

****Author pre-print****

Accepted for publication by *Journal of Youth Studies* 7 Jan 2014

Snee, H. and F. Devine (2015) 'Taking the next step: class, resources and educational choice across the generations' *Journal of Youth Studies* 17(8): 998-1013

DOI:10.1080/13676261.2014.881987

Taking the next step: class, resources and educational choice across the generations

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Abstract

Most young people in the UK now stay on in education or training when they finish school. Numbers will continue to increase following the implementation of raising the participation age. Despite an upward trend in further education participation, young people's pathways continue to be shaped by class and gender. This paper explores the choices and decisions made by young people in their final year of compulsory schooling and describes how these class and gender inequalities are reproduced. We also spoke to parents about their own trajectories and their involvement in guiding their children's next steps. Our concern is with young people in 'the middle': not most at risk of social exclusion, but certainly not the most privileged. The decisions at this key transitional point are socially embedded. Processes of class reproduction and class mobility are dependent upon both structural context and access to advantageous resources. The opportunity structures for our participants were very different for the two generations. We note the wider role that social resources play at this moment, and the classed differences between the children of parents who had experienced some upward mobility and those who had remained in working class positions.

Keywords: class; gender; post-compulsory education; social capital.

Word count:

8360 (including tables)

7704 (excluding tables)

Introduction

This paper explores a long-standing concern for youth studies: the choices and decisions of young women and men in transition, along with their parents' trajectories and involvement in guiding their next steps. Despite the expansion of the further education sector in the UK, rates and type of participation in education after the compulsory leaving age continue to be differentiated by social class (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000). In this paper, we follow work that engages with young people who are not most at risk of social exclusion, but are certainly not the most privileged (S. Roberts and MacDonald 2013). The families we spoke came from a mixture of class backgrounds: the working class, the intermediate class and the middle classes (Rose and O' Reilly 1998). When sociologists of education talk about the 'middle classes', they have tended to mean the *professional* middle classes (Lauder, Brown, and Halsey 2009, 579). In our sample the middle class parents were members of the managerial class rather than professionals (Savage et al. 1992). We also recognise, however, that these families do not neatly fit into such categories, and that the distinctions between different contemporary structural locations in 'the middle' are neither clear-cut nor drawn along 'traditional' class lines (Savage et al. 2013).

Much of the work on class and educational choice tends to focus on parents choosing secondary schools, or young people's decisions regarding higher education. The end of compulsory schooling warrants further exploration. UK Government policies to expand participation in education and training continue to be implemented at time of public sector cuts and high levels of youth unemployment, alongside the removal of the educational maintenance allowance. Moreover, there are ongoing concerns over access to the professions (and the associated status and economic rewards), with some careers remaining more or less closed to young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Milburn 2012). There is also evidence to suggest that 'the socio-economic gap in HE participation is driven largely by differences in secondary school attainment, and hence by participation decisions at age 16' (Crawford et al. 2011, 25)ⁱ. Consequently, the paths young people take at this point can be crucial in determining their future.

In this paper we compare the context for the young people's decisions about further education with those of their parents, and consider the role of resources, and in particular social capital, in educational choice. The paper then describes the local area, the school, and the sample of

young people and their parents. The parents' own educational and employment trajectories were shaped by class and gender, and did not follow the same routes as those planned by their children. There were also classed differences in control over children's choices. The young people's narratives highlight the role that social ties play, including the resources of their own peer networks. We conclude by noting how the decisions at this key transitional point are socially embedded, and how these examples of class reproduction and class mobility are dependent upon both structural context and access to advantageous resources.

Further education, class, and social resources

Young people's next steps after school take place in a context of 'enhanced choice', in which models of rational decision-making shape educational provision (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Reay, David and Ball 2005). While a discourse of individualised rationality may frame such decisions, the 'choices' that young people and their parents face at such junctures are shaped by structural and material constraints (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; K. Roberts 2009). At the time of the study in 2010, young people completed the statutory minimum of education at age 16. This policy also applied to their parents, yet the 'opportunity structures' they faced were very different. The parents were aged between 34 and 54, although most were in their mid-40s to early 50s. The older parents were divided into different pathways by the tripartite system depending on their academic performance in the 'eleven-plus' exam. When they turned 16 in the 1970s and early 1980s, most young people entered employment on leaving school. The youth labour market had just started to collapse around this time but entry level positions were still available, alongside apprenticeships and government youth training programmes (K. Roberts 1993).

