws on their own resources to make sense of the world. The researcher however only has

access to the experiences of participants through what the participant tells them, which is then seen through the researcher's own lens (Smith et al. 2009). Therefore, the findings of this research represent a reflection of my understanding of the interviews conducted with five young people. Van Manen (2007) adds an additional layer by suggesting that this becomes a linguistic project in that the researcher is trying to make these interpretations of experience "reflectively understandable and intelligible" (p.125). So, what might have affected my understanding?

At the start of the thesis I outlined the driving force behind the study. I stated from the outset that I wanted to do things differently and explore aspirations as a construct of everyday experience that moved away from a deficit approach that assumed aspirations would be low. In doing so I attempted to share my values, interests and assumptions and the role that they played in my understanding of the lives of participants. Disclosing such information can help the reader to interpret and understand my findings as well as considering possible alternatives (Elliott et al. 1999). However, I needed to make sure that by making these disclosures I did not let my emotions and my desire to see aspiration through a new light affect the data. Through the methodology chapters I outlined the various strategies I developed to ensure this was the case.

One of the ways in which my interpretations were affected, and this can be seen as the main caveat of this study, was the powerful influence of Lakeside Academy in the process. This study is merely a reflection of the experiences of five young people within one school within one area of England. Because of that, my interpretations may have been very different had I conducted my research in another school, particularly one that was not driving such a clear aspirational message.

Because of the age of participants, their possible vulnerability and the potential that they could be asked to discuss elements of their lives that they felt uncomfortable about, ethical considerations were at the forefront of this study throughout. This was especially the case in the interview process itself, where, as Smith et al. (2009) point out, the researcher has an ethical responsibility to the participant. This meant that although I sought to enter the lives of the five participants and establish what mattered to them in that life and thus adopt an 'insiders' perspective (Conrad 1990), I had to do so at a respectful distance. Therefore, it can be said that my ability to interpret the lives of participants was affected by not only the level in which they allowed me to enter their lives but also the level I allowed myself to enter, based on my professional responsibilities as a researcher. Keeping that distance was also necessary in order to allow for the ability to challenge and be critically analytical (Finlay and Evans 2009). This meant that as well as engaging in the hermeneutics of empathy that attempts to reconstruct the original experience as it is (Smith et al. 2009), I also at times needed to engage with a hermeneutics of questioning (Smith et al. 2009) in interpreting experiences when participants would have been unlikely, unable or unwilling to see or acknowledge themselves (Smith 2004). In adopting an empathic and questioning approach, it can be said that I attempted to do justice to the totality of the lifeworlds of the five participants (Smith and Eatough 2012).

From a professional and personal viewpoint this study has been an enlightening experience; it has opened my eyes to different ways of viewing the world. From a professional viewpoint, the use of IPA has enabled me to adopt a new epistemological perspective, one that I had been intrigued about for so long but had been unable to enter. From a personal perspective it has made me look at the world in a different light, it has made me question taken-for-granted assumptions (particularly of other people). It has made me realise that there is always a story behind a headline. In spending time with the five participants, listening to their stories, finding out about their lives, it led me to often think about their lives, to wonder about the challenges they may face, the difficulties they may encounter. In terms of what it means for

the five young people who took part in this research, by giving voice to them and by listening to their stories I hope that this research can be seen as:

“A pertinent reminder of the importance of listening non-judgementally to individual stories to understand what they mean to an individual in the context of their lives” (Doutre et al. 2013, p.37).

10.3 What next?

If aspirations are a journey, then, whilst this thesis ends here, a study of these young people’s aspirations cannot end at this point, for their journey has only just begun. It would not be fair to be left in suspense in not knowing whether the young people in this study ever achieve all or indeed any of their aspirations. Will Sophie become a dancer, a forensic scientist or neither? Will John continue with his love of technology; will he still want to be an airline pilot in two or three years’ time? How many of them will progress into HE? Will they ‘stay close’ or spread their wings?

There are so many unanswered questions. It is my intention therefore, to seek funding to continue this study post-doctorate, to revisit the young people as they progress through their educational lives and beyond. It is only by revisiting their lives that we can truly begin to assess their aspirations and the impact their lived experiences have had on these aspirations.

This study also gives plenty of opportunities to be expanded in the future. What are the lived experiences of the ‘skivers’ that the participants refer to? Do they really have low levels of aspirations, do they not care about their education and their futures (as perceived by the five participants)? How would their ‘aspirational journey’ look, would it differ from the young people who took part in this study? What would their super-ordinate themes be? It would also be interesting to hear the perspective of their parents. What do

they want their children to achieve? Do they view them as highly aspirational individuals? What were their aspirations when they were 14-15 years of age? What is the school's perspective?

By adopting more interpretative approaches such as IPA, these types of questions can begin to be answered. This would enable the sector to build a more comprehensive knowledge base of the lives of young people from WP backgrounds. In doing so, it would reflect OFFA's (2015) expectations that universities seek to be learner-focused and listen to the voices of learners in order to understand and respond to their needs, as well as addressing concerns over the lack of robust evidence within outreach research.

10.4 Defining aspiration

Earlier on in this thesis I discussed several definitions and interpretations of aspirations within the academic literature and policy. Based on the lives of Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie I would like to contribute my own definition that reflects the phenomenological nature of this study. The key element of this definition being the individualised nature of aspiration.

Aspirations are hopes and dreams about what you might become. They are something very personal, based on emotions, experiences, choices, dilemmas and influences. They are wrapped up in family narratives, norms and histories, in school life. They are about finding something that you can aspire to, something that matters to you, something you can value.

10.5 And finally...

I would like the reader to leave feeling optimistic for the futures of Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie. Whether they achieve their aspirations is for another time. For now, let us be content in the knowledge that they are aspiring individuals, they want to do well in life, they want to be successful in whatever form that takes.

Let us move away from a simplistic, deficit way of thinking, with a discourse that suggests the need to “correct” young people’s ‘deficits’” (Spohrer 2016, p.422). Instead, let us nurture and support their aspirations and harness “the sociocultural richness of their life worlds” (Spohrer 2016, p.422). If we can achieve this, then we can make a difference to the lives of young people from WP backgrounds. If we can engage with their aspirational journey, we can help HE to become something familiar to them whilst also offering them a way of broadening their horizons. In doing so we can ultimately enable young people to feel empowered and confident in deciding whether HE is for them, so that one day, Del, John, Megan, Pete and Sophie, may become exactly what they once dreamed of becoming.

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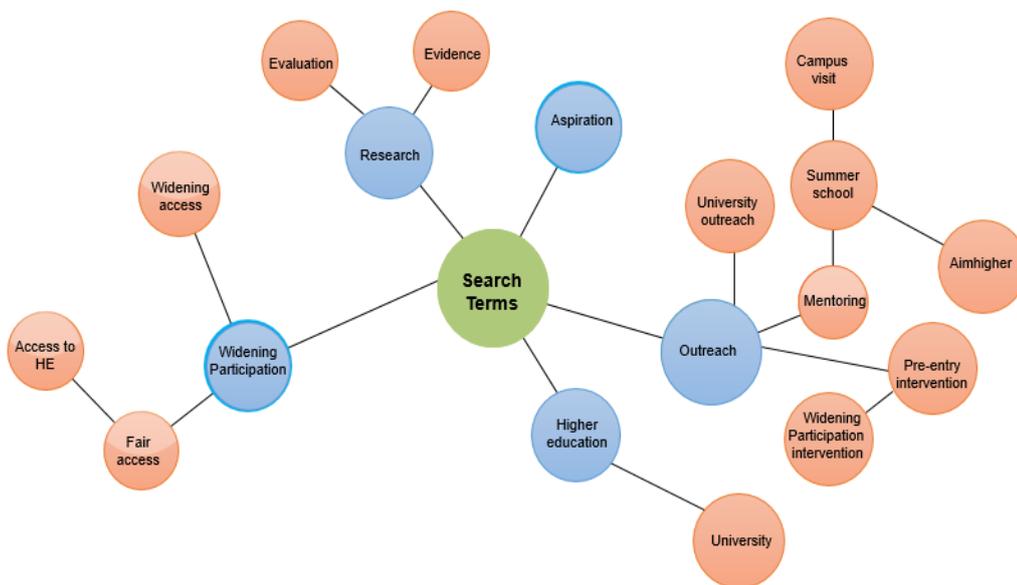
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Literature review information

Mind Map of Search Terms



Searches Undertaken

Search code	Phrase 1	Phrase 2	Phrase 3
S1	Widening participation	Aspiration	Outreach
S2	Widening participation	Aspiration	
S3	Aspiration	University outreach	
S4	Aspiration	Higher education outreach	
S5	Aspiration	University access	
S6	Aspiration	Higher education access	