Entry-level positions have now all but vanished and progression to higher education is the new 'mainstream youth career' (K. Roberts 2013). In 2011, 82.6% of 16 year olds, and over two thirds of 16-18 year olds, were in full-time education (Department for Education 2013). Both the previous New Labour and current Coalition governments have aimed to expand participation, with a particular focus on transforming vocational education (Department for Education and Skills 2007; HM Government 2011). Policies include raising the participation age in education to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015 (although this can include work-based training). Despite the expansion, participation rates continue to be shaped by social class and decline with descending class positions (Thompson 2009). Importantly, not all pathways are

equal, with a well-established distinction between academic and vocational routes (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001; Thompson 2009). The academic pathway of A Level/AS Level study has higher status and greater future benefits than a vocational route consisting of work-related courses such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and BTECs. Some advanced vocational routes can, in theory, provide access to higher education. In practice, students taking academic A Level programmes are much more likely to progress on to higher education, particularly more prestigious institutions (Boliver 2011).

An academic degree from a ‘good university’ is the pathway to a professional career, although not a guarantee. Brown (2013) argues that young people in the early twenty-first century now face a situation of ‘social congestion’ in the graduate labour market. In an analysis of relative social mobility, Devine and Li (2013) found that the relationship between both origin and education, and origin and destination has weakened in recent years, but that the relationship between education and destination has also weakened. This suggests a complex situation in which other factors facilitate occupational success, and that credentials alone are ‘not enough’. Consequently established middle class families may draw on their resources to pursue additional strategies so that their children are ‘employable’, for instance taking an overseas gap year (Snee 2013). There have also been calls in youth studies to consider the experience of the ‘missing middle’ who are not academic high-fliers and fall between being successful and unsuccessful (S. Roberts and MacDonald 2013). Yet changing opportunity structures mean that more young people in the ‘middle’ may now find themselves heading for university, albeit in new institutions that may result in entry to more ‘middling’ careers (K. Roberts 2013). In this paper, we consider the *types* of further education that are pursued by a group of young people who can be broadly described as ‘ordinary’ in terms of their structural location.

Our concern is with access to the resources that may facilitate the ‘choice’ of the routes with greater future rewards. Devine (2004) notes that, while social reproduction is not always straightforward, professional middle class parents mobilise their economic, cultural and social resources to help their children attain middle class positions. We follow this work by considering the role of resources in shaping the paths of young people from non-professional backgrounds, and whether they follow in their parents’ footsteps. Our main focus is on social resources, often understood in terms of the concept of social capital based on the work of

Coleman (1988), Putnam (2000) and Bourdieu (1986). Coleman (1988) notes the role of parental involvement in schooling, whereas Putnam (2000) stresses the importance of access to wider networks in developing 'bridging' social capital. As noted by Heath, Fuller and Johnston (2010), studies of higher education find that 'bridging social capital' facilitates progression to university, whereas the 'bonding capital' of emotional and familial support can close down such opportunities (see Ball, Maguire and Macrae [2000]; Brooks [2005]; Reay, David and Ball, [2005]).

Bourdieu focuses on social capital as relational and differentially distributed among social groups, which results in the reproduction of advantage (Ball 2003). As their social networks are more likely to have experience of prestigious institutions, professional careers, and so on, middle class families are able to successfully negotiate educational choices. Their networks provide valuable first-hand informal information that Ball and Vincent (1998) define as 'hot knowledge'. Bourdieu argues that these 'choices' are somewhat taken for granted, as action is guided by the dispositions of the habitus – people act in ways that are reasonable and acceptable for 'people like us' (Bourdieu 1990). This is evident in how the implicit and unconscious effects of friendship networks, for example in shaping one's sense of self, can indirectly shape young people's expectation of suitable choices (Brooks 2005). Faced with the range of choices at 16, and the conflicting forces that may influence their choice, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown suggest young people may follow the 'path of least resistance' and 'choose' the pathway that is the norm for their peers (2001, 122-123).

However, a Bourdieusian understanding is less helpful in trying to come to terms with social mobility. Consequently, we follow work on post-compulsory education choice that draws on the concept of 'pragmatic rationality' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). This acknowledges young people's agency while also recognising social context, and the structural and material constraints on action. Moreover, young people are often viewed as passive recipients of social capital, but Holland, Reynolds and Weller (2007) argue children and young people are active agents its formation, and draw on their own social capital to negotiate transitions. Like Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003), we broadly define social capital as 'the material and immaterial resources that individuals and families are able to access through their social ties' (323). We also recognise that educational choice is shaped by access to other resources, particularly economic capital in the form of income and assets; and cultural capital in the form of knowledge about the education system, confidence in being able to negotiate it, and

values held. By emphasising the role of social ties, we note that educational decision-making is socially embedded rather than individualised, and depends upon access to advantageous resources in young people's networks (Heath, Fuller, and Johnston 2010). In the following section, we outline the methods used and provide details of our sample, beginning with the local area to give a sense of community culture and expectations (and thus, a local 'habitus').