S7	Aspiration	Summer school	
S8	Higher education outreach		
S9	Widening participation	Research	Aspiration
S10	Fair access	Aspiration	Research
S11	Summer school	Aspiration	
S12	Widening participation	Evaluation	Aspiration
S13	Evidence	WP	
S14	Evidence	Fair access	
S15	Evidence	University outreach	
S16	Research	Widening participation	
S17	Pre-entry intervention	University	
S18	Pre-entry intervention	Higher education	
S19	Widening access	Higher education	Aspiration
S20	Widening access	Higher education	
S21	Widening access	Summer school	
S22	Widening access	Mentoring	
S23	Widening access	Campus visit	

S24	Widening access	University	Aspiration
S25	Aimhigher		
S26	Access to higher education	Outreach programmes	
S27	Access to higher education	Outreach	
S28	Widening participation interventions		
S29	Widening participation outreach		
S30	Fair access	Outreach	

Article Reference Sheet

TITLE:

Author and year:

What's is looking at:

Approach:

Purpose:

Who took part:

Findings:

Researcher comment:

Appendix 2: Ethics forms



INFORMATION SHEET

Title: 'Making Decisions About My Future'

September 2015,

My name is Ed Bickle and I am a research student at Bournemouth University. You are being invited to take part in my research project that is looking at how young people make decisions about their future, especially about whether or not to go to university.

Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and talk about it with your friends and family if you wish. If something is not clear please ask me and I will explain it in more detail. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of this project?

This project will follow the lives of a group of young people over two school years (Y9&Y10). The aim is to get a detailed picture of how young people make decisions about their future, especially about whether or not to go to university. I also want to see who and what plays a part in helping you make these decisions. The research is focusing on areas of the country where less young people normally go to university.

Why have I been chosen?

Your school was chosen because it is a local school to Bournemouth University. I then asked the school to select some young people who they think have the potential to go to university when they are older. I also asked the school to select some pupils who may have taken part, or might do in the future, in activity days at Bournemouth University.

What will happen to me if I take part?

The research will start with a group interview (this is called a focus group) with you and some of the other young people from your school involved in the research in September 2015. In October 2015, you will then be asked to take part in an individual interview.

This is the first half of my study. At the moment, I am only asking you if you would like to take part in this half of the study. The second half of the study will start in 2016. If you are interested in taking part in the second half then I will give you more information nearer the time. The focus group and interviews will be recorded using a voice recorder and will last for about 30-45 minutes. They will all take part on school grounds. The questions that I ask will generally require more than a yes/no answer.

I will be doing all the interviews. Some young people may feel uncomfortable being interviewed by a male. If you think you may feel uncomfortable then I can arrange for a female researcher from Bournemouth University to come along with me to the focus groups/interviews.

It is up to you to decide if you want to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign an assent form).

After the first focus group, I will listen to the recording of everyone speaking and type up what everyone says (this is called transcribing). When I transcribe the focus group, your name and anything that could make it easy for you to be recognised will be taken away. You can stop being part of the research until I have transcribed the focus group and nothing that you would have told me will be used in the study. After this, you can still stop taking part at any point but if the first focus group has been transcribed, I will use the information in the research.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect from you during the research will not be shared with anyone. I will be the only one who will have access. This includes the voice recordings of our conversations. I will store any paperwork to do with our conversations in a locked filing cabinet. I will store the voice recordings on my computer and will use a password so that I will be the only person who can access them.

You must be aware that if you tell me something that I think may affect your safety, I may need to tell someone at your school. I will let you know that I am going to do this.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The information that you provide me will be used in my final research report. This is called a thesis. The information will also be used in other reports/presentations following the completion of my thesis. Sometimes I will use the exact words that you say to me. Your name will be changed and I will also change the names of anyone you talk about, such as your parents/carers.

What are the benefits to me of taking part?

Some young people find it useful to talk to someone about their future. I hope that by talking to me, you will have a chance to think about your future.

What are the risks in taking part?

I will be talking to you about things like your school life, your friends and family, your hobbies and your hope and dreams for the future. The questions that I ask should not make you feel upset. You don't have to answer all the questions and if you feel uncomfortable, you are free to end an interview at any point.

Contact details

Researcher - Ed Bickle, PhD student, c/o Jan Lewis, Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Weymouth House, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Dorset, BH12 5BB.
ebickle@bournemouth.ac.uk

Complaints or concerns

If you have a complaint or concerns about this research, you can contact - Professor Iain MacRury, Deputy Dean Research and Professional Practice, Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Weymouth House W128, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Dorset, BH12 5BB.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you are happy to take part you should now look at the assent form.



PARENT/LEGAL GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

Title: 'Making Decisions About My Future'

September 2015,

Dear Parents/Legal Guardians,

My name is Ed Bickle and I am seeking permission to invite your child to participate in a research study that I am undertaking as part of my PhD at Bournemouth University. My research is an in-depth study of the aspirations of young people and how they make decisions about their future, in particular about whether to go to university or not.