Method

The research was conducted in a town that is part of a larger metropolitan local authority, which contains both urban and semi-rural areas. For much of the twentieth century, the local authority was overwhelming White working class with high levels of employment in manufacturing. The area still predominately White (91%)ⁱⁱ and its class character reflects its manufacturing heritage. The 2011 Census shows that the working class is considerably larger, and the middle class is considerably smaller, than the national average. Unemployment is higher than national rates, and local employment opportunities are now scarce except in a smattering of food factories, call centres, low-level shop work and the like. Ashley High School, as it will be known, is a new school in the area that replaced a failing comprehensive nearby, and is now somewhat average in terms of examination results. GCSE results have improved year on year (see Table 1), with the percentage of children achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE including English and Maths rising from 17% in 2005 to 58% in 2012 (close to the English national average of 59.4%)ⁱⁱⁱ. Because of the shortage of teachers in the area, the 'English Baccalaureate' pathway is not available for all students in the school. Consequently, the school will struggle to meet the latest quality benchmark of school success: namely, that young people secure 5 A*-C GCSE in English, Maths, Science, a Humanities subject (History or Geography) and a Language. Ashley was rated as 'requires improvement' in its latest Ofsted Report.

TABLE 1 HERE

We draw on data from interviews with 16 young people from Ashley: 8 young women and 8 young men. Interviews were also conducted with 19 parents (14 mothers, 1 female carer and 4 fathers). The young people were all aged 15-16, White, and Year 11 students in their final year of school. The details of the sample can be found in Table 2. We found mothers and fathers in semi-routine and routine employment in manufacturing and services, routine non-

manual employment, in self-employment working for themselves, small businessmen and members of a managerial rather the professional middle class (Savage et al. 1992). Many of the parents came from working-class origins (or had deeper generational origins in the working class) and had enjoyed work-life mobility, much overlooked in the field of mobility studies (Devine and Li 2013).

TABLE 2 HERE

In the summer of 2010, our contact teacher kindly provided us with the GCSE results of the young people we interviewed. These can be seen in Table 3 below. It shows that the majority of the interviewees did well in securing 5 GCSEs A*-C and Grade A*-C in English and Maths. Four young men did not do so with one interviewee, Connor Roberts, failing both of these subjects outright. The table also shows the young people's destinations^{iv}. What is striking here is that the four young men who did not obtain grades A*-C in English and Maths were those who went on to vocational training. The young women in our sample tended to do better. Ten of the young people were re-interviewed a year later, although we focus on the first wave of interviews in this paper. It is to the parents that we now turn while remembering that the results and destinations were not known at the time of interview.

TABLE 3 HERE

Parental trajectories and influence on choices

The parents' post-16 paths were markedly different than those planned by their children. While the majority of the young people aimed to go on to A Levels, none of the parents completed this route. Many had met and invariably married in their late teens or early twenties and had their first child young: the classed nature of family formation was evident (Crompton 2006). The birth of children, notably for women, brought their own education to an abrupt end. Divorce had sometimes facilitated a new life including late educational and occupational success. For a number of parents, educational qualifications were acquired later on, and sometimes a range of work experiences facilitated upward mobility.

Only four of the parents – all mothers – progressed to A Levels at 16 but they did not finish their studies. Deidre Hayes was the only one in her family to pass her eleven-plus and attend

grammar school, with all five of her sisters attending the local secondary modern. Deidre achieved 6 O Levels and stayed on to do A Levels in French, English and Art. Her goal was to be a teacher but she left school at 17 when she became pregnant with her first child: ‘when I got pregnant all those, everything got shattered really.’ Deidre started work as a Health Care Assistant at a local hospital when her daughter was older. Thanks to a colleague’s encouragement and her grammar school qualifications, Deidre enrolled on nursing training. After divorcing her first husband, she later remarried, had another two children (including Cameron, the young man in our sample) and was now a grandmother. Again, a colleague’s encouragement spurred her on to take a degree in Nursing Education:

... there was a job came up for an unqualified Nurse Teacher and somebody said, ‘Oh I think you’d be good at that’ and I went and you know, liked it. And then they said I needed to go and get qualified and so I went and they paid for me to go to [University] for two years.