Before you decide whether you want your child to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If something is not clear or if you would like more information, contact information is given at the end of this document. Take time to decide whether or not you wish your child to take part.

My study has been approved by the ethics committee at Bournemouth University. The school has also given me permission to contact you.

What is the purpose of this project?

The aim of my project is to get a detailed picture about the aspirations of young people and how they make decisions about their future, especially about whether to go to university or not. I also want to see who and what plays a part in helping them make these decisions. The research is particularly focusing on areas of the country that have lower levels of participation in higher education.

Why has my child been chosen?

Your child's school has been chosen because it is a local school to Bournemouth University. I then asked the school to select some young people who they think have the potential to go to university when they are older. I also asked the school to select some pupils who may have taken part, or might do in the future, in activity days at Bournemouth University.

What will happen to my child if they take part?

The research will start with a group interview (focus group) with your child and some of the other young people from the school involved in the research in September 2015. In October 2015 they will then be asked to take part in an individual interview.

This is the first half of my study. At the moment I am only seeking your consent for your child to take part in this half of the study. The second half of the study will start in 2016. If you are happy to give consent for your child to take part in the second half I will contact you again later this year and ask you to sign another consent form.

The focus group/interviews will be recorded using a digital voice recorder and will last for about 30-45 minutes. They will all take part on schools grounds. The questions that I ask will be generally open ended, in other words they will require more than a yes/no answer.

I will be undertaking all the interviews. Some young people may feel uncomfortable being interviewed by a male. If requested by either yourself, your child or the school, I can arrange for a female researcher from Bournemouth University to attend the focus groups/interviews.

Does my child have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you want your child to take part. If you do decide to let your child take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). I will also gain assent from your child before they participate.

After the first focus group, I will type up what everyone says (transcribing). When I transcribe the focus group, your child's name and anything that could make it easy for them to be recognised will be taken away. They can stop being part of the research until I have transcribed the focus group and nothing that they would have told me will be used in the study. After this, they can still stop taking part at any point but if the first focus group has been transcribed, I will use the information in the research.

Will my child taking part in this project be kept confidential?

I will respect the privacy of all the young people that take part in this research and will keep information confidential and not pass it on. I will be the only one who will have access to the information provided. This includes all the voice recordings of our conversations. If there is another researcher in the room during the interviews they will not be given access to any of the raw data.

I do however have a professional responsibility to report any information that they disclose that could raise significant concerns about their safety or wellbeing. This also applies to any other researchers who are present. Should this be necessary, I will ensure that this is done in line with the safeguarding policy of the school.

Research records will be kept in a locked file. All electronic information will be secured using a password protected file.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The information that your child provides me will be analysed and then used in my final research report (thesis). The information will also be used in other reports/publications/conferences following the completion of my thesis. At times I will use direct quotes of what they have said. They will not be identified and their name will be changed. I will also change the names of anyone they talk about, such as their parents/legal guardians and friends.

What are the benefits of taking part?

I hope that by taking part, your child will have an opportunity to discuss and think about their future plans.

What are the risks in taking part?

I will be working with the school to ensure my research causes as little interference with their school work as possible. I will be talking to your child about things like their school life, friends and family,

hobbies and their career plans. I would not anticipate that the questions will make them feel distressed. Should they not wish to answer any particular question(s) however, they are free to decline. If they feel uncomfortable, they are free to end an interview at any point.

What should I do if I want my child to take part?

If you are happy for your child to take part then you need to complete the enclosed parental/legal guardian consent form. Please then return the consent form, via your child, to [REDACTED]

Contact details

Researcher - Ed Bickle, PhD student, c/o Jan Lewis, Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Weymouth House, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Dorset, BH12 5BB. ebickle@bournemouth.ac.uk

Research Supervisor - Dr Sue Eccles, Senior Principal Academic, Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Weymouth House, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Dorset, BH12 5BB. seccles@bournemouth.ac.uk

Complaints or concerns

If you have a complaint or concerns about this research, you can contact - Professor Iain MacRury, Deputy Dean Research and Professional Practice, Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Weymouth House W128, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Dorset, BH12 5BB.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you are happy for your child to participate you should now refer to the parent/legal guardian consent form.



PARENT/LEGAL GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Title: 'Making Decisions About My Future'

Researcher: Ed Bickle, PhD student, c/o Jan Lewis, Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Weymouth House, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Dorset, BH12 5BB
ebickle@bournemouth.ac.uk

Lead supervisor: Dr Sue Eccles, Senior Principal Academic, Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Weymouth House, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Dorset, BH12 5BB
seccles@bournemouth.ac.uk

	Please initial here
I confirm that I have read and understood the parent/legal guardian information sheet for the above research project.	
I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw during the process without giving reason and without there being any negative consequences.	
I give permission for all focus groups/interviews to be recorded using a digital recording device. I understand that these recordings will only be listened to by the researcher mentioned above and will not be shared with anyone.	
I give permission for the researcher mentioned above to have access to my child's responses. I understand that the information will be used in the final research report and any further reports/publications/conferences resulting from the research.	
I understand that my child's name will not be linked with the research materials and they will not be identified or identifiable (nor will anyone they make reference to such as their parents/legal guardians) in the final report and any further reports/publications/conferences resulting from the research.	

Name of pupil

Name of Parent/Legal Guardian Date Signature

Name of Researcher Date Signature

Once this has been signed by all parties you will receive a signed and dated copy of this and the parent/legal guardian information sheet. A copy of each will also be held by the researcher.

Risk Assessment Form

Before completing this form, please read the associated guidance which can be found via the Health & Safety Intranet pages. This form should be used for all risks except from hazardous substances, manual handling & Display Screen Equipment (specific forms are available for these). If the risk is deemed to be 'trivial' there is no need to formally risk assess or record.

All completed forms must give details of the person completing the assessment and be dated. Risk assess the activity with its present controls (if any), then re-assess if action is to be taken and after further controls are put in place.

The completed form should be kept locally within the School/Professional Service.



<p>1. Describe the Activity being Risk Assessed:</p> <p>Research with young people within school setting. Focus groups and one-on-one interviews</p>
<p>2. Location(s)</p> <p>XXX</p>
<p>3. Persons at potential Risk (e.g. consider specific types of individuals)</p> <p>Researcher / Participants</p>
<p>4. Potential Hazards (e.g. list hazards without considering any existing controls):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male researcher undertaking interviews alone with young people • Young people disclosing personal information that could indicate they are at some form of risk • Researcher asking questions that cause distress to young people
<p>5. Any Control Measures Already In Place:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research has been granted ethical approval at BU • DBS check obtained • Researcher has consulted a number of relevant ethics documents in research design • Information sheets provided to parents/legal guardians and participants • Consent forms provided to parents/legal guardians • Participant assent obtained • Discussions with relevant staff member(s) at school prior to commencement of research • Researcher to meet participants to explain process prior to data collection if required • Female researcher from BU will accompany researcher to any focus groups/interviews on request of participants/parents/legal guardians or school • All focus groups/interviews recorded with digital recording device • Researcher has agreed process with school in case of participants disclosing personal information that could put them at risk • Researcher is experienced in interviewing young people. If they sense distress a number of options can be taken such as changing topic or termination of interview • A suitable room will be arranged for interviews to be undertaken in
<p>6. Standards to be Achieved: (ACOPs, Qualifications, Regulations, Industry Guides, Suppliers instructions etc)</p>
<p>7. Estimating the Residual Risk (e.g. remaining risk once existing control measures are taken into account)</p> <p>Choose a category that best describes the degree of harm which could result from the hazard and then choose a category indicating what the likelihood is that a person(s) could be harmed.</p>

	Slightly Harmful (e.g. minor injuries)	Harmful (e.g. serious but short-term injuries)	Extremely Harmful (e.g. fatality, long-term injury or incurable disease)
Highly Unlikely	Trivial Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	Tolerable Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	Moderate Risk <input type="checkbox"/>
Unlikely	Tolerable Risk <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Moderate Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	Substantial Risk <input type="checkbox"/>
Likely	Moderate Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	Substantial Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	Intolerable Risk <input type="checkbox"/>

8. Note the advice below on suggested actions and timescales:

Risk (from No.7)	Action/Timescale
Trivial Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	No action is required and no records need to be kept.
Tolerable Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	No additional controls are required, although consideration may be given to an improvement that imposes no additional cost/s. Monitoring is required to ensure that the controls are maintained.
Moderate Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	Efforts should be made to reduce the risk, but the costs of prevention should be carefully measured and limited. Any new measures should be implemented within a defined period. Where the moderate risk is associated with extremely harmful consequences, further assessment may be necessary to establish more precisely the likelihood of harm as a basis for determining the need for improved control measures.
Substantial Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	Work should NOT commence until the risk has been reduced. Considerable resources may have to be allocated to reduce the risk. Where the risk involves work in progress, urgent action MUST be taken.
Intolerable Risk <input type="checkbox"/>	Work should not be started or continued until the risk has been reduced. If it is not possible to reduce the risk even with unlimited resources, work MUST remain prohibited.