She was now in management, although planned to take early retirement. Once employed in the healthcare sector, contacts in Deidre’s social networks helped her pursue training opportunities. Consequently she had access to social resources which, combined with the cultural capital of her existing qualifications, drove her social mobility. Despite her achievements, Deidre said she ‘didn’t put too much store in academia’ and emphasised that she and her family were *workers*. This is an example of a common ‘familial habitus’ in our sample: a ‘deeply ingrained system of perspectives, experiences, and dispositions that families share’ (Reay 2005: 61). Inheriting the cultural values of ‘hard work’ over academic pursuits from her own working class background, these were something Deidre tried to instil in Cameron, who she was encouraging to pursue a career as an electrician.

Three mothers in the sample studied vocational courses at college upon completing compulsory schooling, but they talked about their choices being limited. As Clare Tomlinson said: ‘We didn’t really have a choice. It was just – I – from what I remember, if you went to college you went to the local college’. Furthermore, gendered norms of suitable careers shaped pathways. Like other young women, Clare took a secretarial course and noted that young men did mechanical work instead. However, most of Clare’s friends did not go to college but instead followed the typical route of young people leaving secondary modern schools and entered employment. Clare had been encouraged to attend college by her own mother, yet she did not pursue a career in a related field, and now worked in a call centre. The

cultural resources of aspirations to 'get on' from Clare's family meant that she attempted a different route to her peers, although the opportunity structures she faced were restrictive.

The remaining mothers entered employment at 16. In some cases this was combined with further study but others left with few or no formal qualifications, and started entry level work. Hannah Adams thought her local comprehensive 'wasn't that great to be honest with ya'. Although some of her friends did well, she was bullied, and did not look back on her school days as a 'good time'. Hannah left school with no qualifications, and went to work in a factory, like her parents. Unlike Deidre, Hannah did not have access to the resources that would enable a different pathway. On the other hand, however, Hannah talked about how it was easy enough to find work; she was 'young and care free and got by'. Hannah was now employed as a support worker for social services, cleaning elderly people's houses. Hannah enjoyed her important work and was content, but her job was low-status and low-paid.

Similar stories could be found among the four fathers we interviewed, although again gendered norms shaped their paths: to technical apprenticeships and bar work. An exception was Adam Blake who went to grammar school. A friend he knew through church helped to arrange a work experience placement at an accountancy firm, which eventually led to the offer of a job. Again, social ties in the form of bridging capital to a wider community guided Adam's trajectory. At the time his father, a teacher, would have preferred him to go to university, but Adam left school at 16 to take up the offer: 'It wasn't that I didn't want to go to university, I just through this was a better option for me'. Adam had access to the cultural resources of his father's academic background, yet pursued his own path through accessing wider social resources. He was a qualified accountant, having acquired all his qualifications by correspondence courses and evening classes, and he was now a partner at the same firm.

In the parents' narratives of their past, we can see the role of class and gender shaping pathways, with limited access to high-value resources. People in their social networks played a role in suggesting employment and training openings. The parents had also left school in a different context, one of less 'choice', lower participation in further education, and greater opportunities for entry-level employment. A Levels were either not on the agenda for our parents when they were 16, or they were not able to complete them. However, we also saw examples of parents who had experienced some upward mobility through later training and

study, although some, particularly those who had gone to grammar school, had a ‘head start’ on this.

While some of the parents gained qualifications later on, like Deidre and Adam, none of the parents had followed a straightforward path through school, college, university into a high-level managerial or professional occupation. The majority of the young people we spoke to – 12 out of 16 – had plans to take A Levels at the time of the interview. Their parents did not have experience of this route, and thus the cultural capital that the young people could draw on: for example, confidence in making college choices and an awareness of facilitating subjects for university. In addition, when the parents talked about giving their children advice they rarely mentioned drawing on social networks to inform this, be this family, friends, work colleagues or neighbours. This is in contrast to research with middle class parents in which social networks are mobilised in order to negotiate educational choices (Ball and Vincent 1998; Devine 2004). There was some distinction between those who were taking more creative or practical A Levels and those who were taking more traditional subjects. The children of parents who had experienced upward mobility were more likely to be pursuing academic pathways.

Those who owned small businesses or were in the managerial middle classes were more critical of the role of the school and the college options available, particularly in terms of looking at alternative institutions. These parents were also more likely to moderate their teenage children’s desires to follow their friends. In this way they provided examples of parental involvement that characterises Coleman’s (1988) definition of social capital. Nick King, a small business owner, used the space of the interview to voice his concerns: ‘I don’t know what to do about this college.’ His daughter Emily had plans to study traditional A Levels and become a lawyer. Nick wanted her to be happy and go to the same college as her friends, but he also wanted his daughter to look more widely and consider results as well. Nick was a school governor, and:

... it made me think about education and I do know how it works. So what I’ve tried to do with Emily is go and look at all the colleges. She says, well I don’t want to go to that one. I said no, go and have a look.