9. If 'Moderate' 'Substantial' or 'Intolerable':

What New Control Measures are to be Considered to reduce risk?

10. Referred to:

11. Date:

12. Ensure those affected are informed of the Risks & Controls

(Confirm how you have done this e.g. written instructions):

Participants and parents/legal guardians provided with information sheets detailing such information. Researcher will also outline issues at start of preliminary focus groups and as a reminder prior to remaining interviews/focus groups.

13. Person who did Assessment:	Ed Bickle	14. Date:	26/06/15	15. Review Date:	
16. Checked or Assisted By:	Dr Sue Eccles	17. Date:	28/06/15	18. Review Date:	

Appendix 3: Interview guide interview one

Preamble – ethics/timings etc

Question – can you tell me about yourself?

(Prompts – tell me about who you live with, where you live, what do you do outside of school)

THEME 1 –Their imagined life

Category question 1. Can you tell me what you hope your life to be like in 10 years' time?

Follow up – What do you think your life will be like in 10 years' time?

(Prompts – educational achievement/career/family life/location)

*What are the most important aspects, does this image differ from what they **think** it will be like – in what ways*

Do they think this life might differ from others around them– friends/family?

Getting to that position – GCSE choices/post compulsory education choices

Who/what are important influences on their future?

THEME 2 – Concept of success

Category question 2 – Can you tell me what you understand by the word success?

Why is this' success'

Who is successful/ in what ways are they successful

Talk about when they have been successful – how did they feel/success in school environment

THEME 3 – Barriers

Category question 3 – What might stop you achieving the things you want to in your life?

Who/what might stop them in life? Why? Strategies to break barriers?

Who/what will be biggest influences on their future decisions?

Whose/what advice do they value? In what ways?

What setbacks have they had in their life so far? How did they cope/deal with it? What were the effects of these setbacks?

THEME 4 – Expectations of others

Category question 4 – What do other people expect you to achieve?

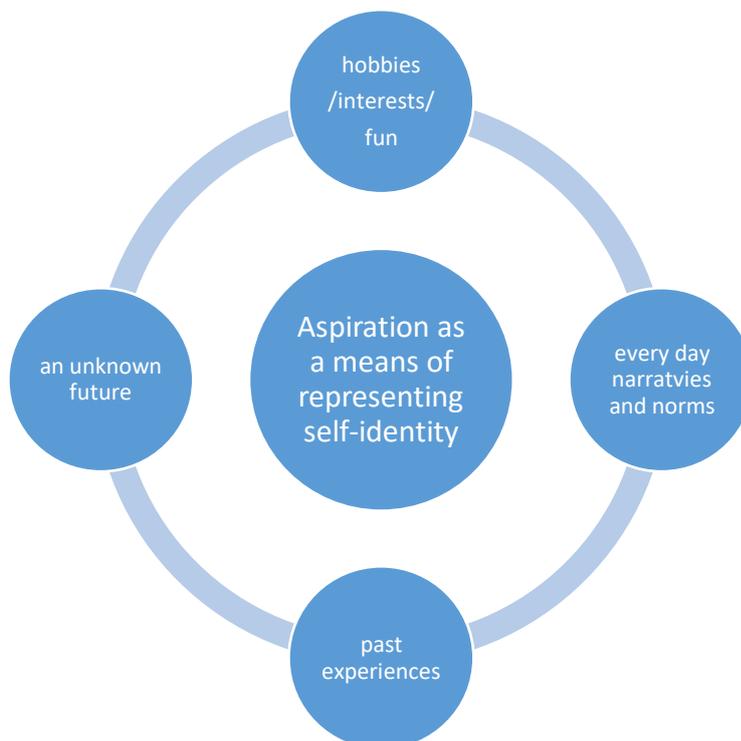
(Prompts – parental/school/friends/media)