Despite his knowledge and connections, Nick felt a bit ‘lost’: ‘I can’t really speak to the teachers here ‘cause I don’t think they’re allowed to sort of just suggest one.’ Part of Nick’s concern was that he wanted to respect Emily’s choices, and not tell her what to do. We can

also suggest, however, that even the upwardly mobile parents were restricted in their access to the *right kind* of bridging social capital to pass on to their children. They were hampered by their own lack of experience in academic pathways and those of their networks.

Some of the children, notably from working class and intermediate class backgrounds, had vocational plans, like Aaron Croft. Aaron's mother Jane Lewis left school at 16. Although she had held a variety of routine and semi-routine jobs, she was not working at the time of the interview due to physical and mental health issues. Jane was aware that being with friends at college was important for her son. They had both gone to the open evening but 'I think he'd already decided because his friends were going there'. Jane was happy with Aaron's choices, as he seemed comfortable and she was impressed with the college itself: 'they seemed to know what they were talking about'. Aaron hoped to pursue a diploma in Public Services, which prepares young people for the Police, armed services and the like, and for Jane, the choice was a good one:

I'm a firm believer in, you know he's got to do his school days so it's up to him what he does ... at the end of the day, he, he has got a mind of his own... And he'll do what he wants to do, so I'm, just very lucky I think that he has chosen to go to college.

Parents like Jane in the intermediate and working class were more dependent on pragmatic factors. This is not to say that there were uninvolved in their children's choices, but were more dependent on official guidance. The upwardly mobile parents had greater cultural resources to draw upon, and were more empowered to be critical and involved in their children's choice of institution. As not yet members of the established middle classes, they did not have extensive social networks to ask for advice. There are some similarities with the typology of parental choice developed by Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995): skilled, semi-skilled and disconnected choosers, especially as the parents with less educational experience had less influence on the process. Differences in parental control were also evident in the children's narratives.

Young people, choices, and social ties

Our contact teacher told us the school was making efforts so that their pupils considered a range of opportunities, courses and institutions, rather than automatically progressing to the same college, as had been the case in the past. This involved speaking to Connexions

advisors (careers advisors provided via the local authority) and teachers, along with attending local college open days. Ashley had links with a number of colleges and some conducted their intake interviews in the school. The young people spoke about applying to, and going for interviews at, a range of institutions. Yet 10 out of the 16 young people were planning to study A Levels at Ableford spoke to at the time of the first interview, and eight went on to do so. A further two young men enrolled on A Level study at alternative sixth forms. A Levels were clearly the preferred route for the middle class families in our sample. Moreover, there were subtle differences between choices of predominantly ‘traditional’ subjects like maths and history, and choices of newer subjects like PE and dance. We now consider how our sample of young people negotiated their choices and decisions about which subjects to take and which institutions to attend, with particular attention to the role of social ties.

The young people taking ‘traditional’ A Levels were pursuing the route that is often held up as the ‘gold standard’, and which facilitates entry to university. When discussing their decisions to pursue this path, young people spoke about their aspirations for future careers, based on what they enjoyed studying and what they thought would help them secure a comfortable life. Those from middle class backgrounds talked about receiving some direct advice from their parents. Rose Maxwell, and her twin Jade, were above average students who were both planning to A Levels at Ableford. Rose was interested in a career in health care. During her interview she was not impressed by advice she received from the school. Like some of the other middle class parents, her mother Tanya had been critical of the support, and this was something that Rose also spoke about:

Like they have the Connexions people which are supposed to help you with stuff like that, but they’re rubbish, they’re not very good, they just, like you go and see them and she’s just like, are you sure you want to do that, no, so it doesn’t really help, everyone’s said that though.

So how did you, did you figure it out with Jade or how do you figure it out?

With my mum, Jade, sat there with a book.

Tanya was a major influence on Rose’s decision making, and was a source of social capital in the form of parental involvement and the cultural capital of confidence in challenging the school. Not all of the young people thought their parents had much *direct* influence on their decisions, however. Instead, they instilled the value of working hard, and encouraged looking ahead to university and a ‘good job’. In this way, parents were instilling their children with

particular cultural values of hard work, and a pragmatic orientation that recognised a degree is increasingly required.

Lucy Grey, who was taking the same subjects as Rose at A Level, hoped to become a midwife. Like many of our young people, Lucy spoke about her parents being supportive and helpful, such as her mother June ‘pushing her to revise’ so that she would ‘do well’. Lucy did not cite her parents as helping with her decisions about her subjects. However, June had initially hoped to be a nurse herself, and many of her friends were nurses and midwives who spoke to Lucy about their careers. Nursing had been a route to social mobility among the older generation of women in our sample, a gendered pathway but nevertheless a valuable opportunity for a successful career. She also spoke about her best friend, who was a year older and a source of practical advice:

Yeah that was good cos she’s already in college as well so she’ll like give me tips and like courses to take and not take, things like that.