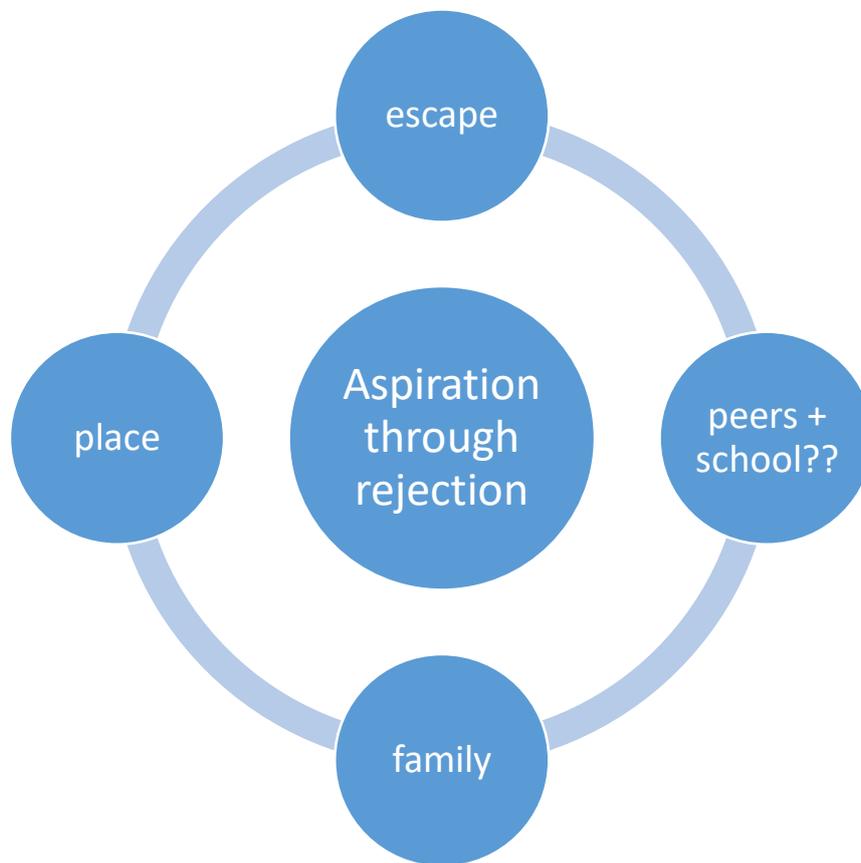
Why do they have these expectations?

How does it differ from their own expectations?

How does it make them feel?

Appendix 4: Example of super-ordinate themes for one participant





Appendix 5: Audit trail

Skivers

Pete

EB: And why do you think they are like that then?

Just to like impress their friends or something or try and impress the people around them and try and make them laugh

EB: Ok and how do you feel, does it disrupt lessons at all?

Yer

EB: And how does that make you feel?

Well annoyed because I want to learn not look at people and like shouting out stuff 4-18

Sophie

I know a lot of people who don't really like feel the need to go to further education because they don't really care too much about their future or they just think like they cannot really try hard and somehow like get an amazing job somewhere 3-1

Yer a lot of people even in like because I'm in top set for all my classes but even people in my sets a lot of them don't care they just mess around and they get sent out of class basically every lesson and they don't really see the point 3-8

some people they, they just don't care for some reason they really think I don't care about my what I get in life I'm just going to go like see what happens because maybe there upset that they've tried their hardest and they can't get the levels that they want to get but some just don't put the effort in at all because they don't see the point in doing it they just like mess around in classes and don't do tests and get like really bad scores in everything but somehow they still don't care about it I just I don't really understand 3-8

there's like a few like about 10 people in our school who just they don't care at all then none of the rules actually faze them they just don't see the point in rules of even turning up to school 3-9

Megan

they just they're the type of people with the bad attitude oh why do we need uniform why do we need to learn this it's not relevant to our life but it's like everything you do is relevant to your life so 3-7

I guess they say that they want to like do this with their life they want to do that with their life but like everyone knows that there not going to because they just don't put themselves out there enough 4-12

like there's this one girls who's like really really smart but she spends so much time

messing around in lessons to the point she doesn't fulfil her potential in a sense but like she rarely comes to lessons when she does she's just like top of the class 4-13

I guess it annoys me really because its what's the point in just messing around getting in with the wrong crowd when you can just like I guess do good with your life 4-14

*Well a lot of people in the year are sort of like the type of people who wouldn't go to university they are the type of people who would just like go from school and do whatever they want really
2-13*

Well a lot of our year is kind of careless and bad behaved and stuff like that so you can't really imagine them going on for further education at university a lot of the type of people are like I can't wait till we leave school and stuff like that so therefore why would they go on to further education after school 2-14

A lot of people I know in year 10 sort of knuckle down and realise we're near GCSEs so we've got to do work but others kind of just mess around, don't really do homework and stuff 3-2

John

I think they I think they improve as they get older because they mature a bit more like things that year 7 and 8 and stuff like some people don't get their education like they're naughty and they get sent out of class all of the time which suggests to me they probably don't care about learning 4-5

I behave normally so do most other people there's just a few people that don't

EB: Don't behave? Is that what you mean?