Yeah, so what kind of things does she say?

Err well she does like a... I don’t know it’s just one big course for childcare, she said don’t take it cos it’s really hard, she said it’d be better to take A Levels and like different options like for when you leave school.

Seeing other young people’s experiences was a way of to determine suitable paths. In Lucy’s account, we can see the influence of both her mother’s and her own social networks shaping her decisions.

The work of social networks could clearly be seen in the case of the young men who were taking A Levels at alternative sixth forms. In choosing a college, Richard Blake looked to kinship ties as well as the networks he was developing outside of the school. A particular influence on his studies was his older sister: ‘She’s the sort who just goes all out all the time, and she’s revising at home, I’m a bit lazier than her.’ Richard chose his A Level subjects based on his aspiration to be a mechanical engineer. He wanted to attend the same college as his sister and cousins at a successful boys’ school which had a mixed sixth form. This would mean that Richard would have to wear a uniform and have a more structured, ‘school-like’ experience rather than the more relaxed colleges (something that his father Adam, an accountant, was very keen on). Richard was on two sports teams and he attended training six days per week. His best friend who he met through his club already attended the college, and Richard tended to socialise with friends from the club rather than Ashley. We can see here

the influence of Richard's family networks in shaping his choices as he progressed along an upwardly mobile route. Moreover, his non-curricular activities were seemingly evidence of 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2003), placing him in alternative friendship groups which set him 'apart' from the other young men in our sample and lead to the accumulation of cultural and social capital.

Richard's extra curricular activities, while an important part of his life, were in addition to his academic career. For the young people who were taking 'new' A Levels, this formed the *basis* of their plans for college. Amanda Wynn planned to do A levels in Dance, English, Media Studies and Photography. Dance was Amanda's passion, and she had received advice from her parents on how to take this forward as a career. Although Amanda did not see herself as academically-inclined, she still aspired to go to university, and her dance teacher gave her the idea that she could train to be a journalist who wrote about dance (which seemed like an unusual career choice). Amanda spoke about how she felt on her interviews at two different colleges:

Erm Milton's more - I don't know how to say it, upper class.

Huhuh.

Like it's more posher.

Hmm how could you tell like?

Because of the people that go there.

Hmm what - what were the people like?

More well presented (laughs).

The comfort of feeling that the institution would be made up of 'people like them' has parallels with work on higher education choices (Brooks 2005; Evans 2009). These young people, while exerting agency in their choices, were also guided by a habitus as shaped by their family and friends. Many of the young people, no matter what route they were taking, wanted to attend institutions with their friends.

The young people who were planning to take vocational courses at the time of the first interview were, perhaps unsurprisingly, from working and intermediate class backgrounds. Aaron Croft's teachers and the Connexion Service had helped him choose his college and his course. On what he was told, he said 'like told you what were the possibilities and going to college and how good you do at college and what college was all about'. Aaron had a place to do a National Diploma in Public Services at Ableford, but had learned that his close

friends were going to Hill Coleman and now wanted to switch. When asked whether he spoke to his friends about college and the future, he answered ‘sort of... ‘cause I can see which college they’re going to and then see if I can go to there as well’.

For two of the young people in our sample, their initial plans for A Level study did not work out. Again, these were young people from working and intermediate class backgrounds. Josh Allen did not, unfortunately, achieve the GCSEs needed to progress on to the A Level courses of his choice. Rebecca Jenkins, on the other hand, did very well throughout her school career and gained 9½ A*-C grades in her GCSEs. During her first interview, Rebecca happily talked of her parents being very supportive of her aspirations, but that she also felt the pressure of their expectations:

... it’s sometimes annoying ‘cause they – I think – I’m sure they think I’m smarter than I am and it puts me in, like, a lot of, like, pressures and its really annoying. And then, like, they’ll say to their friends, ‘oh yeah, my daughter wants to do, like, history’. Its, like, ‘oh my god. Can you please not tell anyone?’ It’s like its putting more stress on me than anything.

There was no poverty of aspiration among this family, and Rebecca spoke of the encouragement she received from her parents to work hard. Yet by the time of her second interview^v the follow year, Rebecca was unemployed and awaiting the start of a childcare course. A Levels were a path to university and she had been put off by the expense, whereas a vocational course would ‘better’ because she would just go ‘straight into work instead of doing another three years in university and not getting paid for it’. A combination of limited economic, cultural and social resources had thwarted Rebecca’s hopes for the future. There was also some disruption in her family life, as her parents were having marital problems. It is important not to reduce social relationships to the resources they provide. Familial ties are not simply ‘bonding capital’ that may restrict social mobility but crucial, meaningful support. When these are disrupted, it can also disrupt future plans^{vi}.

Across our sample, the young people felt they had a degree of agency in their decisions, particularly in terms of subject choices. There were some classed differences in the young people’s pathways and whether parents directly shaped these. This does not mean that the young people from working class backgrounds did not have the support of their families, or that they did not receive advice from them. However, in terms of actually choosing institutions and courses, teachers and advisors may provide practical help when families do

not have the cultural capital of their own further education experiences to draw upon. We can also see the influence of other members young people's networks. As noted by other researchers (Heath, Fuller, and Johnston 2010, Davies 2011) siblings were not a 'dilution' of generational social capital as put forward by Coleman (1988). Instead, brother and sisters (along with older friends) could provide examples of potential routes and pathways. These might be particularly valuable when parental experience of further education (at least directly after schooling) is limited. Friends loomed large in our young people's narratives, and it was also not surprising that attending the same college as their friends was a factor for many. Feeling that institutions were a suitable place for 'people like us' was also significant (Brooks 2005; Evans 2009). Finally, there was also some evidence that worries about economic resources were shaping plans, something that is not surprising given the strains of the current recession.

Conclusion

The opportunity structures for young people as they complete their compulsory schooling changed between the generations captured in this study. More and more young people are choosing to stay on as their next step. Despite this increase in participation, the paths of those in the 'middle' continue to be shaped by class and gender. These young people, with the exception of Rebecca, were not 'NEET' (not in employment, education or training) a year later, but did not have access to the high-value resources of the established middle classes. We have noted the wider role that social ties play at this moment, and the classed differences between the children of parents who had experienced some upward mobility and those who had remained in working class positions. In terms of parental involvement (Coleman 1988), the middle class parents were more likely to directly influence the choices that their children were making, and be more critical of the role of the official resources provided by the school. Yet none of the families in our sample made reference to the bridging social capital found among the established middle classes: of access to 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998) that helps to navigate the most prestigious route of traditional A Levels then university. Moreover, the parents we spoke to did not this path themselves. The resources that are available to the parents and that can be passed on to their children are not as advantageous as has been found among their professional peers (Devine 2004). This is not to say that social ties did not shape the parents' routes, however. Personal relationships and early family

responsibilities had a significant impact on the mothers' transitions to employment in particular.

The young people talked about making their choices based on what they enjoyed and that they found interesting. Despite their feelings of agency, these were classed trajectories. Their narratives also illustrate the importance of young people's own social resources, not just those of their parents (Holland, Reynolds, and Weller 2007). Horizontal social ties to friends and siblings could provide knowledge and examples of routes (Heath, Fuller, and Johnston 2010). Social ties also worked in more subtle ways, including feelings of belonging or not belonging in particular institutions (Brooks 2005; Evans 2009). The significance of friendships in young people's lives also impacted upon their choices. It is notable that the young people who did not follow the 'norm' of A Level study, including those who initially aspired to do so, were predominantly from working class backgrounds. Those from upwardly mobile backgrounds seemed more likely to continue their parents' trajectories, yet they still do not have the same advantages as those from the professional classes. They may be able to develop their own social resources through educational success, however (Devine 2004). While Bourdieu's model of differential distribution of capitals and class reproduction provides insights into this process, we have also identified other forms of social resources that may facilitate transitions and also some upward mobility. We would like to stress that these conclusions do not point to the young people and their families 'lacking' something in a pejorative sense. Rather, we argue that the extent to which young people from non-professional backgrounds are able to take advantage of the expansion in access to academic further education is determined by family trajectories and access to advantageous resources.

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Notes

ⁱ We are cautious, however, about the idea of 'poor achievement' among children from lower socio-economic groups.

ⁱⁱ Combined White populations, including Irish and Other.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ashley's achievements in closing this gap are striking.

^{iv} Young people were defined as taking 'traditional' A Levels if they chose at least one of the Russell Group's 'facilitating subjects': Mathematics and Further Mathematics; English Literature; Physics; Biology; Chemistry; Geography; History; Languages (Classical and Modern) (Russell Group 2012: 27).

^v We have only drawn on the first set of interviews throughout this paper; however we felt that Rebecca's story warranted this update.

^{vi} The impact of parental divorce and remarriage on young people's educational choices is an important subject that warrants further attention. Our data suggests this is a significant topic although we have barely scratched the surface of this in our analysis so far.