Not like misbehave like really naughty but like just keep talking across the class and stuff well they be one corner and their friend will be in the other corner and they'll talk and you can't hear what the teachers saying and it's just like be quiet please

EB: How does it affect you then?

Most lessons when I'm trying to listen its annoying but some lessons which I don't listen then its not really annoying 4 10

DEL

EB: So why do you think they you said you now don't do that because you need to work why do you think they still do it then?

They haven't really realised yet or don't really care

EB: Why do you think they don't care?

They might feel like they don't really need school or something yer

EB: Do you think people are capable of going to university from this school?

I think most people are but then like there are some people that mess about too much and just don't listen at all so I don't really feel they would be capable 2-14

Appendix 6: Contact summary form

Name of pupil: Sophie

Date of interview: 5/2/16

Session: INTERVIEW 1
10/3/16

Date summary form written up:

1. Personal background:

Lives with mother and stepdad. Parents recently split and brother now lives with father. Was living with father beforehand. Appears happy with situation.

Says relationship better with brother since living apart. Father works in education, mother does not work (or appeared not to) still sees dad.

Has friends who live close by. Likes walking dog, taking photographs in fields behind house. Likes area, -quiet.

Has school and out of school friends who are quite different

2. What were the main issues or themes that struck you with this contact?

Seems to have grown up head on their shoulders. Appeared quite pragmatic and realistic at times. Difference between hope and expectation were quite similar although in the hope they acknowledged that they may not have reached their 'dream' yet. Appeared to have a backup career plan and was realistic about being open to this. Main dream is dancing which appears to be from being a hobby that they enjoy.

Success is about being happy and achieving things you want. Listed friends parents are being successful as they always appeared happy. Although mum doesn't work her goal was to have a family. She thinks this makes her mum a success because this is what she wanted to do.

Brother very academically gifted feels frustrated that he gets the attention and accolades even though she is academically talented as well

Also seemed to be very self-determined and strong – parents are divorced and living with mum, wonder she gets the strength from the close relationship with her mum? Also appears to suggest you future is very much yours

Gave examples of where they had more social/cultural capital than possibly other participants – able to talk to people about university and their experiences. Dad appeared quite highly educated – mentioned master's degree

3. Researcher perspective:

By far the most engaging interview, did a lot more talking than other participants. Ran out of time as they were a few minutes late arriving which was a shame as could have gone on for a while longer. Very strong character, seems to know what she wants and displayed levels of resilience.

This quote will be useful in explaining why I selected y9 and y 10 for this research –

we're kind of just expected to always like think about what we're going to do when were older like you have to think about it now like rather than just like you're 14

years old you're still a child you don't have to think about all these crazy things they just expect us to like act like adults even though we're barely teenagers

Appendix 7: Research outputs

Publication

Gauntlett, L., Bickle, E., Thomas, G., Collins, B., Heaslip, V. and Eccles, S., 2017. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A means of exploring aspiration and resilience amongst Widening Participation students. *Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning*, 19 (2), 63-86.

Conference proceedings

Bickle, E. and Eccles, S., 2017. Becoming Aspirational Citizens: How Young People Create and Develop Aspirations Through Their Lived Experiences, *The Forum for Access & Continuing Education*. Glasgow.

Bickle, E. and Gauntlett, E., 2016. A novel approach to researching the student experience across the Higher Education lifecycle: Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore 'Widening Participation' students' aspiration and academic resilience, *The Open University*. Milton Keynes.

Bickle, E., 2015. Widening Participation in Higher Education: an exploration of the aspirations of young people living in Low Participation Neighbourhoods, *SRHE Newer Researchers Conference*. Newport, Wales.

Appendix 8: Participant summaries

	Del	John	Megan	Pete	Sophie
Home life	Lives with mum and 2 sisters	Lives with parents and 2 younger siblings	Lives with parents, 2 younger sisters and 2 older sisters. 4 siblings have moved out	Lives with parents and older sister. Also has older brother	Lives with dad and older brother
Hobbies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hanging with friends • Music • Xbox • Spending time with his animals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Xbox • Football • Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watching movies • Hanging around with friends • Reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Football • Xbox 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dance • Music
Main career aspiration	Vet	Commercial airline pilot	Broad ranging. Many associated with caring /making lives better	Professional footballer	Dancer/forensic scientist
Some other aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HE aspiration • Happiness most important thing in life • To see/ do more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HE aspiration • Travel • To be happy and to earn enough money to live 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HE aspiration • To write a book 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HE aspiration • <i>'to do what you want to do... because it's your life'</i> • Hopes for material wealth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HE aspiration • Happiness over material wealth