Tables

Table 1: GCSE Results at Ashley High School compared to national results for England, 2005-12

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Ashley % achieving 5 A*-C	35	44	44	55	61	63	63	71
National % achieving 5 A*-C	57	59	61	65	70	75	80	82
Ashley % achieving 5 A*-C (inc. English & Maths)	17	27	26	24	42	47	49	58
National % achieving 5 A*-C (inc. English & Maths)	45	46	46	48	50	54	59	59

Table 2: The Final Sample of Interviewees: Young People and Parents

Young person	Parent(s) interviewed	Parent occupation	Young person's route
Richard Blake	Adam Blake (f) Sarah Blake (m)	Partner in accounting firm Childminder	Traditional A Levels
Lucy Grey	June Grey (m)	Accounts supervisor	Traditional A Levels
Emily King	Nick King (f) Julie King (m)	Owns small business Full time parent	Traditional A Levels
Jade Maxwell *	Tanya Maxwell (m)	Project Officer	Traditional A Levels
Rose Maxwell *	Tanya Maxwell (m)	Project Officer	Traditional A Levels
Joe Shaw	Kathy Shaw (m)	Optician	Traditional A Levels
Jacob Wills	Mary Wills (m)	Former nurse	Traditional A Levels
Tony Edwards	Elaine Goodwin (m)	Postal worker	New A Levels
Amanda Wynn	Lois Wynn (m)	Housing officer	New A Levels
Sadie Wood	Heather Wood (m)	Primary school teacher	New A Levels
Josh Adams	Hannah Adams (m)	Cleaner	Vocational/other
Aaron Croft	Jane Lewis (m)	Not employed (ill health)	Vocational/other
Cameron Hayes	Noel Hayes (f) Deidre Hayes (m)	Teaching assistant Senior nurse	Vocational/other
Rebecca Jenkins	Aileen Jenkins (m) Adrian Jenkins (f)	Carer Painter and decorator	Vocational/other
Connor Roberts	Jill Richards (carer)**	(Mother: not employed)	Vocational/other
Holly Tomlinson	Clare Tomlinson (m)	Call centre worker	Vocational/other

All names are pseudonyms.

* *Jade and Rose were twin sisters.*

** *Connor lived in a children's home although he saw his mother nearly every day. Advice suggested that it was best to interview his main carer.*

Table 3: The Young People's GCSE Results, 2010, and destinations as at 2011.

Young person	GCSEs A*-C	GCSE English	GCSE Maths	Courses	College
<i>Traditional A Levels</i>					
Richard Blake	8.5 (1)	C	B	Physics, IT, Design & Technology (Product Design)	Anderson
Lucy Grey	8.5	B	A	Maths, psychology, sociology, & biology,	Ableford
Emily King	10	A	A	English literature, law, psychology, RE.	Ableford
Jade Maxwell	7.5	B	A	Spanish, maths, ICT and accounting.	Ableford
Rose Maxwell	8.5	B	A	Maths, biology, psychology and sociology.	Ableford
Joe Shaw	8.5	B	B	Business studies, maths, biology and psychology.	Ableford
Jacob Wills	8.5	B	C	Art, English, History.	Augustine
<i>'New' A Levels</i>					
Tony Edwards	6.5	C	B	Dance, Sociology, textiles.	Ableford
Amanda Wynn	7.5	C	C	Dance, Media Studies, Photography, English.	Ableford
Sadie Wood	7.5	B	B	PE, psychology, sociology.	Ableford
<i>Vocational/other routes</i>					
Josh Adams **	2.5	D	D	BTEC Business Management ^{vii}	Ableford
Aaron Croft **	3	E	B	BTEC Public Services	Hill Coleman
Cameron Hayes **	7.5	D	C	Certificate in Electrical installation	Tenby
Rebecca Jenkins	9.5	B	B	Unemployed (starting childcare course in Sept)	---
Connor Roberts ***	4	F	F	Certificate in Music Performance	Telston
Holly Tomlinson	9	C	C	Media Make-up	Southfield

Shaded cells highlight the young people who were interviewed twice

* *The .5 refers to a half option in Religious Studies*

** *These young men did not get grades A*-C in English and Maths*

*** *This young man failed his English and Maths GCSEs outright*

^{vii} Discussions with our contact teacher revealed that Josh did not get the GCSE results required to progress on to the A Levels of his choice. Curious about his pathway, we searched

online in case he was listed in the local college results. This unearthed Josh's blog, which discussed his college course upon leaving Ashley. Given that it is not traceable to Josh, we have included this information. This does, of course, raise important questions about the use of digital traces in the public domain, which we plan to explore in subsequent work.